

A Conversation on Salvation

Richard Oxenberg

Sitting in Davis Square on a sunny Saturday afternoon, eating sushi from a local restaurant.

A neat looking middle-aged man in a beige suit comes up to me.

"Would you mind if I asked you a question?"

"No, go ahead."

"Have you accepted Christ?"

I pause. I have a complicated relationship with religion in general, and Christianity in particular.

"Um...accepted Christ? I...well...yes, I think so. I mean, it may depend on what you mean by 'accepted'."

"Do you believe that Christ paid the penalty for your sin?"

"Well, I'm not exactly sure I would use the word 'paid.' That word has never seemed quite right to me."

"But that's what you have to believe to go to heaven. If you died today would you know you were going to heaven?"

"Honestly, I can't say I know very much of anything for sure. I hope so. But doesn't the Bible say that the way to heaven is through love?"

"Well, love is important but..."

"In the gospel of Luke, for instance, Jesus is asked the way to eternal life and he says it is through loving God with all your heart, mind, and soul and your neighbor as yourself. That's the Bible. Do you believe that?"

"Yes, of course, but..."

"So isn't that the way to heaven? Isn't eternal life heaven? So the way to heaven is through love - according to Jesus. I don't mean to say that it's easy."

"But you have to believe that Jesus paid the penalty for your sin."

"I guess I just don't know what you mean by 'paid the penalty'? It seems to me sin is something that needs to be overcome, not 'paid for.'"

"Do you believe you are a sinner?"

"Oh, definitely. We all sin, don't we?"

"Yes we do. And don't we have to pay the penalty for that? Do you believe there is a punishment for sin?"

"Well, but what is punishment for? I think we need to understand the purpose of punishment. Do you have children?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you ever punish them?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"So why do you punish them? Do you punish them to make them 'pay' for what they did, or do you punish them to correct them, to get them to learn the difference between right and wrong, to make them better people? Isn't that why you punish them, to make them better people? Isn't that why a loving parent would punish his children?"

"Well, yes."

"So do you think you're more loving than God?"

"Of course not."

"So then wouldn't God punish to make us better people, not to make us 'pay' for something?"

"But Christ died for the sins of all mankind. That's what the Bible teaches. Do you read the Bible?"

"I've read the Bible, yes."

"Do you believe that Christ died for your sins?"

"But what do you mean by that? How do you die 'for' sin? As I read the Bible, God wants to rid us of sin. In Matthew it says that Jesus is named Jesus, which means 'God saves,' because he has come to save us from sin. It doesn't say save us from the punishment for sin, but from sin itself. So the question is: How does Christ's death help to save us from sin? Isn't that the question?"

"But you have to believe that Christ died for your sins. That's what saves."

"So do you believe that Christ died for your sins?"

"Yes."

"And you no longer sin?"

"Oh, I still sin."

"So it's not working?"

"But my sins are forgiven."

"But maybe my sins are forgiven as well."

"Not if you don't believe."

"But doesn't Jesus say from the Cross, 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do'?"

"Yes."

"He's talking about the people who have crucified him, non-believers."

"Yes."

"Do you think God listens to Jesus?"

"Yes, of course."

"So, if God listens to Jesus, and Jesus asks God to forgive non-believers, doesn't that mean the non-believers will be forgiven?"

"But the Bible also speaks of hell. Do you believe in hell?"

"Well, I don't know. Would you want your children to end up in hell?"

"My children? No."

"So do you think God would want his children to end up in hell?"

"God doesn't want anyone to end up in hell."

"Wouldn't God use all his power to prevent people from ending up in hell? Isn't that what a loving Father would do?"

"I suppose."

"And doesn't God have a lot of power?"

"Yes, God has a lot of power."

"So God would work to prevent anyone from ending up in hell, wouldn't he?"

"But that's just what he's doing in Christ. But you have to believe."

"But why would God make that the criterion for whether people end up in hell? A lot of people don't know what to believe. A lot of people are confused. Don't you think a lot of people are confused?"

"Yes, there's a lot of confusion."

"So do you think God is going to send people to hell just because they're confused?"

"I'm just telling you what the Bible says."

"But the Bible says: 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do.'"

"But the Bible also speaks of hell."

"So it seems like there's a conflict in the Bible."

"So you're not a believer."

"I am, but maybe not in quite the same way you are."

"I can see you're very smart - but are you sure you're right?"

"I'm not sure, no. But I have to follow what seems right to me, don't I?"

He paused and just looked at me, like maybe I was a hopeless case.

"Can I leave you with some pamphlets?"

"Sure."

"Would you mind if I pray for you?"

"Not at all."

"I'm going to pray that you find the truth."

"That's good, I'd like to find the truth."

"All right, then. God bless you."

"God bless you!"