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[Christianity Today, October 23, 2000](#)

Love Your Heavenly Enemy

How are we going to live eternally with those we can't stand now?

Miroslav Volf | posted 10/23/2000 12:00AM

When my Yale colleague Professor Carlos Eire visits his elderly mother, he often ends up as a resident theologian for a small Cuban-immigrant community of her friends. "Is it possible," one woman asked him, "for Castro to convert on his deathbed and end up in heaven?" "It is possible," Professor Eire assured her. "This is what Christian faith is all about. Nobody is beyond the pale of redemption." "Well, if that were to happen," said the woman, "then I would not want to be in heaven." Karl Barth was once asked the antithesis of that Cuban expatriate's question: "Is it true that one day in heaven we will see again our loved ones?" Barth responded with a chuckle, "Not only the loved ones!" The sting of the great theologian's response—be ready to meet there even those whom you dislike here—was directed against our propensity to populate heaven only with people whom we like. Most of us have our own "Castros" with whom we would rather not share the space of the world to come. Heaven with them, we imagine, would feel more like a forecourt of hell. This dilemma contains a serious personal challenge and, it turns out, an inadequately addressed theological issue. How can those who have disliked or even had good reasons to hate each other here come to inhabit together what is, in Jonathan Edwards's memorable phrase, "a world of love"? The not-loved ones will have to be transformed into the loved ones, and those who do not love will have to begin to do so. Enemies will have to become friends. Sometime between a shadowy history and an eternity bathed in light, somewhere between this world and the next, a transformation of persons and their complex relationships needs to take place. Without such a transformation, the world to come would not be a world of perfect love but only a repetition of a world in which, at best, the purest of love falters and, at worst, cold indifference reigns and deadly hatreds easily flare up. But how will this transformation happen?

The limits of judgment

Our theology, unfortunately, has very little to say about this. Not even the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory compellingly addresses the *social* aspect of the transformation that needs to happen if we are to inhabit the world of love. Yet Christian eschatology has not left us completely without resources. Two of the "last things" it examines have to do with the transition between this world and the next: the Last Judgment and the resurrection of the dead. We can leave the resurrection of the dead aside in this matter because it concerns primarily our physical constitution; it is a response to the problem of mortality. The Last Judgment, however, is relevant to our question because it deals with the moral sphere; it is a response to the problem of human transgression against God and one another. There are two basic ways of thinking about the Last Judgment. A good representative of the first is Augustine. The Last Judgment, he believed, separates "the good" and "the bad" and ensures that "the true and full happiness" be "the lot of none but the good" and "deserved and supreme misery" be "the lot of the wicked, and them only." However, the function of the judgment is not to transform "the good" but to separate them from "the bad." So, the good will love perfectly after the judgment only if before the judgment they were already creatures of perfect love. The other way of thinking about the Last Judgment is associated with Martin Luther. For him, the Last Judgment is not so much an encounter with divine justice, which separates the good from the bad, but with divine grace, which justifies those who are not "the good." For believers,

asserts Luther, the Last Judgment is above all an event in which sinners are forgiven and justified. Christ the Final Judge is none other than Christ the merciful Savior. "To me," writes Luther, "he is a physician, helper, and deliverer from death and the devil." Divine judgment at the end of history completes divine justification, grounded in Christ's redemptive work, in the middle of history. Yet it is not clear that the final justification would as such create a world of love. No doubt, it would ensure that we would meet in the world to come even those whom we have not considered particularly lovable in the present one. But for us to love the unlovable, two things would need to happen. First, in a carefully specified sense we ourselves would need to "justify" them—and, given that they may consider us no more lovable than we consider them, they would also need to "justify" us; and we all would need to receive this "justification" from one another. Second, we would also need to want to be in communion with one another. To usher in a world of love, the transition from earthly to heavenly existence needs to be understood not only as a divine act toward human beings (the Last Judgment) but also as a social event between human beings (the Final Reconciliation). Put in the form of a thesis, the argument is this: If the world to come is to be a world of love, then the transition from the present world to that world, which God will accomplish, must have an inter-human side. But why is this so? The answer lies in the nature of human beings, the character of sin, and the shape of salvation.

A social affair

Many things can be said about the nature of human beings—some controversial and others not. What seems beyond doubt, however, is that we are social creatures. From the beginning, the Scriptures speak of human beings in plural terms. God created "them"—male and female—in his image and gave them charge to multiply. This has far-reaching consequences. It is not simply that we are born into families, speak a language shared with others, and tend to live in social units. Our specific identity is shaped by how others relate to us and by how we relate to them, including the way we relate to the way they relate to us. Consider the relation between a parent and a child. Parents' behavior shapes the characters of their children. Recent interest in genetic factors notwithstanding, the old wisdom still holds true that parents can "spoil" their children or raise them well. But it is equally true that children influence parents. Would I be the same person without Nathanael, my young son? My world has changed since his arrival, and my identity has been and is being reconfigured. As it is with our identity, so it is with our sin. Though all sin is by definition sin against God, most of our sins are committed in dealings with others. Rather than living in peace with others, we are consistently involved in conflicts. For instance, we often violate others in small and large ways, treat them unjustly, or deceive them. From earliest childhood on, the weak suffer at the hands of the strong, and the rage of today's victims gives birth to tomorrow's perpetrators. Moreover, sin itself creates a kind of perverse bond between persons. Evil committed and suffered both severs relationships and weaves a thick network of perverted ties that keeps victims and perpetrators returning to each other—in thought or in person—to commit new offenses in an attempt to rectify the old ones. This all leads up to a crucial point. If it is true that our identity is socially shaped and that sin is social in character, then we can expect the transformation and healing of persons to involve social relationships. Consider the famous story Simon Wiesenthal tells in *The Sunflower*. On his deathbed, an SS soldier confessed to Wiesenthal that he killed a Jewish family trying to flee a building which the Nazis had set afire. Plagued by guilt, the soldier wants forgiveness from a Jew. Though deeply moved, Wiesenthal leaves him without a word, partly on the grounds that victims alone can forgive the crimes done against them. The perpetrator's request and Wiesenthal's refusal are instructive. The request comes out of a painful awareness that the remorseful perpetrator cannot deal with the evil he committed on his own. He needs his victim's mercy so much that, in the absence of his victim, he feels compelled to search for a substitute. Wiesenthal's refusal to show mercy stems from the correct insight that the third party cannot forgive and mend the relations between the offender and the offended. You may ask, "Shouldn't God's forgiveness be all that is needed?" Well, yes and no. Yes, because God can forgive our wrongdoing against our neighbor precisely because God is not a mere third party. But no, because divine forgiveness cannot

substitute for a victim's giving and a perpetrator's receiving of forgiveness. If it could, it would make nonsense of Jesus' command that persons who remembered that their brother or sister had something against them go and be reconciled to them before offering their gifts at the altar (Matthew 5:23–24). Reconciliation with one's estranged neighbors is part and parcel of reconciliation with God. The divine embrace of both the victim and perpetrator has, in a sense, not come to completion without their own embrace.

More than a 'fresh start'

We cannot be fully saved unless we are reconciled—not only with God but with each other. From this it follows that the undiluted experience of salvation in the world to come must include social reconciliation. Isn't it enough, though, for God simply to give us eternal life and a completely fresh start after freeing us from the desire to sin? When I was a teenager, a popular preacher used to illustrate what happens at conversion by using the image of a new page. When he was a boy (in a time before delete buttons and ballpoint pens), the preacher said, he could never write out a whole page without making a mistake or spilling ink. He was troubled by the mess he kept making and would always be relieved when he could turn to a new page and start afresh. This is, he said, what Christ offers to us—a fresh start. And this is what heaven will be like—our mistakes will be gone and we will be given a fresh start in such a way that from then on we will always write flawlessly. But that is not quite right. Heaven is more than just a fresh start. It is more than just the creation of a new future. It is also redemption of yesterday, today, and tomorrow—redemption of our whole lived life. Heaven is having had your messy pages made clean and right again. Apply this now to the wrongdoings we commit against each other—a majority of our sins. If the past, which is suffused with enmity, is to be redeemed, it is not enough for us to be given a fresh start. Our relationships will have to be restored. Hence the final social reconciliation of those who died unreconciled must be part of the transition from the present world to the world to come.

A demanding grace

But how is the Final Reconciliation related to the Last Judgment? There are at least three important features to consider. First, at least for believers, the Last Judgment is a judgment of *grace*. Why? Because the judge will be none other than the Christ, who died in our place and suffered our fate. The Judgment Day is *his* day (Philippians 1:6); the judgment seat is *his* seat (2 Corinthians 5:10). The Christ who comes again to judge the living and the dead is the one who died for their justification. But make no mistake: Judgment of grace is not a lenient judgment. It is important not to set grace in opposition to justice. Grace does not negate justice; grace affirms justice while at the same time transcending its claims. The judgment of grace is a demanding judgment. It does not measure our behavior simply against justice but against grace. The crucial question will not be, "Have you followed the rules?" but "Have you shown mercy?" (Matthew 18 and 25). On Judgment Day, all persons' sins will be narrated in their full magnitude. But since this will happen in the context of grace, they will be freed from guilt and transformed by the same Christ who has already become their "righteousness and sanctification" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Second, if we understand the Last Judgment against the background of Old Testament prophecies, then judgment will clearly be a *social* event. The Lord will judge between Israel and its oppressive leaders (Ezekiel 34:17) and "between many peoples" and "strong nations far away" (Micah 4:1–3 ; Isaiah 2:4). Behind these prophecies lies a notion of a judgment fixed in the legal formula—"Let Yahweh judge between you and me"—whose goal is the restoration of the peace that preceded the dispute or conflict. It is clear that judgment cannot simply take place in relation to each of the parties for themselves, but must also take place with respect to both together. Hence the consequence of the judgment is not simply establishing guilt or innocence and apportioning rewards or punishments—it's a redefinition of the relationship between the parties. Third, as a transition to the world of perfect love, the Last Judgment is unthinkable without its *appropriation* by the persons on whom it is effected. In other words, we must accept and internally agree with the verdict as the ruling of a sovereign God. Imagine this: God pronounces judgment and you say, "This is outrageous! You blew my offense totally out of proportion and you forgot a number

of my opponent's transgressions. I will get myself a new lawyer and appeal!" This is, of course, unthinkable. But it shows clearly that you cannot contest divine judgment and inhabit heaven at the same time. The divine judgment will reach its goal when, by the power of the Spirit, each person eschews attempts at self-justification, acknowledges personal sin in its full magnitude, experiences liberation from guilt and the power of sin, and recognizes that all others have done precisely that—given up on self-justification, acknowledged their sin, and experienced liberation. Having recognized that others have changed—that they have been given their true identity by being freed from sin—one will no longer condemn others but offer them the grace of forgiveness. When that happens, we will each see ourselves—and all others in relation to us—as does Christ, the Judge who was judged in our place and suffered our fate. On that day, the grace truly received from God will translate itself into grace of forgiveness given to others and grace received from others. With forgiveness given and received, we have reached the threshold of the Final Reconciliation. It will take one more step to get there, however. For forgiveness is the boundary between enmity and embrace. Forgiveness removes the obstacle to embrace, but is not yet the embrace of the enemy. For even with forgiveness granted, each of us could still go our own way. The offended party could say, "I don't hold the transgression against you anymore, but I prefer that our ways part." Or the offender could say, "I receive your forgiveness, but I don't want to have anything to do with you in the future." Reconciliation will take place only when former enemies have moved toward each other and embraced each other as belonging to the same communion of love. With that mutual embrace, all will have stepped into a world in which each enjoys the other in the communion of the Triune God and therefore all take part in the dance of love freely given and freely received. After I finished a recent lecture on the Last Judgment and the Final Reconciliation, an African-American student approached me. "Do you know what you are saying?" she asked, visibly disturbed. I guessed immediately what she was thinking: Many masters of her enslaved ancestors were "good" Christians, and she may see them one day in heaven. "I know," I responded, "and it is scandalous, isn't it?" If I were her, I thought to myself, I know what I would want to do at the Pearly Gates. If the slave owner was settled in the East End of heaven, I would not budge until Peter assigned me to the West End, and I would certainly refuse sitting at the same table with him at any of the heavenly banquets. She—and I along with her—was troubled by the thought of the Final Reconciliation. "But if it were otherwise," she said after a while, more to herself than to me, "heaven would not be heaven." And a spark of hope appeared in her pensive eyes.

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