

A New Heart: A Personal Covenant Narrative

In seeking to express the atonement of Christ in terms understandable to the twenty-first-century culture, we need to identify imagery that is culturally meaningful yet faithful to the concept of the reconciliation and interpersonal union expressed in the covenant renewal concept of atonement. We thus need new models for many of our theological ideas, particularly for salvation and the atoning work of Christ.

My own story of a heart transplant provides a fresh interpretation of the atonement that I believe works with the biblical covenant framework and can communicate the nature of salvation to a contemporary, even postmodern, audience. The image of organ transplantation is well-known in this cultural context, although the spiritual, psychological, and incarnational implications experienced by the transplant recipient are largely unexplored as a vehicle for communicating spiritual formation. Since I, as a heart transplant recipient, have reflected on the resources of this transplant imagery, the narrative presentation of my story is one example of using this metaphor to communicate some of the existential meaning of a covenant-relational understanding of the atonement.

A New Look at a New Heart

Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26 NAU).

What was promised to Israel spiritually, I have been blessed with physically. I was given a new heart through transplant surgery in 1995. I was in critical need, having been given two years to live after a heart attack and bypass surgery. I

had lived three years since that diagnosis, so I was at least ahead of the statistics game.

Nevertheless, I had hoped that before I went into surgery researchers would come up with some other transplant techniques. Medical science is now very close to being able to transplant pig hearts into humans. In order to avoid suppressing the recipient's immune system to prevent it from attacking the new organ, doctors put the patient's chromosomes in a pig so that it grows up with the person's antibodies. Then when the time comes to harvest the organ and put it in the patient, the heart isn't rejected—it gets along just fine. The recipient's body thinks it's a cousin, so to speak. I had hoped to benefit from that new medical technology. There are some side effects, however; for instance, they say you tend to grow real big hips! I figured I could deal with that. But then I also like ham, and I would have a problem with eating my relatives!

In any case, when the transplant opportunity came, it was a real blessing. Driving from a retreat at Mt. Angel Monastery in central Oregon to Seattle after I got the message, I kept thinking: *This is what we've been waiting for, what we've been praying for.* I had the radio tuned to a Christian music station and was singing and praising the Lord all the way. And yet the whole idea of an organ transplant is profound—a very weighty matter. It is sobering to think that someone lost his/her life and now you are able to live because that person died. It gives you something to really reflect on. What about that person? What has he/she gone through? What is his/her family going through?

As I have reflected on my life-saving transplant experience, I have been struck by the similarities between my experience of literally having been given new life through someone else's death and the meaning of Christ's atonement for our salvation. He died that we might live; but it doesn't end there. It is because he also lives, and lives in us, that we can be resurrected to new life in the Holy Spirit.

While the various historical models of the atonement, such as the ransom, satisfaction, and penal theories, had relevance when they were developed, I believe they do not fully communicate to today's culture. The covenant model, I think, has much to offer. As a biblical model, it shows that salvation is a relational issue. Sin is a brokenness and alienation from God; and he has established, through his covenant with humanity, a way of reconciling the distance between himself and us. The transplant metaphor seems to me an excellent expression of that covenant model. I see it as an interpersonal kind of model in which we can understand salvation as the renewal of an interpersonal relationship between us and God. I

also believe a theology of suffering is relevant to the idea of redemption. There's something about suffering that brings out grace, gratitude, and faith.

I think many in our society have tended to develop an attitude of entitlement: *I am entitled to happiness. I am entitled to so and so. I deserve a Mercedes because the commercial says I deserve it.* We really need to evaluate the concept of entitlement. In doing so, we need to understand indebtedness and lostness and dependence and accountability. These concepts enlighten us about salvation. Christ's purpose in giving his life was to reestablish an interpersonal union between humanity and God. That's what being created in the image of God leads to: the right relationship, the interpersonal union, the bond that exists between a person and the Father. When one is in right relationship to God, there is a capacity for open communication with God. When Adam and Eve sinned, they abandoned communication with God and tried to hide in the garden. God had to pursue them. That alienation revealed the consequences of disobedience. God never has to pursue someone if communication is open. But this openness requires an attitude of complete trust, an attitude of the subordination of your will to the Father's. In short, it requires obedience.

Sin, the asserting of our own will over God's will, strangles the relationship. It is like the medical condition known as *ischemia*, in which a narrowing of the blood vessels results in oxygen deprivation and asphyxiation of the cells of one's organs. A constant assertion of our own will—a refusal to submit, to subordinate our own selves and our own will to his self and his will—prevents any spiritual nourishment from reaching our souls. Then the life-giving "oxygen" of the Spirit of God is gradually pinched off and our souls die.

Humanity has choked off this relationship by our rejection of God's offer of intimacy and harmony with us. The reality of ischemia has become very familiar to me. That was the basis of my problem. The buildup of plaque in my arteries choked off my heart so that it was gradually starved of oxygen, and slowly and imperceptibly it deteriorated and ultimately failed. Spiritually, that's what happens when our relationship with God is strangled. Deprivation of spiritual oxygen from the direct relationship with God results in the deterioration of ourselves so that we become spiritually ischemic and further and further estranged from the source of life. And we ultimately die.

Sometimes our reaction to pain and suffering chokes off God's Spirit, and we begin to suffocate like the goldfish in the asthma commercial. We need to overcome this broken relationship to inhale God's oxygen. We need to restore the life-giving love of God. This is what atonement means: to be restored to a

Spirit-inspired relationship with God. What else does the paradigm of the heart transplant have to teach us about the atonement?

The Transplant Is a Gift

In Ephesians, Paul wrote: “God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with Him. . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:4–9 NAU). God made us alive because of his great love for us. That is grace. God gave us the gift of new life: a new heart.

When a person’s heart fails and the only treatment left is transplant, only the fact of death—someone else’s death, and a voluntary gift of his or her organ—makes life possible for that person. When the medical staff talk in the background about the patient with terms such as “end-stage heart disease”—as I began to hear them speaking about me—one realizes that it is just a euphemistic way of saying, “His illness will kill him unless something is soon done.” In 1992, when I had a heart attack and a quadruple bypass and nearly died, the doctors gave me approximately two years to live without some sort of other procedure. And nothing else could be done other than a transplant; there wasn’t enough of the heart left to graft in any more arteries. Three years later I was still alive. That was a miracle! Another miracle was that I had survived the heart attack—up on beautiful Bear Lake in British Columbia, several hours away from medical help—to begin with.

It is very sobering to realize there is only one thing that can save you, and that is the death of someone else. You don’t really know whether to pray for that or not, because in praying for a donor you know that someone’s life will be lost. This is serious. And this is how serious our salvation is. However, when we admit that something is so terribly wrong that it can’t be fixed, when we break denial, then healing can begin. But there must also be a *new creation*. And this new creation is also based on whether someone else has enough love and grace to want to give a gift beyond his or her life. A donor must do that. There must be someone willing to give beyond his or her life in order to save you. We were dead but God made us alive in Christ; God did that for us spiritually.

This whole idea of Christ dying for us may not really hit home until we face death. When you see someone die, you see the finality of death. Or if you’ve been

brought to death's door and have met it head-on and said, "If this is my time, then I accept that," you have a sense of complete helplessness.

So when you receive that organ, you realize there's nothing you can do to earn it. You can't build up an account that says, "All right, when I get so many points I'm going to get the next organ." A very sophisticated system that uses computer data analysis to research all kinds of factors selects who will receive a heart. The person in need of the organ has no part in the search process. The only role I played was to say yes to the offer of new life. When the hospital called my beeper, I was at a retreat at Mt. Angel Monastery. I thought: *This is really ironic. Is God telling me something? Have I come to a monastery to be prepared for transport to the other side?* And the question of the transplant supervisor—once I was able to find a phone in a monastery—was, "This is a really great heart. Do you want it, or not?" It was as if God had offered me life and it was my choice whether I took it. I could not have earned it, or bought it, or deserved it, for the fourteen-year-old donor deserved it much more than I did. But here it was—a gift. Would I receive it?

A life-giving heart transplant is a gift you can't ask for. There is nothing you can do to earn it or buy it. You can give a spare organ, like a kidney, if you are a really loving person. A young woman in a youth group I led back in the seventies, during the Jesus Movement era, had some severe problems, and I was able to get her out of a terrible life situation, with the Lord's help, and get her straightened out and on her feet. She is doing wonderfully now; she is a strong Christian and has a beautiful family. When she found out about my need for a transplant, she wrote me a letter and said that if it were possible she would be willing to give her heart for me because her life had been saved through my ministry. I don't think I have ever been so touched. "Greater love has no one than this, than to give one's life for a friend."

A donated heart is a tremendous gift. Several years ago, Nicolas Green, a seven-year-old boy from America, went to Italy. He was very precocious and knew all about the antiquities there and wanted to see the country. Nicolas and his parents and younger sister were driving toward a ferry so they could go to Sicily when bandits pulled up beside them and sprayed their car with bullets. They were able to get away; but when the boy's parents looked in the back seat, Nicolas was quiet. They checked him more closely, and he didn't move. Then his parents realized he had taken a bullet in his head and was brain-dead. They got Nicolas to the hospital where the doctors tried unsuccessfully to resuscitate him. The fam-

ily then donated all of his organs to the Italian medical authorities to be used for transplantation.

Now Italy has the lowest organ donor response in Europe. For some reason Italians just don't like to give away their organs! But this act of love totally overwhelmed that nation. This free, unrequired gift of grace—giving a part of one's life for the sake of someone else—this magnificently unselfish gift from this family, brought this country to its knees. It became a national issue. Streets were named after Nicolas. Schools were named after him. The family went back a year later and received great celebrations on their behalf. They have been emblazoned on the hearts of the Italians. A TV movie has been made of his story and was recently shown in America. As I watched it, I was overcome with gratitude as I was reminded of God's supreme love shown in his Son Jesus Christ, who voluntarily, willfully, accepted death—with all of its horrors, darkness, and uncertainty. He went through death for you and me. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."¹

The donor who gave me his heart is supposed to be anonymous, but I have friends in Seattle who are mutual friends with his family. They knew of the tragedy of this family and of my transplant, and they put two and two together. The donor was a fourteen-year-old star athlete. At 165 pounds—all muscle—he could bench-press 250 pounds. Furthermore, he was an absolute star person: a top student, an all-American type boy. He was playing in a junior high football game, which had just begun. Right off the bat, he tackled a guy extremely hard and just flattened him. And then one of the other team's players blocked him really hard. So he received two pretty hard hits, though he seemed to be all right. But then he lined up for the fifth play of the game—and collapsed. The paramedics called for Life Flight, and they got him on the helicopter. They tried to resuscitate him and get him to the hospital. They tried all night to save him but were unable to do so.

At 7:30 the next morning, the young man was pronounced dead. At 10:30, I was called. I was asked to come to the University of Washington hospital as the alternate, or backup, organ recipient. The transplant team always brings in two candidates for the surgery. However, the primary recipient, who had come first, had a kidney infection and was disqualified. By about nine o'clock that night I was prepped and ready to go into surgery. As I was being wheeled into surgery, my wife, Evangeline, finally arrived from Portland, Oregon. I only had time to give her a thumbs up and whisper, "Resurrection." Either way, by death or new life, I was going to be a new person.

The donor's family had donated all of this young man's organs, so there were five transplants that weekend: heart, lungs, two kidneys, and a liver. Five people's lives were saved. His family wanted his death to mean something.

Death does mean something. Death means salvation, in a spiritual sense. The death of Jesus Christ was not merely something God did to show how strong he is, or how just he is to come down and punish with his wrath all of the wickedness that we had laid on Jesus Christ. The nature of God is not to exact punishment. The nature of God is to establish righteousness and renew his creation into his image. His concern is not to get even. His concern is to bring us back into proper relationship with him.

My concern really wasn't to get a new heart. My concern was that my body could function normally again. If they could have done it some other way that would not have required someone to die, that would have been fine with me. But in this case it took a death to bring the gift of new life. Yet the death of this young man was not some kind of divine punishment; the gift of his organ was a sacrificial offering that brought me resurrection to a new life. This was a gift of love.

The Transplant Requires Submission

Salvation is not a do-it-yourself project, and neither is a transplant. You're eligible for it because of the need, not because of your ability to do something to please somebody else. Because you don't have the ability to save yourself, salvation is done for you. You can't perform the needed surgery on yourself. You may have heard about the logger whose leg became pinned under a fallen tree. He amputated his own leg to get free and save his life. Or remember Aaron Ralston, the hiker whose hand became wedged under a huge rock and who amputated his own hand to save his life. Now those are superhuman exhibitions of courage. Most of us don't have the courage and discipline to do something like that.

But no one can perform his or her own heart transplant. For one thing, you couldn't get the old heart out. How long are you going to stay conscious after you run the scalpel down your chest? Then you get the saw and start down your sternum—no, I don't think so! Instead, you have to be willing to put your life in the surgeon's hands and say, "OK, I trust you with my life." There is no sense trying to jump off that bed and challenge death.

In many ways we need to learn the lesson of total dependence upon someone else. I was reminded of that when I came out of surgery completely dependent on machines for breath and circulation and everything else. An artificial heart pumps

blood for you; tubes go down your throat to feed you, a machine breathes for you; a machine circulates your blood; a machine maintains your blood pressure; all kinds of needles and high-tech machines manipulate all of the chemicals in your blood. And all of that is done artificially and externally. Without this technology you would die, even though you have already had the surgery. And furthermore, you can't fight that respirator machine—I tried that. It is going to breathe when it wants to breathe, and it is a lot bigger than you are! "So you'll take this breath now, thank you," it says.

As a patient in surgery, you don't say, "Let me help; let me suck the blood out of this little pool and let me cut on that place over there," or, "You don't have the thing positioned quite right—let me help you." No. You learn what dependency is all about. Likewise we really can't follow Jesus without learning that same lesson: total dependence on God is required for doing the work necessary to transform us, to take out the old heart of stone and give us a new heart of flesh.

Not only do we have to trust our spiritual doctor to perform the operation and sustain our lives through the whole process; we also have to allow that old heart to leave. We have to be willing to let go of it to be changed. We get so familiar with the way things are that even if they don't work right we don't want to change them. We are afraid of change. We are afraid to be transformed. I was reluctant to undergo the transplant process. I said to myself: *I know this old heart doesn't work right; it doesn't do half the job. But it is familiar. The idea of a new heart is so scary, I can't bring myself to let that happen.* I had to trust the surgeon if I was going to live. So too we have to trust God.

When the surgeon restarts the new heart and lets the warm blood begin to flow back through your new organ, it begins to turn pink and then slowly starts to beat under its own power. It's a phenomenal sight when that new heart begins to beat on its own. The new heart is not controlled by the involuntary nervous system because the cardiac nerve was cut when the diseased organ was removed. The new heart is controlled by the chemicals in the body rather than by the brain. But that heart has such a strong impulse to beat that, when the chemicals begin to flow back in with the blood, it senses the new life and says, "I want to beat whether I'm told to or not." And it starts on its own. There is a lag without the direct command to the heart; the chemicals have to build up to a certain point. But after the demand is put on it for a couple of minutes, it begins to pick up the beat and sustains life anew.

This new life is a free gift. If we can entrust ourselves to human surgeons, why do we so often leave the destiny of our eternal souls up to our own amateur-

ish efforts to please God and find our way to him unaided? We have to really want to be changed. Our own efforts do not keep us alive, but we must choose to stay alive. When the doctor was ready to do the transplant, he kept saying, "Do you really want this transplant?" What he meant was, "Are you willing to submit your life to me? This will mean a daily discipline for the rest of your life. In return, I will give you the wonderful gift of life—a new chance, a new life, a new opportunity to feel good and move out and be strong. Now do you want it, or not? If you do, you're going to listen to me. You're going to play by the rules."

Now every so often I get a call from Victoria, my posttransplant supervisor. Vic pretty much has control over me. She is kind of like the Holy Spirit in this analogy. I could choose to manage my medications by myself, but I probably wouldn't live very long. The drugs I take are extremely potent, and they are lifelong. Every day, every moment, I am dependent upon them to stay alive. Salvation—like a heart transplant—is not a "set it and forget it" type of thing. It requires a continual relationship of submission to the Master Surgeon, the Great Physician, who gave his own life to preserve and transform mine.

The Transplant Must Be Maintained

I have to take medicines, watch for exotic infections, and go through biopsies (taking pieces of my heart out to check them). I must keep a dynamic relationship with this whole process; it changes every day. Once we have the new heart of Christ, the Holy Spirit has conditions for living the new life in Christ. The prescription requires ongoing obedience to that new discipline—continual, fresh obedience. *God, what are your directions today?* Only every day maintenance and nurture will prevent the rejection of this heart.

Only the recipient can cause a rejection. I find this interesting. The doctor doesn't say, "Well, I think I'll have his organ experience rejection for a while." No, if I don't take my medicine, if I'm not careful in avoiding infections, and if I don't follow the conditions for maintaining my new heart, I will suffer the consequences. And it will be my own responsibility. The same human weaknesses and disease that brought death to me the first time will bring death to me again if I do not maintain the conditions for life. The ischemia, like sin and Satan, remains constantly at the door; and I need constant vigilance. But I'm blessed with a physician who continually monitors my condition.

It is the same in our spiritual lives: "But except you abide in me and my words abide in you, unless my life flows through you and yours through me daily," as Christ says, then my ischemia and rejection will occur. We can't stay close to

Christ without obedience to the conditions for maintaining the vitality of the new life. But the Holy Spirit, like the transplant cardiologist, monitors us constantly, spiritually tweaking our hearts and watching for signs of alien invasion. The life in Christ is thus maintained by the Spirit who actually lives in us and gives new life to our mortal bodies: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you" (Rom. 8:11).

The Transplant Inspires Gratitude

Twice in my life I have been indebted to someone for my very life. When I was twelve years old, I went swimming in a farm pond while at a youth camp in North Carolina. I was having a great time as the big guys pushed the float out into the middle of the lake. I was lying on the raft, not paying any attention. When I jumped off and started to swim, I realized we were farther out than I expected. But I thought I could make it. I became exhausted a number of feet from the bank, and I went down twice. As I was going down for the third time, I can remember looking up and seeing the top of the water above me. I was totally exhausted, and I then realized I was in real trouble. Then all of a sudden a big, strong hand grabbed my arm and jerked me back up out of the water and dragged me out of the lake. After I was able to breathe, I turned around, looked, and saw great big 240-pound Harold Holmes, a football fullback and one of my heroes. Harold Holmes has been my hero all my life because he saved my life. Because of him, I am alive.

The second person I am indebted to for my life is David who gave his heart to me. It is really ironic that all my life I've worked with young people—students—and tried to give all I could to them. And now at the end of my life when I need my life saved, one of them gives me back the life I've given. There's something about transplants, there's something about salvation, that calls you to respond to the sacrifice you've been given. It calls for faith, obedience, and then gratitude; there is no other appropriate response. Mere thanks is kind of thin. Your whole life has to be an expression of gratitude in response to the greatness of the gift that has been given you. As I contemplate David's life being lived in me, I am made aware of Christ's life transplanted in me and that the life I now live is lived in the strength he provides in me.

Our brokenness becomes the story of life. Nicolas Green's family giving his organs was an unexpected response to tragedy. That is not the kind of response to violence that people expect. They expect retaliation, not the giving of the body of the very victim himself. When Jesus was reviled, he did not revile in return. Seven

people benefited from Nicolas' organs. A nurse was comforting one little boy as he was being wheeled into surgery to have his kidney replaced. She was trying to keep him from getting his mind on the operation and becoming nervous. She kept saying things like, "Don't be afraid. Think of all the things you will be able to do. You can run and be healthy." The little boy replied, "Don't talk to me. I'm not thinking of anything but Nicholas. He saved my life."

This is the meditation of worship. This is gratitude. It is the worshipful contemplation of the one who died for us. The face of Jesus Christ is our hope. In turn, the response to a life freely given is gratitude, faith, and obedience. So what a new heart really means is that we have a new sense of total dependency and submission. We have an abiding need for daily spiritual discipline. And we have an undiminishing gratitude to the one whose gift gives us new life. You are not your own. You have been given to God in Christ's sacrifice for you. Therefore, glorify God in your bodies. Amen.