Participation With Christ
Interviews With Douglas Campbell

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Introduction

This is a transcript of interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 120 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

In ordinary conversations, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

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Our guest in these interviews is Dr. Douglas Campbell, Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. He received his PhD in 1989 from the University of Toronto. He is the author of:

- *The Call to Serve: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Ministry in Honour of Bishop Penny Jamieson* (editor)
- *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul*
- *Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography*
- *The Quest for Paul's Gospel*
- *The Rhetoric of Righteousness in Romans 3:21-26*
- *Four Views on the Apostle Paul* (contributor)

The interviews were conducted by J. Michael Feazell, then vice-president of Grace Communion International, and Michael Morrison, Dean of Faculty at Grace Communion Seminary.

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Our Participation With Christ

Welcome to this interview series devoted to practical implications of Trinitarian theology. Our guest today is Douglas Campbell, Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Campbell is author of *The Deliverance of God* and *The Quest for Paul's Gospel.*

J. Michael Feazell: Thanks for being here.

Douglas Campbell: You're welcome.

JMF: I would like to talk about your book, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel*, or at least some of the concepts that are in it. But I'd like to start by talking about the cover (it's a unique cover), and if you could tell us about how that came about and what the meaning of some of these symbols are on it.

DC: Well, this is the secret to the book. You have to be nice about the cover because it was designed by my wife.

JMF: Very good.

DC: I think it was very funky. She's a very funky woman. Buried in the collage are codes about what I'm talking about in the book, so my students always pick it up and have a chuckle. At the top, there are two boxes and the arrow, A to B. Most people have a theory about how Paul gets you from Box A to Box B. Box B is where you want to go. But there are lots of different theories about how you set up Box A and Box B and how you get from one to the other. Some of these theories can get in the way of what Paul is often doing.

But the model that I like, that I really push for in this book, is sneaking through the middle here. It uses these letters. You've got two Ps and then an M and an E going around the corner. What I'm getting at there is that, I think Paul's gospel is all about P for participation, and E is for eschatology, which is one of those wonderful words you should use at a cocktail party from time to time. Meaning, there's a sense in which God has brought to us a new reality, a perfected reality, which is superior to the one that we're occupying. In Christ, he's managed to organize things so we participate in it in Christ.

How does that work? I think Paul tells us about this in some detail, particularly in Romans 6, but also with insights from Romans 7 and Romans 5, a little bit going on in Romans 8, but Romans 6 is really where it happens. What seems to have happened in Paul's mind is: Christ has

entered our situation, the human situation, which is good, but there's a sense in which we're oppressed, and disordered (and fractured even) by evil powers. The power of Sin (Paul effectively spells that with a capital S—the power of Death, capital D). These demonic forces have unfortunately taken up residence in the stuff that we're constituted out of (our flesh), so that we're transient, we're corruptible, we decay, we sin, and we die.

This is a very heavy burden for humanity to bear. What God has done to drag us back (because this is not God's intention for creation, for humanity, for any of us, he wants to pull us back into fellowship; this is something we've done to ourselves), he sends his Son into that situation to become part of it and to assume it. As the [church] fathers said, "That which is not assumed is not healed." So Christ takes on all of this mess when he becomes a human.

Then the crucial thing for Paul is that when Christ is executed, when he dies on the cross, that condition is terminated. I'm in the province of termination, and here we are. That places a massive full stop after all of this corruption, all of this dislocation, all of this disorder.

In order to get us through and transform us and heal us, God must provide a state beyond this. This is the eschatology, the eschaton, the things to do with the end. *Eschaton* is Greek for "end," *ology* is just "words about stuff." So we're talking about the end, but the end has come right to us, now. So, Christ has taken everything that we are, has terminated it, and then has been resurrected again into this new state where he's enthroned and sits on the right hand of the Father.

By doing that, because he is God, because he is also the creator, because he is also the new Adam, the second Adam, the one who starts off a new humanity, there's a sense in which this is now true for every one of us, a reality for every one of us. But God doesn't leave it at that. The Holy Spirit draws each one of us into this reality in a very powerful, palpable way.

So the second P is very important. The first P is important, that's the participation in Christ, the second P is the Spirit—it stands for *pneumatology* [after *pneuma*, the Greek word for spirit]. Our participation in Christ is by way of the Spirit. As we're drawn into what Christ has done, we're drawn into this new transformation of what we are. And this [pointing at the cover] is a humanity in which the power of sin and death and corruption has been broken. It's quite concrete. I want to say that this is Reality with a capital R. This is more real than anything else that you or I experience.

The sharp-witted among you will have noticed I've only covered three letters. I've done a P,

a P, and an E. Why have I put an M in here at the risk of making the whole thing hopelessly complicated? Well, this reality, this new creation that we stand in the midst of, is not obvious on one level. Paul's converts knew this. They sensed that when he talked about the new reality, sin being broken, the power of death being broken, they couldn't see it. Paul said to them, "If you're part of Christ's story, you are guaranteed the fullness of this reality. But you must be part of the front end of the story."

How do we know we're part of the front end? It's when we participate in Christ's sufferings. So the M stands for the *martyrological* side of what Christ did when he obeyed the will of the Father, suffered, was obedient to the shame of the cross, and died. It's the story of his faithfulness unto death. It's the story that Philippians 2:5-11 talks about so much.

Paul is emphatic that as we experience some of the suffering in this life, at the same time we experience some of the faithfulness and the obedience, we experience some of the martyrological side of Christ, and we know from that, that we are bolted into this story, and we are at the front end of a story that ends in the termination of all that's bad, but a glorious resurrection of all that's good.

That sounds complex, but this is the heart of Paul's gospel. This is what powers him up, what excited him, what he thinks God has done in Christ. This is what leads him to travel all over the eastern Mediterranean to suffer, to struggle, to found little communities everywhere. This gives meaning to the Lord's Supper, this gives meaning to baptism. Baptism symbolizes beautifully and nets this idea of participating in Christ's death and then also being resurrected to new life. I find it all incredibly exciting and helpful.

JMF: Not only Paul, but we often find throughout the New Testament it's as though the letters begin with the assumption that the recipients are undergoing some kind of suffering, it can be persecution, oftentimes. Then he's moving from that into "but it has this great meaning for you."

DC: Very true.

JMF: How is that any different from what all of us experience? All you have to do is listen to the adults, if you're a kid, and they're talking about what hurts, and how the government is doing something to mess things up. There's always something going on that's painful, a tragedy, a crisis. We live from one crisis and tragedy to the next.

DC: There's a sense in which, apart from Christ, it's hard to give meaning to suffering. We

can try, but part of the struggle of life is we suspect often, "Does my pain have value? Does it have worth? Does it mean anything?" I think what Paul is offering us here is an understanding of suffering that has a real core of meaning in it. It's not any old suffering.

I think we get this from one of Paul's rather neglected letters – 2 Corinthians articulates at great length what it means for him as a leader of the church to suffer. He talks about this suffering—he hasn't gone looking for it, it's found him. But this is a mark of his authenticity, and a very powerful one. I don't want us to run off and look for pain, but there's a sense in which if it does encounter us, it can mean something.

The other thing we get from 2 Corinthians is the suffering that Paul catalogs there is suffering in which he is reaching out with the gospel to those who do not know about it, and in a way are even hostile toward it. It's the suffering that's generated when you take the incarnation seriously and you act in an incarnational way. That's when you begin to follow the Spirit into situations and locations where you're uncomfortable, with people that you're uncomfortable with, where God is calling you to go. When you have to push through these barriers and boundaries… (We love to surround ourselves with barriers and boundaries and keep out the people we're uncomfortable with, but God is ahead of us and is often pulling us through those to engage with those people.)

When you move through those barriers, get out of your comfort zone, get into cultures, get into languages and situations that you're not comfortable with, then you experience suffering. You experience incomprehension and rejection. To top it all off, you're arriving with this shocking gospel—a gospel that is a wonderful gospel of grace, but it's also a gospel that says to people, "You can do nothing to please God. God has done everything to help you. God has come the whole way to you." That means, in effect, "All the things that you're offering me, you just have to put away for now."

It's a message that in its very generosity can elicit conflict and hostility. Paul gives us a narrative in 2 Corinthians of the sort of suffering that is often associated with Christian ministry and Christian life. What he's trying to say is, "It's okay, this is going to happen, enjoy it if you can, rejoice in it, because this is an authentic mark of the reality of the Christian gospel."

JMF: Where do you look for assurance of being in Christ if you're *not* experiencing that kind of suffering?

DC: That's a good point, and should allow me to clarify something that's important. I'm not

advocating going and finding pain, but we often define it very strongly with reference to ourselves in an individual way. What Paul is talking about is an attitude of burden-bearing. The pain that Paul often talks about is, in part, the pain of other congregations and other people and other groups that he is shouldering and carrying—the pain that he is feeling. I would say that God is calling us to carry the burdens of people. This is where we're meant to be going.

The Spirit is often way ahead of us. I think of John 4—when Jesus brought out the disciples to look at the fields and said "a few more months until harvest, and I say look, the fields are white and ready for harvest now." It's true. The world around us that's ripe for harvest is a world that is suffering and struggling. That's where we're called to be. There's a sense in which well, it doesn't have to be us.

I wonder if we don't need to be in contact with people who are, in a sense, struggling. There should be, perhaps, a story that we can tell sometimes of relationships that have been set up that we've followed the Spirit into where we're trying to help. And in helping, we are helped and enriched ourselves. Often when we come as people who are prepared to give, we are the ones who end up receiving.

JMF: Paul uses that kind of language in the opening to several of his letters where he talks about how one congregation's heart is going out to the suffering of another and that sort of thing.

DC: Yes, the language of sharing is all over his letters. It's because the reality that he's involved with is a participatory reality. We are bound up with one another, and so what happens to you affects me in a direct way. The sort of community that we're being birthed into by this process is a communion. It's the communion of God, the divine communion, and we've been called to be part of that, and so we're being called to be part of a community where every person is bound up with the reality and the life of every other person. We look at Christ, we look at the Father, we look at the Son, we look at the Spirit—they're all defined and inextricably intertwined.

When we're experiencing fullness of our personhood in Christ, what we experience is the reality that we're involved with one another. We're very relational. Personhood is all about these relationships. My relationship with my wife is a huge part of who I am. She is a huge part of my personhood. She's not the only person that's a part of my personhood, but she's a very important one. This is a central truth. So, in a sense, we need to be engaged with the people around us who are hurting, and hopefully they'll be engaged with us when we're hurting.

JMF: When we talk about the gospel and salvation, we are not talking about details of rules and laws to keep—we're talking relationships—restorational relationships, building right relationships, good relationships, being together, being in communion with God and with one another.

DC: Absolutely. That's the church. That's the reality of the church, which is a reality that's in God, and you don't legislate a reality like that. That's to make a big mistake. There's a freedom to these relationships that's very important, because we're in touch with the person who's making the rules, as it were.

It turns out that this person, God, is not making rules. God is just calling us into these relationships that have a certain shape, so there's a flexibility about it, there's a malleability, if you like, which is liberating. Once you start to try to legalize it and legislate it, you mess it up. In the end of the day, there's one legislator, and that's Jesus Christ. If we have any problems, we can go to him and ask him about stuff, which is nice—it's a good feeling to be operating in a situation like that.

JMF: Often we read Paul as though we have a relationship with the rules. When our relationship is mediated by the law, our focus is on "where are we falling short in terms of this rule or that rule" instead of thinking about it in terms of living out the relationship into which we've been called, the relationship we've been given that we are a part of and participating in, whether negatively or positively.

DC: Yes. I think Paul was anything but a legalist, and you can see this when you lay his letters out alongside one another and look at their diversity and see the very different advice that's going to Philippi from the advice that's going to Corinth, even the advice in the second letter that goes to Corinth, the advice that goes to Colossae, the advice that goes to Rome—extremely diverse, which suggests to me that Paul is very context-sensitive. He's not laying down universal rules—he's speaking out of a universal reality, which is a very different thing. That reality is essentially personal. It's a community that involves people; it involves the divine community.

JMF: It's like he gets to the very different needs and conclusions by the same path.

DC: Exactly. Under the same Lordship, one might say.

JMF: A lot of similarity in Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and yet addressing different issues.

DC: Right. Paul is what we might call almost a command ethicist. He's worried about the thought that you lay down a rule, because he thinks while that can be a good thing for a while, as he points out in Romans 7, eventually you can make that rule and go to some situation where it will do some damage—you can exploit it. The demonic forces that are unleashed in the world that stand against us are much more sophisticated than we are, and they can manipulate these things and can break you down by putting them to work.

So Paul's approach is, he's no longer orienting himself primarily by written instructions or by rule after rule or even by propositions—he is orienting himself through Christ. He's listening to Christ, and Christ is telling him what to do. It's a living situation where he's getting instructions from the one who is controlling and organizing everything. He's getting his instructions from the Spirit and from the Father as well—it's not just Christ who's doing this. That's a very different mentality, isn't it? It's a much more intimate reality than we tend to live in ourselves.

JMF: An example of that might be in the way unity is often used with churches. Paul is talking about unity in the Spirit and in the faith, and we, instead of seeing that as being rooted in the relationship of love, we instead use it as a weapon as a church to compel…

DC: Right. Legislate.

JMF: We legislate a lock-step approach to something and *call* that unity as though it's unity, but it it's far from anything resembling communion.

DC: Right. What Paul is talking about is, the church *is* actually unified, because it is in Christ, and Christ is unified, and he holds everything together. It's a failure by people to recognize a unity that Christ has established. We don't have to go out and work at establishing this.

JMF: To create it.

DC: We can respond to something that's already there.

JMF: To live in the reality of what is already true.

DC: Exactly.

JMF: Which means I need to change, as opposed to making everyone else agree with me.

DC: Right.

JMF: Robert Capon calls it left-handed authority as opposed to right-handed authority.

You've mentioned that Paul illustrates some of his theological positions in his ministry in

what he wrote about the slave Onesimus and also Lydia in Philippi. How do you see those playing out in…

DC: If I'm right about Paul's gospel and what was making it tick, you've probably detected by now that God comes down so far to us, and we're all so deeply involved in the situation that's wrong, and we're accountable for that wrongness on a certain level, that it levels out all the distinctions that we like to introduce to stratify our relationships. The gospel of grace knocks down status and pretentions. When Paul talks about the new reality that we live in, he does so quite clearly from time to time, that these old barriers have been broken down and transcended, so that there is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free, there is no male and female, that you're all children of God in Christ Jesus. That's his most famous saying about those things, in Galatians 3:28.

We're fond of saying that from the pulpit and even our Bible studies, but it's another thing to actually enact the erasure of these status differentials on the ground and to push past them—that's hard work. So the question arises—was Paul himself somebody who was actually committed to doing that, or was he a bit of a theorist? Was this something he was happy talking about, or was it something he actually did?

I was enormously impressed when I pushed into his letter that he wrote to Philemon and reconstructed that situation there and realized that he was really practicing what he preached and the situation in that little letter.

Paul has written to a guy called Philemon, who's married to a woman called Apphia. Apphia is a Phrygian name, and I think Philemon was probably accompanying [the letter to the] Colossians, so it's going to an ancient territory in present-day western Turkey—it would have been ancient Phrygia. It looks as though Philemon and Apphia are a Phrygian couple, which make them members of an ancient civilized barbarian race.

Paul is writing on behalf of a guy called Onesimus. Onesimus is not his name, it's a slave name, a Latin name, just means "useful." It's like as we would call "Handy Andy." Slaves were so depersonalized in the ancient world that they weren't allowed to use their own names, but were just called things like Number 1, Number 2, Number 3, or they were called after places where they were born, or they were called pet names. Onesimus is a slave, this is his slave name.

When we read the letter to the Colossians, that's also going to the same situation, I think, we read a similar statement to Galatians 3:28 in Colossians 3:11, but it's oriented slightly

differently. Paul says there's no Jew or Greek, circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free. Barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free. What's a Scythian doing in Colossians 3:11? What is a Scythian? A Scythian is a barbarian that rides around the Russian steppes. It was a name that was applied to people who were enslaved from the northern part of the Black Sea. Everyone who was enslaved out there was called a Scythian—you often got a higher price for them if you called them a Scythian. These slaves were brought down into the Mediterranean, and they were mainly sold at Ephesus, one of the great slave markets of the ancient world.

It's likely that Onesimus or his parents is some poor white guy who's been enslaved by pirates from the north shore of the Black Sea. He's come down, he's been sold at Ephesus, and now he's working for this Phrygian couple, and there's a problem in this household, there's great unhappiness, there's a fractured relationship.

Paul has run into Onesimus in jail, and Onesimus has come to him and said, "Please help me out here. Something is wrong in this household." This was something you could do in the ancient world—it wasn't quite as bad as running away. If you ran away and you were caught, you were branded, you could be executed, terrible things would happen to you. But you could run to a friend of the family and say, "I'm in deep trouble here, please help me out."

So Onesimus comes to Paul, and as we reconstruct the relationship, this is what happened. It doesn't look like he was a Christian when he arrived. He's a pagan boy that's unhappy. He is the lowest of the low. He's an unhappy slave, branded as lazy, he's a white slave from a far-off barbarian land. In terms of social status in the ancient world, he's as low as you go.

Paul practically falls in love with him. He says, "This boy is my heart now, he has become my heart to me while I'm in chains." He sends him back to his master, Philemon, with this letter, but also having converted him. He sends back a cover letter saying to the leader of the congregation, "Look, take care of this situation, look out for him."

Then he says, "Charge any money to my account, I'm coming to visit soon." What I see in there is that Paul has reached out to this, this probably teenager, and has grasped him, drawn him to the reality of Christ, given him that gift, and set up a relationship that seems deep and committed and genuine between a high-status religious figure and this very low-status marginal guy who's been causing trouble, this person from the bottom rung of society.

So I thought to myself, well, it looks to me as though Paul's really delivering on this from time to time. It's quite a challenge to us and for us as well.

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Sin and Its Seriousness

JMF: In your book, *The Deliverance of God,* you focus a great deal on Romans 5-8 and the very positive, powerful assurance of salvation that is present in those passages. The question that seems to arise when we talk about the power, the strength, and the assurance of grace, which is most assuredly present, are all these nagging questions about the "but"s — the "but"s syndrome — "when it comes to grace, but…." What are some of those, and how do we work with those?

DC: A lot of people resist a gospel of grace for three reasons. They're worried about judgment, they're worried about ethics, and they're worried about sin. They see those things as connected together. What one runs into here is the inability to step outside of an essentially conditional mentality where people think, "If I can't threaten you with something, with a negative future state, how can I get you to behave well?"

JMF: Exactly.

DC: So [if I stress grace] I'll be soft on sin, I won't be doing my ethical job, and I'll let judgment go, and all these things are held together. While this is the model that is pursued with the best of intentions, I think it's wrong on all accounts: as an account of judgment, an account of ethics, an account of sin, and about how people behave. Most importantly, it's wrong about God.

The gospel wants to do things very differently. Perhaps if we talk about that for a little bit, we can come back and see where the fallacies lie in these sorts of protests. The gospel of grace addresses ethics and sin in a radical way. It says to you immediately, you are so sinful that you can contribute nothing to this process. That's a very strong judgment on your sinfulness and what needs to change, and people sense this. The flipside of the gospel of grace is this very stern word of judgment.

You say to me, "How do I behave, once this gospel of grace arrives? Does it just let me do whatever I want?" "Absolutely not!" (to quote Paul, who says that a lot, especially about this question). You've involved in a transformed reality now; you have to cooperate with it as much as you can. You need to throw yourself into this new reality, and it asks that of you. It asks you to respond, at least in the relationships that you're in. It will take every ounce of willpower and effort that you have, and more, to continue to respond to the Spirit and the presence of Christ in your life.

This is what true freedom is. As we respond in these relationships, we discover what liberty

is, what it means to be set free from sin, and the tyranny of death, corruption, and sin, and to be free to live for God as God wants us to live. That's true freedom, but it's freedom that you have to be involved with. It's real freedom. *You* are doing this. But you're not choosing to step away from him or choosing not to be involved with him. It's a relationship that's given to you that you then need to respond to. It's the freedom of response and the response of freedom.

This is something that's hard for us to grasp because it's a very non-modern, non-Western way of understanding freedom, but if I can put it like this, it's rather like when a beautiful chord is played on a piano. Certain notes that are in harmonic resonance with this chord will resonate with it, and it's as if God is playing this chord, and we are free to resonate with what God is doing in our lives and to fit into this magnificent orchestration. If God is not playing this chord, we're not free, nothing happens, we're inert. But when that chord is played and when we are struck, when that note is struck, we resonate. That is the freedom of God. We can push back on that and refuse to resonate. We can reject the freedom that God gives us. We can reject the gift that comes to us. But that's not free, that's not a choice. The Bible calls it sin, and it's an irrational decision for slavery. I wouldn't grace that whole operation with the word freedom.

When the gospel of grace comes to us, it reshapes our understanding of what true human freedom is. As our minds are reshaped and our responses are reshaped, I think we live as we're meant to live, and we see more clearly why these other ways of approaching ethics and judgment and sin are wrong. You can probably see by now where I'm going with this in terms of having someone protest against the gospel of grace and says it's soft on sin, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Because when I'm looking at grace, I'm seeing something that treats sin with incredible seriousness. When I'm in this relationship of grace, and I know that God accepts me in Christ, I'm then free to see myself as I really am. I'm free to see the depth of the sin in my life because I'm secure.

JMF: Without fear.

DC: Exactly. I know that I cannot fall out of his loving embrace, and so I can be honest in a way that I cannot be honest in any other situation or system.

JMF: There's a huge freedom in that. All the burdens are lifted. There are no more pretenses.

DC: The burdens are lifted, but the reality is sometimes slightly horrible, because you begin to go on a journey when you get exposed to depths of sin that you hadn't even suspected were

there. So a confessional quality becomes part of your discipleship — it becomes part of Christian leadership, where the deeper we go with God, the more sense, unfortunately, we have with our own struggle with sin...the more we appreciate the enormous accomplishment of Christ on our behalf, who shared this horrendous situation and didn't slip into that. It produces a more honest church culture; I hope it produces a slightly more honest culture of discipleship.

There are some lessons about sinfulness that I didn't even smell a whiff of until I had been a Christian probably 15 or 20 years, then all of a sudden, bam, you're confronted by something that you do, that's a pattern of behavior, that it's been in your life from the get-go, and suddenly God is asking you to address that — an issue like violence. You can't even see how deeply immersed you are in violence until one day the Holy Spirit puts you in an incident, puts his finger on it, and says okay, it's time for you to address this now. That is an utterly painful experience, but it's the sort of repentance that needs to happen in Christian lives. It's taking sin incredibly seriously in an ongoing way.

If you're pushing the other kind of model, the one that I'm not so happy with, the more conditional contractual model, you're protesting against my emphasis on grace and you're saying well, what about sin? Aren't you soft on sin? I'm saying no, *you're* soft on sin. If you're approaching the gospel as if sin is something that you learn about and confess before you become a Christian, I think you're treating sin in a trivial way. You're approaching sin as if you can understand it without God revealing this stuff to you in an ongoing way—as if you could understand sin without being confronted by the reality of Christ. You're treating sin as if it's something you and your sinful situation can deal with yourself so that you can become a Christian.

That trivializes sin. The assumption seems to be that through your good actions, you've left it at the door of the church when you walked in and became a Christian. You *didn't* leave it at the door of the church — it walked into church with you — unfortunately it comes back to grab you time after time. So I have a deep worry that this fairly conditional contractual approach to the gospel doesn't treat sin with sufficient seriousness. I find that ironic when I get accused by advocates of that gospel, of being too soft on sin.

I also think that they're soft on ethics. There's this belief that human beings have it in them to generate a certain amount of good behavior in order to become a Christian, before they become a Christian. Once you're a Christian you keep on with the good work. But this is deluded

about the depth of sin and the human condition. We cannot generate good behavior and good deeds until God has come down and transformed us and changed us. This is a wildly over-optimistic evaluation of human ability and capacity. These are things that I've learned from standing in the tradition of grace, standing in the reality of grace.

JMF: Isn't there also the idea of being forgiven, to have your past sins removed, and then the concept... now the Spirit will come and help you maintain some level of righteousness, rather than the model you're talking about.

DC: The false model has this sort of funny two-step pattern where you get sins wiped away and then you step into the church by doing certain things. For example, making a decision of faith...supposedly makes you a Christian. Then the Holy Spirit arrives like the seventh cavalry to help you out when you get into a difficult situation. There's something a little odd about that.

What really seems to be going on is the Spirit is involved from well *before* your involvement. Now, from the foundation of the world, the Spirit with Christ has been working toward your and my inclusion in all of this. The Spirit has been working on your journey often when you're not aware of it, leading you to an understanding of Christ, of the church, of God, of sin. They are all involved together. This is so much more than forgiveness of sins. It is forgiveness of sins, but it's release *from* sin.

There's a little word play that Paul does on the genitive connection [in the Greek grammar]...and you can talk about forgiveness of sins or forgiveness of transgressions, in which the transgressions are the object of the forgiveness. I'm going to forgive those sins over there. But there's also with the same word a sense of *release* from sins, which becomes release from sin in Paul's genitive of separation — we're getting released out of or away from the sin. This is talking about actually changing us — not wiping away acts, but changing the way we function so we don't act in that way.

JMF: This transformation has to do with being in Christ in a way that he is our life, he is our righteousness.

DC: Absolutely. There's a danger that when God comes to us in grace, we then think "okay, so much has been done for me, now it's over to me to respond" — possibly I've been overemphasizing that. There's a sense in which grace from God doesn't just come all the way to us—it takes us back as well in Christ. Christ is the one who has walked in the way that we couldn't walk. It's as if we're in a massive snowdrift, helpless, bound there, but Christ is the one

who has smashed the furrow through the snow — we walk behind him, he pulls us, he carries us behind him through the snow. God hasn't just come all the way down to us, he's also hauling us and Christ all the way back to him. All of our acting and responding, in a way, is an echoing of Jesus' perfect response for us.

We see this again in Romans 8, where Paul talks about prayer, for example. We struggle, we don't know what to pray. But then we realize the Spirit is praying in a deeper way than we can pray. Christ is praying for us as well. Christ is continually offering prayer to the Father, the Spirit is offering prayer to the Father (knowing much more about the situation than we do), and we're entering into that prayer that is being undertaken on our behalf. It is a gift that comes all the way down and comes all the way back. It's a marvelous thing. We could never dream this up. This is not something that a clever person has thought up. This is an act of God.

JMF: So we're participating in the prayers of Christ and don't have to worry about whether our prayers are good enough.

DC: We don't have to be anxious—we just have to respond to this divine community as doing things on our behalf. All our activity is like that — we're caught up into worship in Christ, we're caught up into the behavior of Christ by the Spirit of Christ. We're caught up in the understanding of Christ, the mind of Christ. The faithfulness of Christ is something we're caught up in as well. We don't have to generate this ourselves—God is giving this to us. It's a gift that's so much bigger than we realize, and yet Paul knew this. He wrote in Ephesians, "I'm going to pray that you would have power to grasp with all saints the height and the depth and the breadth and the width of the love of Christ which is past all understanding." He understood that you could fall forever into the love of Christ. That's a pretty powerful expanse of benevolence, is it not?

JMF: Yeah. So our faith that we have at the time of believing should not be thought of as a work that causes God to change his mind, causes God to look at us in a new way.

DC: No, not at all.

JMF: It isn't the beginning point of our salvation.

DC: I don't think so.

JMF: Or even our transformation.

DC: This is where we can get Paul wrong, by turning faith into a deed or a work that accesses the benefits of Christ. It's like our Visa card — we trot off to the ATM with it and get

money out of the account. Without the card, you don't get any of the good stuff. No. This is a misunderstanding of Paul. For Paul, our faith is something that Christ has as well as us. In us, it's a fruit of the Spirit. It's very important, but it's a sign that we are in Christ in our responding to the Father as Christ himself did.

In a way, faith has many dimensions. It's correct understanding of what's going on, which is important. One of the most important elements is that we understand what sort of God we're involved with — the God of love. It involves unwavering trust, it involves fidelity through suffering. When struggles come, we can be faithful. These are all signs that the Spirit is bearing fruit in our lives and that we're echoing the character of Christ.

Here I am using this reading of a couple of phrases in Paul that the King James Version got right when it translated them as "the faith of Christ." Modern translations can seem to emphasize our decision, making the role for faith, unfortunately, changed or reinterpreted, so they became "faith in Christ." Recently scholars have begun turning back to "the faith of Christ." Some have begun realizing that this makes better sense of the texts where these phrases occur. I'm persuaded by that; I think they're right.

JMF: The fact that it's the fruit of the Spirit...often we'll hear a sermon or a Bible study or group, and fruit of the Spirit will be listed or read from Galatians and then the admonishment is to start living like this because, after all, this is the fruit of the Spirit, so you need to get more of this in your life. Isn't that kind of turning around the whole...

DC: That's missing the point (laughing). It's not that we're not involved. God wants a response from us, and we are fully involved in this. But we don't have to generate this out of our own resources. We're not thrown back on ourselves. We don't have to strive to produce these sorts of things as proof that we're involved in the reality of Christ. We can chill out to a large extent, and attend to the glories of the gospel, respond to it is as best we can, and Christ and the Spirit will do this work through us. There is restfulness and a sense of relaxation about people who are grasped by this truth. Paul would say people grasp this truth because they're grasped by this truth. This is the hallmark of people who are walking in grace.

JMF: Going back to the title of the book, *Deliverance of God*... The subhead is, *An Apocalyptic Re-Reading of Justification in Paul.* Why is it an apocalyptic re-reading of justification in Paul?

DC: What I'm getting at there is that there's a bad way of reading Paul, a way that I don't

approve of and that gets him wrong. That reading of Paul produces a false model of the gospel, and it springs out of what we could call "Paul's justification texts." These are passages where he uses justification words, which in the Greek are using the *dikaio* name. We could call them as *dikaio* texts.

In those texts, Paul is doing something interesting with faith and works — works of law over here, faith over there, someone's been justified or *dikaio*(ed) and is also the righteousness of God running around. Those are the texts out of which a very conditional contractual understanding of the gospel has been generated, particularly since the second and third generations after the Reformation. I think that is where the damage was done. I don't think the main Reformers got this wrong. There was a little bit of it going on, but Calvin, Luther, I don't get the sense when I read them. But later on, second, third generation — certain theological systems were developed in a very conditional, contractual way, and these are the ones that did the damage.

To understand Paul properly, I think we need to eliminate this false dogmatic way of reading Paul. The way we eliminate it from the justification texts is, we grasp they're all about revelation, particularly when Paul's talking about faith. That's what I mean by *apocalyptic.* Apocalyptic is just a fancy word for revelation, the Greek word for revelation. *Apocalypsis* is Greek, *revelare* is the verb in Latin. So what I'm getting at is, there's nothing conditional or contractual going on in these justification texts. Paul is talking about the disclosure of the good purposes of God through the faithfulness of Christ, which elicits from us a response and an echo of faith as we are involved in him. This is what Paul is talking about in these texts.

We've tended to miss that because we've taken away the faith of Christ and we've taken that faith and made it into an action that *we* undertake. We've made these texts about human beings and about conditions that we can fulfill. But I don't think that's what Paul was writing. When he says *dikaiosyne theou,* the righteousness of God (or even better, the deliverance of God) has been revealed through *pistis Christou,* he's talking about the faith of Christ. It's Jesus' faithfulness to death on the cross and his resurrection where we see God's definitive righteous purpose revealed.

When we miss that, we misunderstand and misconstrue all of Paul's teaching about salvation. It's a great tragedy that's gripped a lot of the conservative church... We're used to saying that the liberal church has messed things up because they dumped the Bible and wandered off. But the conservative church tooth and nail will defend this as the true gospel...and it's a great

tragedy for the church, because what was going on in Paul was the antithesis of this "gospel." It's time for us to recover that.

JMF: It seems like the Christian walk is a lot more fun and enjoyable than it's often made out to be by those who seem to take it seriously...in the sense of being very sober and uptight, unable to enjoy themselves, unable to have fun with other people. It's not fun, it's a burden as opposed to a joy, because it's laced with fear.

DC: I think so. What can be joyful about being flung back on your own resources and asked to satisfy…

JMF: Especially when you have none, so you have to pretend you have some, which leads to judgmentalism and to condemnation and to everything that divides people instead of bringing them together.

DC: And hanging over your head is this fearsome scenario of what's going to happen at the end of the age, and you're worried, you don't have any sense of assurance.

JMF: In the gospel, there is no fear of the judgment.

DC: Love drives out fear. I don't believe that God wants us to be afraid for a millisecond of anything, except perhaps our own stupidity.

JMF: There's a solution for that: by trusting, over against our stupidity.

DC: That's right — trusting what God tells us about ourselves instead of what we perhaps want to believe about ourselves.

JMF: That would take another full interview alone.

DC: Exactly.

JMF: What do you do for recreation, for hobbies?

DC: I have fun. I follow the suggestions of my wife, who is an expert at having fun, and we have cats and dogs, we run, we do Pilates and yoga, we go to the beach, we travel. I spend time with the kids, watch a lot of films, read. We have a terrific life. I feel positively guilty about the amount of enjoyment that I get out of life. But you can't have fun in your spare time if you're not having fun at work, often.

JMF: What's your next project? What project are you involved in that we'll eventually see?

DC: People are asking me to write a shorter version of *Deliverance of God*, and I'm hearing those cries, so I think I will. I don't know that I always explain myself as well as I would like to. The feedback is coming in on the big book. Folk are not grasping the theological issues with as

much clarity as I had hoped. So I need to spell those out a little more clearly. I think I'm getting a hold of them more clearly as I talk in situations like this. So a shorter book that shows how to read Romans the right way I think is what I'm going to work on in the next few months.

After that I have a very long-running project on the life of Paul, because I've always been passionately interested in how he worked as missionary — where he was, what he was visiting, what ships he sailed on...in a concrete gritty way. I've visited most of these cities, so I wanted to write a book about that and then collapse. And I should come to you for another suggestion.

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In Christ – Conversion and Calling

Paul's method of preaching the gospel

Michael Morrison: You've spent a lot of your scholarly time on Paul. You've got a couple of big books here about Paul. You said in one of our earlier interviews that you are interested in the life of Paul. I thought maybe you could talk a little about that. I'm somewhat familiar with the conversion of Paul from the book of Acts. But how does Paul himself describe his conversion?

DC: We're a little too familiar with his conversion from the book of Acts. We don't pay enough attention to how *he* tells us he got converted. He never uses the language of conversion when he is describing what happened to him; he uses the language of *call.* He echoes the call narratives of Jeremiah and Isaiah strongly to emphasize that God encountered him in a direct and dramatic way. What took place was a *revelation.*

So on one level, what happened to him is extremely important for us to understand, which is that a meeting with God took place that God initiated, very unexpected. On another level, it's a little dangerous to make Paul's "conversion" the paradigm for our conversion, because he had something very special happen to him. He was called to be an apostle. I'm not sure that all of us are called to be an apostle. Some of us, maybe.

MM: I've never been struck down in the way that Paul was. But does his story have any exemplary value for the conversions that we have?

DC: I think it does. But we also need to look harder at what he was doing, how he was converting people. We find there's a network of friendships and relationships that's spreading. He's utilizing networks, sometimes in unexpected ways. People are converting in the context of relationships that they already have.

For example, he often tries to hook up with family networks or Jewish networks where he's visiting. When those don't work, he goes and takes employment as a hand worker, and he begins to make friends with the people in the workshop. This is roughly how he met Lydia. Lydia was involved in handworking and textiles. She's somebody who's networking with women. He's not just staying in the networks with men.

He's probably also working veteran networks when he can as well. Remember, there's a veteran at Philippi. There's another veteran probably at Colossae. These are colonies of soldiers

who have retired from the Roman Army, they've done their 25 years of service, and they kept in touch with one another, and they probably were working in textiles.

We see Paul doing something typical of a new religion, which is sort of playing hopscotch from network to network and exploiting those networks and those relationships and people who know him and are friends of his, become friends of his, who are friends of friends, they're converting and forming the basis of his new communities.

MM: So could he go into a city and start a church in three weeks, for example? Is that…

DC: Well, this is a bit of an exaggeration. In the ancient world, if you went into a city cold and you didn't know anybody, you would die. They didn't know you, you had no food, you had no water, if you fell ill you dropped on the street, you had nowhere to stay. You had to have contacts. These are hostile missionary environments. They don't like strangers coming in and telling them that the way that they've been doing things for hundreds of years is wrong. You need to know somebody who's there already.

Once you've linked up with them, stayed with them for a bit, you need to try and hook onto the sorts of networks and friendships that that person has. This is what we see him doing. In each city around the Mediterranean, he knows somebody who knows somebody, and he goes and stays with them and then links up with somebody else. It's all about who you know.

MM: What kind of a message would he preach in that situation? How would he introduce them to Jesus?

DC: This undermines our slightly stereotypical notion of Paul arriving and preaching one dramatic proclamatory message that people then respond to with some sort of decision, the altar call takes place on the corner of the streets of Corinth and the Corinthians all come forward. This is not how it worked.

When you're working with somebody – say you're a handworker and you're working on leather or you're working on sandals or stitching canvas awnings or something like that – you don't preach at them all day. You chat with them. You get to know them. You're probably listening to them as much as you're talking at them. A conversation takes place over many days and weeks and months, and then you turn around after that process, and lo and behold, these people believe what you're saying. You're telling the story about how the Spirit who once created everything is also gathering us up into this person. It's language they can understand, but it's also language that challenges them.

It will make more sense if you've heard Jews speaking, probably, if you've hung around the local synagogue, which you could do, if you've heard these types of stories about the God of Israel before. That's going to help you. But Paul is happy to communicate even if you've never heard of that material. He can translate his good news into your idioms and your thought forms. He can talk about adoption or benefaction, grace. These are things that every Greek and Roman would know about. They would know about having a patron, they would know about being gifted things, they would know about being adopted into someone's family, they would know about being immersed as a ritual of entry.

This is Paul communicating also in the language of the street, in a way that makes sense. He's a very good missionary. He knows what he's doing. He's contextualizing.

MM: You mentioned immersion. At what point would Paul baptize these people? Did he realize that they had crossed over from one religious belief to another?

DC: I think so. Sometimes there's a dramatic moment when you can point your finger at something and say, an event has taken place here, and we need to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, and you would get baptized along with all your household. Other times I suspect that the process was gradual. But at some point it's appropriate for you to get baptized to signify the reality that you're now standing in. This would be one of the things that took place.

You would attend the communal meals where the Christians gathered. These are meals taking place every day, and these are *meals.* A lot of people in ancient times were hungry, maybe two-thirds of the population was hungry, one-third of the population was very hungry — they lived from hand to mouth. So you went to Christian meals, you went to Christian celebrations of the sacraments partly because they were offering you food.

But in the middle of the food was the breaking of the bread and the passing around of the cup. You're participating in this. As Wesley would say, probably the cup and the bread are functioning like converting ordinances at that time — they're making the reality of Christ present to you. The cup is going around and the bread is being broken and eaten, and people are saying, "We're all part of this, this is all one with us, and we're one with someone who died, but also who is alive now and who is present with us now in a real way."

I assume that, like most Greek meals, you had the food first and you had the entertainment afterward. The singing would begin, the Christian singing, people maybe would have brought along a song (which was extremely democratic), and the worship would begin, and you would

get a sense, "Goodness me, we're in the presence of the living God here."

MM: People found themselves in a community.

DC: Exactly. A worshiping community. They were gathered up into its worship. In this way probably many were powerfully affected. This is pretty exciting stuff for an ancient Greek — especially if you're a woman. You didn't have access to this type of stuff ordinarily. But these Christians were kind of strangely democratic. If you're a woman you could come along, you could bring a song, you could prophesy, you could pray, you could participate, as long as you didn't humiliate your husband in public (which is still probably a good rule of thumb) …this is how these meetings operated. They were very vital and participatory.

MM: Is it just a *story* that Paul is telling, or is there something there that he's also exhorting them to make a decision? How do you go about growing this community or solidifying it?

DC: It's not *just* a story – it's a story about a reality that you're a part of, and that reality has certain claims on you, if you like, has a certain shape. It has a certain set of relationships built into it that you have to respond to. Paul is expecting a response. He has high expectations of his converts. He's got high expectations of their behavior. There's a strong emphasis on ethics, in particular what we might call the ethics of relationships.

This is where Paul is innovating — where the Spirit of God is doing something exciting, but also slightly intimidating — in the sense that if you're a Jew, you would be expecting to do a lot of your responding to God in the temple at Jerusalem, in a particular place, in a particular building, in a certain state of purity. You'd be expecting to do a lot of your responding to God in accordance with strict calendrical observances and diet. Paul's view is: that stuff is now purely negotiable. If you're a Jew you should still do it, unless you're called to engage with another constituency.

But the pagans that he's calling in his communities off the street…what he's challenging them with is the inter-relational stuff that we see so much of in the Bible. How do I relate to you? Am I bitter toward you? Angry, hostile, backbiting, slanderous, am I in a status game with you? All that stuff has to stop. How do I speak to you? How do I talk with you? Am I charitable? Am I humble? These sorts of things. This is what Paul is pushing his people to do. (Pushing is the wrong expression.) He's talking about something that's *drawing* them into this in a new way.

MM: So the motivation for the behavior is different than …

DC: Very much so.

MM: He's offering them a gift of salvation, but once they're already saved, then what's the motive for them to do what is right?

DC: He's offering them participation in a new reality. When you're in that new reality, you've been set free from a whole lot of stuff that is dragging you down, fracturing you and breaking you and harming you. You see more clearly what the good things are in life that God wants you to do. Basically you're an idiot if you don't want to do that.

MM: So he's painting a new reality.

DC: He's not painting it in the way that we would *limit* things to that. You're right, he is depicting something that's really here. He's witnessing, in a way, to a reality, so his stories and his depictions are helping Christians understand what's going on.

It's exciting. This is why he calls himself an apostle. He's a diplomat who's announcing the good news of what God is doing — and what God is doing is really what matters. That's what's central, and that's what's real, and that's why if you're a Christian you're characterized in part by belief, which is, you understand what's going on. You're the one that's walking around with your eyes open. You're the one that's in the daylight. Other people are stumbling around in the dark with their eyes closed. You're the one that really knows what reality is all about.

That's an exciting summons. He's stitching away in his leatherworks, stitching the soles of his sandals, and he's talking about this stuff to these other impoverished stone workers around, and they're getting interested in it. They're going, "Sounds like a good deal."

MM: Once he builds this community, then he leaves. What are they going to think of that? Or, how long would he be staying in a city?

DC: It looks as though he stayed for about a year and a half, roughly, depending on how things went. Then he shot off, which strikes us as shocking. But he did keep in touch with everybody. We've got all these letters, because even after he left, he was still networking with these communities. When you see the thought and the effort that has gone into these texts, you realize how much they're still on his mind.

If they get into trouble, he's on a boat straight away and shooting back to visit them. But he's a missionary, so he's church planting. His plan is to put these communities in place and then move on in the hope and expectation that they will flourish, and also begin to do the same around them. That's probably the plan.

MM: As I understand it, letter writing wasn't that easy in antiquity, and yet he invested

quite a bit of, I don't know, maybe financial resources to be able to do this. As you say, he's keeping that relationship.

DC: It is a big investment. It's an investment of time, too.

MM: But he also wrote to some places that he had not been before.

DC: A couple of times, yeah. Paul believes, as I said at the start, that God has revealed himself to him and revealed Christ to him, and he also believes that God has revealed Christ to him in a way that has special significance for people converting out of paganism, not for other Jews. So, when pagans are converting around the place, even when they haven't converted through his direct ministry, he feels protective about them. And thankfully he writes a letter occasionally to sort them out.

So we have, I think, Ephesians written for this reason. There's a little group of converts, they've converted, they're not Jews, and Paul's view was you didn't have to become a Jew to engage with this new reality, because the Jew/Greek distinction was something that was being transcended. He's not down on Jews – it's just that the Jewish people and their history, the nation, is being fulfilled in *the* Jew, who is Christ, and we're stepping through into a new reality. There's no need to go back and around the long way. It's controversial, by the way – they said this, not everybody liked it.

MM: So the important part of a person's identity was not their ethnic category.

DC: Exactly. That is a shocking thing to say, and something that we're still coming to grips with, is it not? We love to group people. We love to look at ourselves in groups.

MM: You're either with us or…

DC: Exactly. Paul is saying no, that's not where you are primarily. Primarily you're characterized by the fact that you're *in* this person who has died and been resurrected. Now you're beyond. That's where you are. That's the real you. So it's a shocking thing to say. It's exciting, it's liberating, but terribly, terribly hard to take on board.

Being "in Christ"

MM: Right. Even your expression there (which I know comes from Paul), that you are "in" a person. How does that translate into our modern concepts? We're not physically in a person, so what does Paul mean?

DC: Right. It's a special metaphor that is trying to convey to us a couple of things. The first

thing that it's trying to convey is that this is real and concrete, so it's referring to your being. It's referring to what we call your ontology, what you're made of, the stuff that really matters that puts you together. When Paul says you're "in Christ," what he's saying is you're no longer "in Adam." Now, everybody is in Adam in some sense. It's what we all are, it's how we're all constructed.

MM: It comes with the flesh.

DC: So to say we're in Christ is a strong statement about what we're constructed out of. The other thing that he's getting at with the "in Christ" motif is when you're in something, you're inside it or it's in you — there's a sense of closeness and intimacy that's being conveyed by this expression. He's saying not just that this is the way you're made, but you're made in a way that's very close and intimate with this particular person.

MM: The word *identity* comes to mind here. Is it identification?

DC: You're closely identified, without losing who you are. There's a sense in which (paradoxically) the more involved with Christ you are, the more your own personhood is affirmed, and, in a way, the more you grasp the distinctions between you and him.

MM: He gives us freedom to be individuals, different.

DC: He gives us the freedom to be persons, not individuals. We're persons. I think we're being rescued from individualism, actually. But a personhood is something that we need, something we want to have. We want to have full personhood. That is exactly what being in Christ gives us.

MM: I see this distinction you just made between individual and person, and I hear you saying that we are most truly persons when we are in community.

DC: Yes. In relationship. Very much so.

MM: Which ties back in with, our new reality is in these relationships.

DC: It's an interpersonal reality. Because it's a communion characterized by these relationships all interlinking or lacing together, it follows that the more invested we are and involved in this community, the more fully personal we are.

MM: And that's all in Christ.

DC: We tend to think of being in a community and being in an individual as a zero-sum game — the more community the less individuality, the more individuality…it's almost like people are bubbles. Little areas of space that can't exist with somebody else without popping.

MM: Yes, personal space.

DC: That's right. Our culture is telling us this all the time. This is a fundamentally wrong understanding of what being a person is all about, according to the gospel and according to what Paul is telling us. Being a person is all about, actually, investing heavily in these relationships with other people. It's all about being relational.

MM: That's why Paul spends so much time telling people….

DC: That's right. He is a very relational person. Your personhood is bound up with how these relationships are functioning. There shouldn't be a strong distinction between who you are and how you behave — they're both parts of the same thing.

MM: So in the first part of the letter he can say you're not saved by what you do, but then later in the letter he talks about what you're supposed to do.

DC: Right. He's getting at slightly different things there. When he says you're not saved by what you do, he's trying to emphasize that you don't access this reality yourself by doing anything, and you don't control it by doing anything. There's nothing that you can bring to this party that isn't being done for you. But when you're involved with that, there's a lot that you're asked to do by way of response. He's coming from a very different place when he says that. Asking people to behave ethically and in a good way by way of response…it's just a completely different ballgame from telling them to shape up so that they can get involved in something — very different things going on there.

MM: I like the way you put it earlier — he's inviting them to participate in a new reality, and that reality is in these good relationships.

DC: I could put it more strongly and say he's inviting them to *recognize* this new reality, because I think there's a sense in which God is reaching out to us and working with us and doing things for us even when we're not.

MM: It's already there …

DC: It's closer than the heartbeat in your throat, but it doesn't help us much if we're not cooperating, recognizing, responding, and obeying.

MM: That's part of the faith response?

DC: Exactly. Faith, in a way, is just recognizing what's there. We're also gifted the ability to do that. My advice is not to resist it too strongly. I imagine that Paul's advice was kind of similar. Don't resist the reality that has come upon you. Why would you do that?

MM: People have choice in what they believe and accept. If you describe reality well enough, isn't it going to automatically [make me] say "that's right," without me making a specific decision, "Okay, I will have faith in this. I'm not sure if it's right, but I will have faith."

DC: It's easy to lose our way at this point. It's important that we respond to this reality freely; this is free. And we need to respond with everything we've got. There's no limitation, no "statute of limitations" on how much we need to give to this. We give it everything. All our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength. But I wouldn't describe this as a *choice* that we're making.

The only choice that we would make in this situation would probably be a choice to do the dumb thing, which is to sin or resist or reject. This is what gets us into trouble. We tell ourselves, it's okay if we push back on this reality, it's okay if we disobey, if we reject a certain amount of what's going on here, but the Bible basically calls this transgressing or sinning, because there's something stupid and destructive about it. My advice is not to do it. [laughing]

I wouldn't present the gospel in such a way that you had a choice to walk away from it, because it's a declaration of reality. You can respond to the reality that's in front of you and you can walk away if you really want to, but you're denying what *is,* and there's something a little foolish about it, and this is why we get the declaring language coming through so strongly.

MM: Proclaiming.

DC: Exactly. This is how it is. Why wouldn't you be involved with this?

MM: Right. The gospel is good news and not a good invitation.

DC: Right. It's a declaration. Exactly. It's a slightly different way of thinking about what's going on, but it's not aggressive because, as I said before, it's worked through in these conversational settings. People are often converting as this washes over them in time.

MM: Not putting people on the spot.

DC: Right. You're getting to know them, welcome them into your home, feed them, listen to them, talk with them, have a good time with them, share this sort of thing with them, and particularly, if it aligns with how you behave, that will be a powerful witness. You will turn around and after a few months or years, most of those people will have joined your community.

MM: Those people will like what they see of the gospel in you.

DC: Right. You'll mediate the truth of the gospel. Fortunately, it won't be entirely down to you or me.

MM: That's a good thing.

DC: With God's grace we will imperfectly mediate the gospel. Very much so.

MM: You were mentioning faith, and it made me think of something you have written about the faith of Abraham. The way that faith is described in Romans is astounding. Is this the kind of faith that we need to have?

DC: I hope not. Abraham's example is used sometimes in a way that can be a little destructive and challenging, as if we are to access this reality by choosing to have faith like Abraham, which opens up the door for fellowship with God. The way Paul describes Abraham's faith is unwavering, without doubt. We need to read behind the lines there. We skip over the fact that Paul is playing with two stories; he's playing with Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 and also with Genesis 21 and 22. What's going on is the promise of a son, miraculously, to Abraham from his sterile loins. Abraham had to wait about 14 years from the age of 86ish through the age of about 100…

MM: Without ever wavering.

DC: Yeah. If that's what we have to do to become a Christian, we are all in deep trouble. But if in this unwavering trust in God we see an echo of Christ and then we see Abraham in anticipation of Christ's unwavering faithfulness to the point of death and his resurrection, then we see faith as a *gift* that we can receive in Christ, from Christ.

At that point all things become possible. If this is not something we're having to generate for ourselves, it's something that God is giving us, we're built into, and we grow into, then it starts to make sense. It starts to make sense as an aspect of our discipleship, rather than a criterion of entry.

MM: So when Paul was telling this story, he wasn't using it as an example?

DC: I don't think he was using it as an example of how we get saved. He was using it as a story that spoke about Christ and spoke about unwavering fidelity, through suffering if necessary, until a miraculous life-creating event takes place. He was probably saying, if you go back to the start of Israel, what happened? It was a resurrecting event in which a person of great faithfulness endured for a long time and then suddenly the Spirit of God created somebody miraculously out of a situation that was basically dead. Now here we are, talking about Jesus Christ — somebody who faithfully in an unwavering way walked to death and then was raised from the dead, so life was miraculously created. So we're standing, my friends, in the presence

of the very fulfillment of the nation of Israel. This is where it was always going all along.

MM: What Abraham only pre-figured.

DC: In the patriarchs we get this pre-figuration of what has come to fulfillment in the gospel.

MM: So he's not the example of what we do, but the example of what God does.

DC: Exactly — and what God does is gift us with life, life from the dead. It's an exciting promise.

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Understanding the Book of Romans

JMF: You've done a lot of work on the book of Romans, as evidenced by this huge book. It reminds me of a Harry Potter book, it's so big…

DC: Yes. I'm sorry.

JMF: And absolutely just as scintillating. You do a lot of work in the book on the book of Romans, and you tell us about the gospel as it springs out of Romans 5-8, where you spend a great deal of time.

DC: I think Romans 5-8 is where Paul tells us what really matters to him. It's where he tells us what God is really like. This happens because in those chapters he's addressing a couple of very important questions:

I think he's being challenged by somebody who was trying to frighten the Christians that he is looking after, and scaring and intimidating them with a future judgment scenario. Someone is trying to make them feel insecure.

The other question is, he's been challenged by somebody who is accusing him of libertinism. "According to your gospel, Paul, how can Christians behave in a good fashion? They seem to be out of control, riotously living, and they're pagans, they don't really know anything about behaving correctly. They're not proper Jews."

Paul pushes back on both these challenges very, very hard. At the basis of both of these pushbacks is Christology. He says, "The reason why we can be secure against the coming judgment is because the God who does not spare his only Son but gives him up for us all can be trusted to take us through any judgment process, and in the judgment he will be on our side. He won't be on the other side. You can be completely assured when you face the future.

Second, the God who has not spared his only Son but who has given him up to die for us has also transformed us so that we can behave in a way that we need to behave. He's taken us, he's entered into our condition, he's terminated, he's executed the stuff that was getting in the way. He's resurrected us into a new condition, he's joined us to that new condition not only in the Son but through the Spirit. This leads to the only sort of right behavior that is valid and authentic. Romans 5-8 is where we see the heart of the Pauline gospel.

JMF: Isn't that pretty much the opposite of the way most of us have tended to look at the gospel? The gospel is usually presented with the idea "let's make people understand there's

going to be a judgment and make them afraid of that judgment." So people respond to the gospel because they're afraid of the judgment and they want to escape it. They've got to do something to escape it, which is to have faith in somebody who is going to help them. Then we try to maintain that position of escape by trying to behave better. But the way you're describing Romans 5-8 is the opposite of that.

DC: People have got Paul very, very wrong. If what he's saying in Romans 5-8 is right, then the model that you've just described, which is widespread, has something wrong with it as a presentation of Paul. It could be that Paul was horribly muddled up, and on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays he was the good Christological thinker that we think he was and on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays he was the other guy, then on Sundays he had the day off.

But I think when you plant your flag on Romans 5-8 (That's where we need to plant our flag, because that's where he's doing all his work out of Christology. That's where he's talking about God in the light of Christ, and so that is solid information.), what you end up with is another perspective on the model that you've just outlined, which is usually articulated in relation to Romans 1-4.

JMF: That's where we're confronted with "Christ died for us while we were still sinners."

DC: Yeah, Romans 5.

JMF: And we're confronted with "if he's already done this much for you, how much more is he going to see it through the end."

DC: Exactly, yeah.

JMF: The judgment is usually thought of as something scary, like a final exam. What if I don't pass? But we're talking about the judgment being a *good* thing and something to look forward to.

DC: Yes. The judgment's already taken place in the cross. When Paul talks about Christ assuming what we are — the sinful nature, the flesh, as he calls it (the *sarx,* in the Greek), and terminating it, and cutting it off and executing it, that is a judgment. It's God's judgment that this situation cannot continue. It must stop. The hostile part of the judgment is behind us.

When we talk about any future judgment, I think there's a moment of accountability that's coming. Paul is clear that we will stand before Jesus on the last day. We may have to give some sort of account for ourselves, and that would be a potentially excoriating occasion…it could elicit some embarrassment. But I don't think it's a hostile judgment. I don't think it's a judgment

where God is going to say, "You tried hard, you've been a Christian, you've done all the things you're meant to do, but…" It's not going to be one of those sorts of judgments where our deeds are laid in the balance.

You can't get away from the argument of Romans 8, which I think is the finest chapter that he ever wrote. The God who is giving up his own Son for us, giving us the Spirit, is on our side all the way through, all the way down, right through to the end. We should be living lives of joyful assurance.

The bit that you were worried about is the bit of Paul that's coming through from Romans 2. The big problem is, what do we do with Romans 2 when we're really rooted in Romans 5-8? Are we talking about the same gospel? This is where the controversies come from. This is what I was trying to do in my book.

JMF: What is it about Romans 1, 2, 3 that seems to be in contrast with what we're reading in 5-8?

DC: Romans 1-3 is usually read in a certain way. There's a consensus — what I call the usual reading or the traditional reading. It's in most of the commentators. They tend to assume that Paul is, as we put it, thinking forwards, and he's building up a picture of the gospel from a problem. He articulates a problem and then he matches a solution to that problem. All the hard work and all the critical theological moves have taken place in the definition of the problem.

If you think that this is the way that you should be preaching the gospel, you will find that reading in Romans 1-3, because it works reasonably well. There was a guy running around there who preaches forwards, there was a guy there who has a harsh punitive understanding of God, a conditional understanding of salvation. You'll find it because it's a reasonably good fit.

JMF: You mean that the language of those chapters comes across as though there is a fear of a judgment to come in a punitive…

DC: Yeah. Something's going on that's talking about this future punitive judgment. Something, some sort of system where you are being threatened with a future evaluation. So you live in a situation of fundamental insecurity, building toward this final judgment. It's in Romans 1-3.

The question is, has the argument been understood correctly if you attribute all of that to Paul? When you have a very clear understanding of Romans 5-8, what you find when you come to Romans 1-4 is there are little hints and clues in the text that this is not what he was trying to

do. He's not the person that's setting up this problem and pushing people through to a solution – he's going after somebody who talks this way. So it's almost the opposite of the way he's always been read, or almost always been read.

JMF: So in other words, in Romans 1-3 we're reading his presentation of the very argument that he's arguing against in 5-8.

DC: Exactly. Paul is setting up somebody, but he starts off setting them up in a Socratic way, which was typical in the ancient world, where he is using the assumptions of this person and driving them against one another to show how this gospel collapses.

JMF: So back and forth like a dialogue of Socrates.

DC: Right. He's pushing back on a religious person in Romans 1-3, which sounds too good to be true. I tell people, "We've misunderstood what Paul's getting at here. It's not really as negative as people think." And they go, how can you be sure? I answer, It makes better sense in the text because there are these little problems in the text that we've known about for a long time, but we haven't known what to do with them, so we've done what the scholars say, we've anesthetized them. We've passed over the top of them and pretended they're not there.

JMF: Let's look at an example or two.

DC: There's a stack of them, but let me run you through a couple of them. The first problem is that when Paul starts off his tirade, Romans 1:18-32, it's a very dense aggressive bit of prose. When you read it in the Greek, what you hear is a texture that isn't quite Paul. It's a little bit like you're reading through a Stephen King book (should you read a Stephen King book), and you hit a paragraph that's written by Jane Austen and you go, something funny is going on here. Somebody is talking in another voice. It's an aggressive voice.

Then, chapter 2, we hit somebody who's talking in this way. Who is that person? Tradition has usually said this guy is a Jew. He's not only a Jew, he's *the* Jew — Paul is attacking Judaism here. So the way we get to be a Christian is we learn first what it means to be a Jew, which is to be justified by works, and we fail, and then we sort of flip out of that into Christianity.

But when we read what Paul does with this Jew in this text, we build up a picture that isn't quite right. It's not fair. He accuses the Jew from verse 17 and onwards of being somebody who robs temples, who commits adultery, who is a thief, who is a terrible hypocrite. How many Jews do you know that rob banks, sleep with the wrong people on the wrong occasions, this sort of thing? It's a hostile exaggeration. Not all Jews do this; *most* Jews don't. So the person that Paul's

going after here probably isn't your everyday Jew. It's somebody else.

If I told you the Jews were very upset about the time Paul was writing this letter because 20 years previously the Roman emperor kicked them out of Rome…imagine a decree coming down from the Governor of California saying all Christians must leave Los Angeles. This would cause quite a trauma, right? In 19 C.E. the Jews were kicked out of Rome because three Jews had seduced a Roman noblewoman and taken money that she had promised to the Jerusalem temple…and absconded with it themselves. So they were thieving, temple-robbing, adulterous Jews. I think that explains what's going on in this text. Paul's not targeting everybody who is a Jew, he's targeting people who come to Rome who pretend to be Jewish teachers and really aren't.

This fits into the argument that he's developed here, that he's going after somebody else. Then if we read on a little bit further, we suddenly have a little to-and-fro between Paul and this other person. The first guy is going, "I believe in desert, I believe in judgment." The other guy is going, "I believe in the faithfulness and the compassion and the graciousness of God." The first guy goes, "No, even if you sin, God is not going to rescue you on the day of judgment, what you deserve must hold good." Then the guy comes back and goes, "But surely if we're sinful and we get rescued, that shows that God is a compassionate God." It goes back and forth like this.

The usual reading thinks that Paul is the guy that's insisting on judgment and desert. How can that guy, Paul, turn around in chapters 9-11 and say God loves Israel, and even though Israel is disobedient, and will rescue Israel? He will not lose faith with Israel. How can the guy saying the opposite in chapter 3 turn around and suddenly say something else in Romans 11?

My reading, it's the *other* guy who is insisting on judgment and desert. Paul is the guy who is saying, "What about the faithfulness of God? What about the compassion of God? What about the love of God for people who sin?" These little clues add up to a new understanding of this text, where Paul is attacking someone who is fundamentally religious, fundamentally conditional and contractual. I'm summarizing an awful lot of information, and you might just have to buy the book and read it and you'll find out all about it.

JMF: It's a very long book.

DC: Yeah, it is very long. I'm sorry about that. I did my best.

JMF: You must have felt that the entire argument needed to be in one volume rather than breaking it into, say, three volumes or two volumes.

DC: Right. I thought hard about breaking it into two books, but what's going on when you read Paul, even though we're often not aware of it, is we're bringing what we've been taught to the text. It's structuring the way that we read the text, even when we're not aware of it. We've been raised and taught that Paul teaches a certain sort of the gospel. And the way that we've often been taught Paul (and I'm referring to the wrong way) is a way that often also resonates with our culture and even with our politics. So the slightly harsh understanding of Paul resonates with the slightly harsh side to American culture, to American politics, to Western politics.

JMF: How would you describe this harsh side of Paul? What's a summary of that way of viewing it?

DC: It's all about compassion being directed to a limited group, who has done certain things to earn that compassion and benevolence, and everybody else on the outside being exposed to what they deserve and, if necessary, to punishment. So if you contract into the privileged group by doing certain things, then you'll be okay, but everybody else basically just has to sink or swim by themselves. If they sink, that usually means in social or cultural terms that they're going to be punished. This is how we run our politics, and it is how we run a lot of our culture, and this how we've been taught Paul.

So part of the length of the book was to show this is how we're thinking, but it's not necessarily the way that God is acting toward us in Christ. There's another way of doing things that we're getting from Christ. We're getting a God who doesn't want to leave anybody out. We're getting a God who has acted very inclusively first to reach out to everybody. It's almost the opposite way of doing things. Everybody's been included and there are people who push away and pull out of it.

So a lot of the book and its length is trying to deprogram people from their wrong way of thinking and reprogram them with this healthier way of understanding God, so that when we get to Paul, we can see that this is what he's talking about as well. He's on the same page as we are.

JMF: How do you find it being received? What kind of feedback are you getting?

DC: There's been a full spectrum of responses, from "this is absurd rubbish" to "this has changed my life forever," and pretty much everything all the way through in the middle. Quite a lot more enthusiasm than I thought I would get, and a lot more tension than I thought I would get.

When you're writing a book like this, you worry that when you finish, it will drop in a black

hole and no one will talk about it. Well, a lot of people are talking about it. I get a little frustrated with what they say at times. I don't feel I'm being understood all the time. I don't feel like my arguments are being presented accurately at all times, but people are trying to break through, and I appreciate that.

There's a bit of a generational thing going on as well. There are a lot of scholars who have written equally large books on Paul and Romans, and I'm challenging what they're doing, threatening them. It's very hard for them to turn around and say, "I've been wrong about this all this time," if they have been wrong. The younger generation, the doctoral student, post-doctoral type of student, seems to be very excited about it.

JMF: What do you attribute that to?

DC: They're putting the pieces in place for the remaining creative research on Paul, so they're at a much more malleable stage of life. I remember when I was like that. There aren't too many costs involved with them saying, "What I was taught was wrong, let's run with this new paradigm." There are a lot of costs involved with the older generation turning around and seeing the paradigm that they're working with is no longer functioning. This is typical if it's a paradigm shift. This is how they always work. It just means that I have to be patient and a bit lucky.

JMF: You're not the only one who takes this perspective, though.

DC: I hope not. Certainly not on Paul as a whole. There are a lot of scholars who agree with me about the main thrust of his gospel. That is right. I'm standing in a long tradition in terms of reading Paul this way. I would hope that what I'm saying about Paul's gospel is in complete continuity with the way the Patristics have read him, the Cappadocians, the best parts of the Catholic tradition, Orthodoxy, the best parts of the Reformation, right through the modern period. I think I'm in touch with the best theology of the church. It's true, though, that there are a lot of non-scholars reading Paul who aren't quite so thrilled with what I'm up to… I don't always hear good reasons from them why that's the case.

JMF: You wouldn't attribute it entirely to their history of research and study and teaching, would you? Because there are examples of major theologians who come across a new perspective and who go with it. What is the attraction to holding on to a view of Paul that is more judgmental than grace-filled?

DC: I think you've hit the nail on the head. Whether you acknowledge it or not, theology is always in play when we're reading Paul, and it's almost being scrutinized by that, so we're very

defensive about it. If we're not crystal clear on certain theological positions, we will lapse into a conditionality and a sort of a contractualism. If we're not vigilant that we don't do that, if we're not 100 percent committed to a gospel that is unconditional, a gospel of grace.

JMF: When you say conditionality and contractual, you're driving at what?

DC: Certain people present our relationship with God in a way that basically is a contract. They talk about it as a covenant, but it's a contract. A contract is something where I will do something for you if you fulfill certain conditions first. It's always an if/then structure. This is how we run our society. This is how we run our families half the time, unfortunately. This is how we run our politics, and this is how we run our theology. But it's a fundamental *mis*understanding of the way God deals with us.

JMF: "I'll give you salvation if you do something for me."

DC: Exactly. It seems very natural to us, it's an easy way, it slips off the tongue, doesn't it? But it's a fundamental corruption of the gospel. Once you put that little word "if" in, you have the destroyed the gospel of grace. It's as simple as that.

JMF: And a covenant, by contrast …

DC: Unfortunately, people have debased the use of the word because they've talked about the covenant, but then they've talked about it contractually, which is what it really *isn't.* We learn about what a covenant is, *the* covenant in fact, from looking at how God has related to us in Christ. It's as simple as that. It's utterly unconditional. It's benevolent, it's loving, it's his choice for us from the foundation of the world to be in fellowship with him and to be transformed by him. That's what a covenant is. There are no conditions, no strings attached. There's no "if," there's no "but."

JMF: In the Old Testament, it's full of that, isn't it?

DC: It is and it isn't. Depends how you read it.

JMF: The idea that "I will be faithful to my covenant regardless of what you do."

DC: Right. Very much so.

JMF: "I change not in my covenant faithfulness, therefore you are not destroyed."

DC: Exactly. What tends to happen is a little mistake. People shift from what God is expecting of us in the covenant relationship, and they turn those things into a condition. God lays out that which is expected of us and appropriate of us — the way we should respond to God in this relationship — and they like to turn that into a contract. We like to introduce these other

conditions for all sorts of ultimately pretty sad reasons.

This is the great battle going on in the interpretation of Paul. This is the struggle that's going on his understanding at the moment. The stakes are so high, this is where the conflict is, at times, so strong, and people are so rooted to the conditional or contractual gospel. This is why they fight back so hard. It's a tragedy that so many good folk in the church have been taught that God is a God of conditions. They're defending "the true gospel" when they push back on a reading that I'm offering, which is a reading based in grace.

JMF: If you take grace unconditionally, doesn't that level the playing field, as it were? There's no room for me to say, "I've been faithful in this way and that way, and you haven't, so I deserve *more* than you. You need to be condemned, and I need to be, I'm going to be…" You automatically think that way.

DC: I am superior here in some sense. So we need to find some way of setting that up. We have to introduce conditions…

JMF: Yeah. It seems a rather base way of looking at it, but…

DC: It's sinful.

JMF: It's religious, as opposed to gospel.

DC: Yeah. It's religion at its heart, as opposed to gospel. That's right.

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