

Provonsha's "Untheology" of the Atonement

Reviewed by Nancy Hoyt Lecourt

Jack Provonsha. *You Can Go Home Again*. 128 pp. Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1982. \$6.95 (paper).

Mystery. That is the subject of Jack Provonsha's latest book. It's a thriller. Not a "whodunit," of course. Rather it asks, Why? Why did Jesus have to die? Here is mystery indeed, but mystery considerably illuminated by this moving, memorable book.

You Can Go Home Again essentially begins with a brief historical survey of the traditional answers to this most central of all questions. This is not an easy task in a book avowedly for non-theologians, yet the discussion is generally clear and helpful to the lay person. The main point made is that these theories are useful *as metaphors* but that when taken literally, as has been too often the case, they show a basic misunderstanding of the nature of sin and, hence, of atonement itself.

According to Provonsha, theories that consider Calvary a mechanism for reestablishing order, for allowing God to forgive, reduce sin to a "thing"—something that can be remedied by an act. But sin is not a thing; it is a broken relationship that must be healed. Further, these theories (again, when they are pushed beyond their metaphorical limits) pose an interesting problem. Most explain that Christ's substitutionary death satisfies justice and restores peace and order. But, as Anselm first posed the question: "What justice is there in giving up the most

just man of all to death on behalf of the sinner?" (p. 27). Finally, these theories often contrast Father and Son—a wrathful Father is mollified by his Son's suffering in our stead. Naturally such a dividing of the Trinity is, quite literally, anathema to the author.

Having described the strengths of these ideas as metaphors and delineated their weaknesses as full-blown theories, Provonsha is in a position to describe his own efforts to build toward an understanding of the atonement. The solution he offers revolves around another extended metaphor: the Genesis account of man's fall. The tree, the serpent, the fig leaves, the "better garments," the garden itself—all illustrate the human condition and God's loving, appropriate response. In a sort of cosmic "he loves me, he loves me not," the author removes obstacles from between God and the sinner—sin, guilt, doubt—like petals, until at last only the center remains. Here, at the emotional core of the book, we have his "untheology:" a vivid retelling of the tale of the prodigal, who can go home again when he finally understands with his whole heart, finally really believes, in his Father's love.

At last we have Provonsha's thesis: "Christ died because God loves—and that's the sum of it" (p. 113). The Son did not die to set right an injustice, to enable God to save man; he died because God's suffering love must be revealed, unforgettably made plain, to sin-hardened hearts so that they may believe. "The cross was the ultimate, forceful expression of the way things really are—it is the way things are!" (p. 91).

Though the early chapters, while necessary, are somewhat mechanical and seem at

times to wander into superfluous apologies, disclaimers, qualifiers, and asides of various sorts, these faults seem slight when one enters the powerful central chapters on sin, guilt, justification, and sanctification. Here the author truly finds his voice, and his conviction and enthusiasm carry the reader firmly down the path of his argument. The destination is certainly crucial, yet beside the way lie many unexpected pleasures. Provonsha illuminates troubling concepts such as original sin ("I, frankly, had nothing to do with Adam's sin, nor did you. . . ." p. 71) and perfection (including a discussion of Ellen White's statement that "when the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own"). Salvation by works is further unveiled as villain: it assumes an unfriendly universe, where "God requires our goodness in order to respond in kind . . ." (p. 102). An interesting use of church standards is described (p. 101), and we even learn the potential value of penance (p. 102).

This book is recommended reading, then, for those "thoughtful, reasonably well-educated" Christians for whom it is intended. Like any good mystery, it makes a pleasant, instructive way to pass the afternoon, rainy or otherwise.

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The Tie That Binds as Noose

Visions of Glory, by Barbara Grizzuti Harrison. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978. \$12.95.

by Carol L. Richardson

Take a sensitive, intelligent, religious nine-year old girl and introduce her to an American apocalyptic denomination, one

formed in the ferment of the social reforms of the 1840's, 50's and 60's; a religion whose earnest mission is to spread the gospel world-wide to hasten Christ's return; a religion that insists on a conservative, modest, family-centered life-style; introduce her to this religion and what do you get? A young woman, by age twenty-two, catatonic, unable to speak or walk down stairs, on the verge of breakdown, overcome by guilt and anxiety, estranged from her family, confused and friendless. What might seem to some like a sure-fire prescription for what ails a suffering humankind, in this case ended in disaster. What went wrong?

Visions of Glory, this passionate account of Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's thirteen years as a Jehovah's Witness, seethes with resentment at the psychic damage she suffered as a Witness, yet yearns to understand both the byzantine world of the Witnesses and her own attraction to this idiosyncratic sect. While the book contains a good deal of historical and contemporary accounts of the church's activities, Harrison's approach is frankly subjective, history and sociology merely providing the context in which she examines her own harrowing experiences.

For example, Harrison sketches a brief biography of the sect's charismatic founder, Charles Taze Russell, a man given to financial flimflammy; a man with an appetite for publicity, litigation, and women. After bitter scuffles in the courts with his wife Maria, Russell emerges as the church's chief articulator for the misogynist doctrine of Eve as the source of the world's evil. This is not mere history: its effect on the young Barbara is brutal:

But the offenses that made me most horribly guilty were those I had committed unconsciously; as an imperfect being descended from the wretched Eve, I was bound, so I had been taught, to offend Jehovah seventy-seven times a day without my even knowing what I was doing wrong. (p. 16)

Or again, Harrison's review of the Witness's historical objection to saluting the