

ON JESUS AS ATTUNED TO <LIFE> NOT <G:E>

Our discussion on <G:E>¹ has prompted a lot of thought for many. I know this is a hard idea to grasp, and I freely invite challenge over it. I don't think I, nor my friend Tony Golsby-Smith whom I quoted last week, have this nailed. Let me try to break it down and, most of all, to illustrate my point from Jesus himself.

As you will read in the Notes for Week Three (up on Moodle), I think that seeing <G:E> as a problem, and not as a 'good' thing, makes best sense of the Genesis narratives, and helps make sense of the problem of law within redemption. As Paul will say (in my words), we needed law (because we are now wired to <G:E>) but it made everything worse (by reinforcing our predilection to act in terms of <G:E>).

It is virtually impossible for us to think outside of <G:E>. I am suggesting that this is one of the most deeply ingrained "patterns" of the world that Paul calls us to be transformed away from by the renewing of our mind (Rom 12:2). Our moralistic frame (ie. <G:E>) makes us think of drinking, smoking, cussing, etc etc as the "patterns" we are to shun. Whatever the cons (or pros) of any of these, thinking that these are the issue just dumbs down the gospel. What are we saying: that Jesus died and rose from the dead to stop me drinking, smoking, cussing etc etc?! That would be blasphemous (and maybe still is) if it wasn't so funny (in a sick kinda way).

I hear many of you saying that you recognise how prevalent and problematic the 'viral' metaphor has become (remember that we think in terms of a metaphor without ever naming it as such). But you are still chewing over how to describe sin in terms of our disposition to act badly.

This is going to be too quick, but let me lay out the architecture of Paul's thought around this (as I see it) and throw in the pattern of <G:E>.

Paul is not a dualist. But he does see history and humanity as falling under two heads: Adam and Jesus (the Second Adam) – see Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15. His favourite words to describe the ways of being/living/knowing characterised by the two heads are Flesh (Adam) and Spirit (Jesus). The latter is possible because of the way he so closely identifies the Spirit with Jesus (eg. "The Lord who is the Spirit" 2 Cor 3:18). He also associates three other word-pairs with these heads: sin vs righteousness; law vs grace; death vs life. [Remember that 'righteousness' is a category of covenant identity not morality in Paul's arguments in Galatians and Romans.]

So we have...

<i>Head</i>	ADAM	JESUS
<i>Order</i>	Flesh	Spirit
<i>Manifestation</i>	Sin	Righteousness
<i>Principle</i>	Law	Grace
<i>Outcome</i>	Death	Life

In Gal 5 Paul makes clear that a 'life' centred on flesh/sin/law perpetuates a hideous and horrendous distortion of relationship as the fruit of autonomy. It is a 'living death.' He then shows how a 'LIFE' centred on Spirit/righteousness/grace yields the fruit of truth, beauty and goodness (read: wholeness, flourishing, not morality) in relationship: "against which there is no law", ie. a 'LIFE' that is beyond the categories and reach of law, performance, and judgement.

¹ These notes were prompted by discussions arising out of the paper I am teaching, *Ways of Knowing* (Laidlaw College, March 2010). I have suggested that the two trees in Gen2-3 offer a profound typology of knowing. Two default modes. I express these using <>. So there is the default of "the knowledge of good and evil" <G:E>, and the default of "life" <LIFE>.

This is hard for us to understand. We are wired to thinking performance, judgement, standards, reciprocity. It's like trying to think of economics or the marketplace without the categories of either capitalist or socialist markets. But we *can* think outside these because we *do* actually live outside them from time to time. Think of what happens when friends get together. Imagine you can do it without any 'performance' (ie. no comparisons about what you brought, or wore, or did). Everyone comes with whatever they brought, chosen only with the others in mind. It is gift. If we end up with three of something and none of something else, no one minds. Being together is what matters. Encounter and indwelling displaces morality. No one asks whether we brought the 'right' thing, or a 'good' thing. [We might ask *ourselves* that—but it would only show how trapped *we* are in <G:E> even to the point of not being able to indwell our friends without fear of failure! We are thinking of coming to the meal as being like doing a deal, rather than indwelling a relationship.]

This is why you will hear me emphasise that the idea of *ekklesia* (of gathering) in the NT is *not* about 'worship' in our restricted vertical sense, but about each other: see all the "one another" sayings of the NT. *Of course* we 'worship': *aka* praise, sing, pray etc. Why wouldn't you do so, everyday?! But we *gather* for each other. It is *incredibly* difficult to think and act from <LIFE> rather than <G:E>, and it can only be sustained, however inconsistently, by continually reminding one another of the story of Jesus, and pointing one another back to him.

So this is where I want to point you now to understand <G:E> and <LIFE>. First Adam (and Eve), then Jesus. There are two passages in Hebrews I'd like to draw on.

First, Heb 2:5–9 quotes Psalm 8:4–6 as part of the writer's "Jesus is superior (to everyone and everything)" argument. On this occasion, it is Adam whom Jesus eclipses. The logic runs like this: Claim: the world isn't subject to angels but to humanity (Heb 2:5). Proof: Psalm 8:4–6. Problem: we don't see it working out this way at present. [Note: the 'him' at the very end of v8 is *not* Jesus (see v9), but Adam, or humanity generally.] Solution: we see another human, who tasted death on our behalf, who is now raised above all other humans in order to bless all (vv10–11). In other words, the office was lost in such a way that we only see traces of it in ourselves, but it has been restored in Jesus (whom Paul calls the "Second Adam"). [You might want to look at Jesus' miracles afresh in the light of all this: What would a human do (Gen 1:26–28), empowered by the Spirit to be in continuous encounter and indwelling with and by his Father, when he encountered chaos and distress?]

Second, Heb 5:7–9 describes Jesus in a way that we will find highly problematic if we can only see life, and him, in terms of <G:E>:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him...

It seems odd to us to think of Jesus 'crying', 'learning obedience' and 'becoming' perfect (or mature: *teleios*). But it only seems odd because we think <G:E>. If we think <G:E>, then *everything* is moral. So we are troubled that the logic (of <G:E>) implies Jesus was 'disobedient' and 'imperfect'. The writer of Hebrews of course says Jesus was without sin. So then we think 'no virus', but are still stuck trying to work out how the perfect sinless one cries and has to learn to be obedient and grow.

So go back to the garden. In Gen 2 the man and woman do not think or act from <G:E>. Surely the narrative shows they are learning (naming animals etc), and that they must continue to learn (how else can you fulfil the mandate [Gen 1:26–28] without continually learning and mastering new things?). So 'learning', 'growing' and 'maturing' don't need <G:E>; they only need <LIFE>. Then the man and woman encounter a lie. A seduction. A possibility of breaking trust. They could have

sustained faith, hope, and love.² If they had not moved from indwelling their Creator—if they had obeyed—it would have been from a place where they still did not know good and evil: still no <G:E>.

Ok, now look at Jesus. He does not master the temptation in the desert by a superior morality. He does not choose 'good' over 'evil'. *He knows his Father*. That is enough. Pharisee, Sadducee, Roman governor, and more, all challenge him on the basis of <G:E>. "Which mountain is the right one?" "Is it legal to heal?" "Who was right: him, or her?" "Who sinned?" "What's the most important rule?" "What is truth?" "Tell us by what authority you do things?" Etc. Jesus scribbles in the dust and excuses a woman who is as guilty as they come. He sustains a rage overnight to make a whip and lash people with it. He welcomes the adoration of a woman of questionable morality. He lets her play with his body! That isn't nice. There's a lot that Jesus says and does that gives us real grief if we judge him by <G:E>. It simply doesn't work, because he simply wasn't living from that place. He was living from <LIFE>. More specifically, Jesus made it clear that everything he did and said came from knowing his Father, and from his Father knowing him: from their mutual indwelling (John 16-17). Full stop. He did not live by reference to the law. Nor morality. He did not do what was 'good' or 'right' or 'legal' or 'proper'; he did what was true to knowing his Father. He lived by *faith, hope, and love*. And law couldn't touch him.

Jesus did all this by the power of the Spirit. That *is* what the Spirit does. This *is* what Jesus promised. This *is* what we experience as the Spirit enables us to shun performance, shun expectation, shun niceness, shun our narrow little religious-moral-self-satisfied-righteous-Christian ways of being and knowing, and choose the outrageous imbalance and excesses of faith, hope, and love. This is the transformation of mind and heart—of LIFE—that the Spirit is bringing about in us. A choice for grace and life over law and death. For relationship over rule, process, and being right.

None of us do this consistently. We can't. <G:E> is too hard-wired in us. You don't need a 'virus' model, nor any other kind of ontology for sin, to explain this. Neuroscience isn't a bad place to work from. We lay down patterns from birth that come from outside us. Indeed, neuroscience shows it is happening in the womb. Having cast ourselves into relational distortion, having twisted our office to our own ends—all that gob-smacking imagination and power that ought to be directed to fulfilling the creation mandate—we 'pass it on' to our children from the very first words and actions they perceive (even when they lack the means of showing they *know* it).

The idea of two natures ('sinful nature' and 'spiritual nature'—recall my comments on the terrible NIV translation of Rom 8:9)—is unnecessary. We are *not* in the flesh, but in the Spirit (Rom 8:9). But we *can* think, act, and live *as though* we are in the flesh. In other words, we can still choose to follow our old head, Adam. It's about choice, not infection. We have had a lifetime of thinking and acting from Adam/flesh. That doesn't change overnight. Like any neural 'conversion' experience, some dramatic changes often occur when we come to Christ. Other stuff persists forever unless we encounter and indwell Father, Son, and Spirit in transformative ways *through one another*.

Now we could get depressed at this. Or we could choose to follow Jesus in his utter rejection of religion and its associated morality. We could square our shoulders, remember our baptism (ie. our new identity >> in Christ and the Spirit, not Adam and flesh), reject our mamby-pamby religious modes of being nice and doing the right thing, and begin to seek and offer deep, vivid, rich, profound, disturbing relationship with the kinds of conversation that provoke one another to be done with <G:E> and to embrace <LIFE>. These are the weak, fragile, foolish ways of knowing attuned to a weak, fragile, foolish gospel. Here we encounter and indwell the Father, Son, and Spirit as they move toward us, fashioning us by love after and for the Second Adam and one another.

² *Ways of Knowing* is built on the premise that 1 Cor 13:12-13 is epistemological, not moral or 'spiritual': "Then we shall know as we are known. So then, these three remain: faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love."

Ok, so I can hear you asking, "So how do I *live* within this new understanding?" Does it mean nothing is right and wrong, ie. can we do anything we like? Paul faced this question in Rom 6:1: "Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound?" I'd like to draw your attention to two things here.

First, he raises this rhetorical question not on the back of a discussion of 'Christian living' (I hope that seems more and more like a limited and contrived phrase). He raises it on the back of expounding the gospel as righteousness, grace, and life accomplished in one man, Jesus, Second Adam, on our behalf. There can be no other response than to accept the gift (to believe).

Second, he raises the question because the gospel of grace really is that radical. If we keep on sinning, grace *will* keep on abounding. Guaranteed. If it doesn't, he wouldn't need to ask the question! You can only ask the question if you get grace. If everything—*everything*—has been done by Christ, then I can add or detract nothing. My faith is itself a gift responding to a gift, not a work. Here's the terrifyingly beautiful secret: I can't undo what Jesus has done. So whatever I now do with my life will neither add to nor subtract glory from Jesus, nor impinge on my justification and reconciliation by Jesus. So, if I think <G:E>, I am immediately unnerved by the total one-sidedness of this. Surely, we think, we have to *do* something. There must be an 'our side' of the bargain. But there isn't. *He* is the covenant. *He* is our righteousness. If we get over this shock, and *still* think <G:E>, then we gasp in horror that there's nothing to control my (I mean your) behaviour. Will we just repeat the Fall?

Paul would say we are very capable of acting that way. So, then, surely he should reintroduce law. Scare us into holiness. But he won't. He is dogged about standing on grace (see Gal 5:1-4). Instead he directs the Romans to look to their baptism. Not a magic rite that changes us, but the symbol of our changed identity. When we went under and came up from the water, we identified ourselves with one who went under and came up from death. He defeated sin. Not a virus. He didn't de-sin anything. He triumphed over the real enemy: *death*. So, Paul says, look back there, and know who you now are. "That's it?" Yep, that's it. Live out of new identity, not old (or new) law.

It's tempting of course to say this just isn't practical. It doesn't change us. Actually, it does. In fact, grace *will* change your life. Law can't. Spiritual disciplines can't. Goodness can't. Only grace. Indeed where this leads to is a dramatically practical idea: *God calls us to design our lives for... <LIFE>!*

Chucking <G:E> is so counter-intuitive. Some of us have poured enormous energy into de-sinning ourselves. The normal formula is regular Bible reading, regular church, lots of prayer, hanging around wholesome people, and keeping a close watch on our behaviour. Are these things wrong? No. Do they work? It depends what we mean. Do we find we do less of the things we wanted to avoid while we keep up these disciplines? Quite often. And quite often not. When we do, we feel good about it. We feel positively closer to God. And that is a lie. And it is the kind of lie that breeds self-righteous religious pride, *and* self-righteous religious anxiety. <G:E> always send us into a spiral: either into despair and increasingly pathetic and toxic attempts to get rid of sin; or into self-righteousness and the underlying fear that it still isn't enough. Either way, it yields the peculiar neuroses that characterise much 'Christian spirituality'. Paul laid that out in Rom 2-3 and 7.

Paul gets closer to the bone, and to our lives and strategies, in Col 2:16-23:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. 17These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. 18Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. 19He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

We need to feel the weight of this indictment of supposed spirituality. Rules, laws, prohibitions, spiritual experiences, visions, ecstasies, strict discipline regimes—none of it works. They don't stop anybody from sinning. I bet we can all testify to the truth of this.

So what *does* bring about change? He goes on (Col 3:1–4):

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Again, look to your new identity. "You died." "You have been raised with Christ." "Your life is now hidden with Christ in God." "Christ, who is your life." Now don't go reading 'earthly things' in terms of <G:E>: "See, we have to turn our backs on the world to get away from the infection of sin." Read the context: the 'earthly things' are the supposed spiritual rules of 2:16–23. Religious wisdom that is utterly useless to change your life, trumped up spirituality, *that* is the earthly stuff. In the following verses Paul will remind us again that we are being transformed in terms of the image of God, and that what matters now is the love that transforms relationship.

Another way to picture all this is to say that thinking of sin as an infection within you, of the need to de-sin yourself, and of life as being about morality (<G:E>), never leads to a life of *thankfulness*. [And thankfulness is not 'right' or 'good'—it just is. It is a welcoming of wonder, love, and joy.] Let me be clear: we won't stop thinking and talking in terms of right and wrong, good and evil. The world is shaped by these patterns. There *are* things that I must call wrong and evil and have nothing to do with them. But this isn't <LIFE> and no amount of fighting evil and promoting good will give anyone <LIFE>. It will never lead you to draw in the dirt and say "neither do I condemn you." It will never lead to a life of thankfulness. Only grace yields thankfulness. Only grace transforms.

We started all this with 1 Cor 13. Let's go back to that:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. **2**If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. **3**If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. **5**It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. **6**Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. **7**It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. **9**For we know in part and we prophesy in part, **10**but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. **11**When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. **12**Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

There is not a drop of <G:E> in that. There is no law. No morality. It is utterly beyond notions of right and wrong, good and evil. Beyond all that awful *karma* nonsense (another version of <G:E>). It is of a wholly different order. It is LIFE. It is relationship. It is *love*. And once we grasp love or, better, once love lays hold of us, we *know* everything differently.

I can't pretend to be a great U2 fan. I do like their music but I didn't grow up listening to it. But their song "Grace" seems to say so much here (thanks to Fiona Sherwin for showing me this):

Grace, she takes the blame
She covers the shame
Removes the stain
It could be her name
Grace, it's the name for a girl
It's also a thought that changed the world
And when she walks on the street
You can hear the strings
Grace finds goodness in everything
Grace, she's got the walk
Not on a ramp or on chalk
She's got the time to talk
She travels outside of karma
She travels outside of karma
When she goes to work
You can hear her strings
Grace finds beauty in everything
Grace, she carries a world on her hips
No champagne flute for her lips
No twirls or skips between her fingertips
She carries a pearl in perfect condition
What once was hurt
What once was friction
What left a mark
No longer stings
Because Grace makes beauty
Out of ugly things
Grace makes beauty out of ugly things

I realise grace is hard to grasp. I know it's entirely counter-intuitive to unmask <G:E>. I know it seems like I'm going soft on sin (I'm not). I didn't come to any of this quickly. I don't expect you to. Nor do I think I've got it all right. But it sure makes better sense to me of the gospel, of scripture, of the twists and turns of how we know, of pastoral ministry, of friendship, and of my own thought life.

In the end, <G:E> does not need, and will not lead me to, faith, hope, and love. But faith, hope, and love—and especially the greatest of these, love—leads me to <LIFE>.

Grace,

Mark