

Theology Forum *Brief*

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Stromata

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● From the TheoForum Director

Alle Anfang ist schwer! How true does this adage prove itself. Actually, though, I don't think that the emerging look of the newsletter is half bad. The idea—modeling the old *Theology Forum Brief*—is to include a miscellany of ideas, somewhat reminiscent of the "*stromata*" (literally, "carpet weavings") of Clement of Alexandria. In any event it is hoped that there may be something for everybody.

● Galatians 3:28: What does it Really Mean?

Is it possible that one of the most celebrated of Biblical texts has been misappropriated in the interest of ideology? Well, it happens all the time. But not so flagrantly as in the usual rendering of Galatians 3:28: "There is neither

Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Without indulging in nice exegetical points, this famous statement doesn't say what we thought. It is not a sweeping egalitarianism, because the Pauline distinctions—neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female—*presuppose* the standard social structure inherited by Paul and, generally, everyone else. There is of course a soteriological point, bearing on salvation, but it has nothing to do with *culture*. It has do with rules, regulations, social hierarchies, and the like. These are left very much in tact, along with standard institutions and social practices that mark everyday life. And the “Great Egalitarian Text of Galatians 3:28” now looks very different.

There is much more to say, including an examination of other relevant passages. But this is the idea. For further, see Ed. L. Miller, “Is Galatians 3:28 the Great Egalitarian Text?” 114 (2002), pp. 9-11.

● Briefly Noted

Is this the most biting statement in Kierkegaard? “In the magnificent cathedral the honorable and Right Reverend Geheime-General-Ober-Hof-Prädikant, the elect favorite of the fashionable world, appears before an elect company and preaches *with emotion* upon the text he himself elected: ‘God hath elected the base things of the world, and the things that are despised’—and nobody laughs.” (Sören Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon ‘Christendom,’* tr. Walter Lowrie [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944], p. 181)

Franz Jägerstätter **Husband, Father, Churchman, Martyr**

Ed. L. Miller

Franz Jägerstätter was born in 1907, an utterly nondescript individual in the utterly nondescript farming village of St. Radegund, upper Austria. What emerged in the man, however, was something utterly remarkable.*

As a youth he was well-liked, something of a roust-about, got a young girl pregnant (he assumed responsibility for the child, a daughter, until he died), and introduced the first motorcycle to his village. He himself was illegitimate, and after his mother's marriage was eventually adopted by her husband. This, and his own poverty as a child, rendered him unusually sensitive to the needs and predicaments of others.

He left home and worked for a time in the iron mines of Steiermark. Here he came into contact with socialistic and atheistic strains, and gave up his long-standing religious exercises. However, this perspective didn't "take," and soon he was reaffirming the religious faith—in a radical way—of his Roman Catholic upbringing. This is reflected in a poem dated October, 3, 1932, after his return home (quoted, Putz, pp. 30, 32, tr. here and below, ELM).

Be not too proud, wealthy man,
you too will one day die.
Abandon your evil struggle for status.
God's Son was not wealthy on earth.
How full of pain, our days,
on our short streetcar line,
on which we all, unequal, travel,
until one day the car derails.

I ask now, proud man,
whether personal wealth suffices,
so long as God grants health,
and no grief overwhelms you.
Health and prudence, if one has it,
is the most beautiful gift.

Also proper is beauty and money.
But all the beautiful gifts
Don't bring the hoped-for joy,
when love is missing from the heart..

It is the master-work.
Peace and love don't last long
if you have no faith in God,
and in no eternity.

The reaffirmation of faith is also reflected in a letter to his godson, composed around 1935:

In school, we have already learned that man possesses a reason and a free-will.
And especially does it depend on our free-will whether we will be eternally
happy or eternally unhappy. (quoted, Putz, p. 34).

A certain independence is apparent in a continuing debate he had with his parish priest over the perpetual virginity of Mary: Franz argued against the traditional Roman Catholic belief, appealing to numerous Biblical texts as evidence that Jesus had siblings.

*Gordon Zahn, *In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jägerstätter* (New York: Holt, 1964), *passim*. Erna Putz, *Franz Jägerstätter: "Besser die Hände als der Wille gefesselt,"* second ed. (Grünbach: Geschichte der Heimat, 1990), *passim*. Erna Putz, "Er folgte seinem Gewissen . . ." *Franz Jägerstätter* (Salzburg: St. Peter, 1993), *passim*. See the old bibliography in Zahn, and the newer but spottier one in Putz.



Franz Jägerstätter

His marriage to the good-looking Franziska Schwaninger was a godsend to him. She was more than good-looking. In 1948, Franz Huber (Jägerstätter's godson) said of her: "I have been in thirteen countries of the world, but such a unique person, so Christian, such a one I have not found in the whole world" (quoted, Putz, p. 40). They were married in 1936. On their honeymoon they visited Rome, and, as part of their group tour, had a papal audience.

Then, came the *Anschluss*, the Annexation of Austria by the Third Reich, by plebiscite, on April 10, 1938. Nobody in the obscure village St. Radegund gave it much mind. It was a distasteful intrusion into the community's, life but bore little practical consequence. Everyone went along with it.

Except for one, solitary exception.

What grips a man to see what others cannot is often hard to say. In the case of Jägerstätter it was at once a Roman Catholic-ethical-political matter. Stated otherwise, it was an unspeakable repugnance with National Socialism—the Nazis. There is evidence that Jägerstätter's resolve had taken shape in 1941, and, in 1942, he was composing letters,

commentaries, and tracts in justification of his stance. Though now the father of three little daughters, bearing the burden of the farm, the extended family, responsibility as sacristan, continuing various charities, and his own practice of prayer and fasting, Jägerstätter took on, as it were, the whole of the Third Reich.



“Dear Father, come home soon!”

Though he had in fact been called up for a brief period of service in 1941, he was returned to the farm, presumably with an agriculture exemption. But in 1943, he wrote to Franziska, from an induction center in Enns, “Today I am going to take the difficult step” (quoted, Zahn, p. 55). The road led from Enns to Linz to Berlin. And an unequivocal, unwavering commitment to execution. Already in ’41 and ’42 he was implored on all hands to abandon his pointless resolve. He was implored by his priest. He was implored by all his local compatriots. He was implored by his family (though Franziska understood his commitment). He was implored by those clerics attending him in prison. (For a moment he considered service in the medical core, but this was immediately dismissed as a misconceived compromise.) Especially poignant, surely, was a photograph received by Jägerstätter in Berlin prison—it portrayed a large banner, held by the little Jägerstätter girls holding Easter baskets, and the words, “Dear Father, come soon!”

By mid-July Franziska had received word about the inevitable sentence of her husband. In a kind of frenzy, she enlisted the youngish vicar from St. Radegund, Fr. Karobath, to accompany her to Berlin. The meeting was limited to only twenty-minutes. And, again, Jägerstätter could not be dissuaded. Early in the morning, on August 9, he was transferred to Brandenburg/Havel. At noon his sentence was confirmed. At 4:00 he was decapitated.

At the end of the war Franz Jägerstätter's ashes were returned to St. Radegund. On August 9, 1946, they were placed in the wall of the chapel along with a suitable memorial that includes Matthew 16:25-26 (tr., NRSV):

*For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.
For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world
but forfeit their life?*

One must make up one's mind about Jägerstätter. Some have called him irresponsible in the extreme. Some have regarded him as deranged. At best, they say, he was bent on a senseless and misguided endeavor. Others have, of course, seen Jägerstätter as the epitome of the man of principle. When others might have been deflected by personal or practical considerations, he remained unwavering and resolute. For better or worse, this is the Jägerstätter that has commanded the admiration of those who are familiar with the story. Certainly it is the Jägerstätter that I find myself deeply in awe of.

But there is something else.

There is a difference between standing on principle but in solidarity with others, and standing absolutely *alone*. Not to minimize untold numbers of heroic self-sacrifice, the sacrifice is surely easier when bolstered in solidarity with those of like-mind and practice. In a way, the death of Martin Luther King, for example, was easy—I don't speak disrespectfully. It is easy, in a way, to be thronged by multitudes singing in unison, "We Shall Overcome." It is something quite different to roam the isolated hills of St. Radegund, *alone*.

Pictures from *In Solitary Witness: The life and death of Franz Jägerstätter*, Gordon Zahn (New York: Holt, 1964)

Talbott on Hell: An Inconsistent Idea?

Many Christians believe that anyone who dies unreconciled to God will spend eternity in hell. In a provocative paper presented to the Theology Forum on the evening October 23, Professor Thomas Talbott of Willamette University argued, that this traditional understanding of hell is inconsistent with the Christian concept of God. There are, he claims, both scriptural and philosophical grounds for believing that God loves *all* the persons he has created and wants *all* of them to be saved. And since God has sovereign control over the destiny of all persons, Talbott thinks that God can get what he wants by making sure that *all* of them are ultimately brought into his Kingdom.

The most common response to the philosophical part of Talbott's argument is a sort of "free will defense" for hell. The damned are said to be separated from God of their own free will. They are stuck in hell, not because God keeps them there, but because, through their own free choices, they have developed characters that would make it impossible for them to enjoy heaven. As C. S. Lewis famously put it, "the doors of hell locked on the inside."

Much of Talbott's paper was devoted to a two-pronged attack on the free will explanation of eternal damnation. Talbott claims that this approach fails to respect the limits, both of *possible* freedom, and of *permissible* freedom. With respect to permissible freedom, he argues that a loving father must sometimes limit what he allows his children to do. If my daughter is about to commit suicide, I must stop her. If I discover that my son has taken a gun to school with the intention of killing one of his teachers, I don't hesitate to do everything I can to prevent such a tragedy. My love for my children alone is sufficient to guarantee that I will do everything that I can to prevent them from doing irreparable harm to themselves or to others – *even if that entails placing some limits on their freedom of choice*.

Interestingly, Talbott does not deny that there is a hell, or that it is extremely unpleasant to spend time in hell. But since God is love, he thinks that hell must have a purpose that is both loving and constructive. In the long run it must be good for the denizens of hell to spend time there. From some of us, Talbott thinks, the pains of hell may be needed to destroy all that is false within us and to fit us for entry into God's Kingdom. But he denies that it could be good for anyone to stay in hell forever.

Now even an all-powerful God cannot make us *freely* enter into a relationship of love and devotion to him. So what if the damned freely choose to reject God forever? This objection brings us directly to Talbott's thesis about the limits of *possible* freedom. It is impossible, he argues, for anyone *freely* to choose to spend eternity apart from God. A genuinely free choice must be a well-informed choice with a rational motive.

To see this, Talbott asks us to imagine a child who frequently touches a hot stove. Nothing makes him do it, he knows how much it will hurt, and he has no reason whatever for putting his hand on the stove. He just does it. Such inexplicable behavior, Talbott argues, would be a *random* occurrence and not something the child does *freely*. The child would not therefore be responsible for putting his hand on the stove.

Now hell is infinitely worse than any hot stove. It may not involve physical torture – literal fire that never consumes, for instance. But this New Testament metaphor is appropriate because eternal separation from God is the worst thing that can happen to a person. An eternal hell would be a place of unending misery and hopelessness. By contrast, heaven is the highest good for a human person – a place of love and fellowship with God and other creatures. As Augustine put it, "Thou has made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee." Now no well-informed, rational person can fail to desire his own happiness. So no such person can fail to desire heaven. *A fortiori*, no well-informed, rational person could freely choose to spend eternity in hell.

So what role does (or can) freedom play in human life? Well, Talbott notes that many of us are not well-informed – we mistake ephemeral pleasures for the real thing, and that we are sometimes influenced by irrational desires and inclinations. Situated as we are, we may freely go wrong, thereby *postponing* the day of salvation. But in the end, Talbott insists that God's love and sovereign control are sufficient to guarantee that all of us will be saved.

How successful is Talbott's argument? It does seem to me that Talbott is right about the limits of *permissible* freedom. As I would put it, some kinds of freedom are simply not worth having. The freedom to damn oneself forever is surely one of these. A loving God would heal the sinner's will, and give him the information he needs to choose his own happiness, thereby preventing him from doing *irreparable* harm to himself – even if that

entailed a certain restriction on what he can freely choose. Interestingly, though, God would thereby actually be *restoring* a significant part of the sinner's freedom of choice.

On the other hand, I have serious reservations about Talbott's account of the limits of possible freedom. Talbott seems to be saying that we cannot freely and knowingly choose what is bad for us. Now in the long run, wrong actions are always bad for those who do them, since they separate us from God and make it harder for us to realize our own proper good. But if this is right, then Talbott's view of freedom has the unwelcome implication that no one can ever *freely* do a wrong action. Either the person is not sufficiently well-informed, in which case he has not acted freely; or he is subject to irrational desires and inclinations over which he has not control, in which case (once again) he has not acted freely. Either way, it seems to follow that no one is ever morally responsible for a wrong action.

There is also the following related worry. If every well-informed, rational person is certain to choose rightly, and if God is going to make sure that we are all eventually (perhaps after a lengthy sojourn in hell) rational and well-informed, why doesn't he give us all the information we need in this life? That way, no one would need to go to hell even for a short period.

When this issue was raised in the discussion period, Talbott said that it may well be "metaphysically impossible" even for God to create free beings who are well informed right from the start. Now I don't claim to have a precise way of drawing the boundaries of metaphysical possibility, and I would not for a moment claim that everything that *seems* possible to us is really possible. On the other hand, the fact that something seems possible provides at least some evidence for thinking that it is possible. The burden should therefore be on Talbott to explain why an omnipotent being could not tell us right from the start what we need to know, and do so in a way that would make it impossible for us not to believe it, thus bringing it about that none of us need the corrective sufferings of hell.

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Petitionary Prayer: Does it Really Work?

On Wednesday, December 6, 2002, the Theology Forum sponsored a panel discussion on the topic of petitionary prayer. Panel participants included Fr. Dave Dwyer (St. Thomas Aquinas University Parish, Boulder), Jim Cook (Christian Leadership Ministries), and Victoria Harrison-Carter (Lecturer in Philosophy, University of Colorado, Boulder). About 25-30 were in attendance and refreshments of pizza and pop were served. The panel discussion was meant to shed light on the following: What is petitionary prayer within the Christian tradition, what are some of the theological justifications for the doctrine, and what are some of the philosophical problems raised by the doctrine?

Fr. Dwyer began the discussion by situating petitionary prayer amongst the many other forms of prayer that Christians engage in, for example prayer of thanksgiving, of praise, of repentance, etc. He then provided a definition of petitionary prayer as stated in the Catholic Catechism and distinguished between petitionary prayer as offered by the individual

and as part of the communal liturgy that Catholics participate in each week as they speak the Prayers of the Faithful during mass. He explained that, for Catholics and most Christians, one primary role that any form of prayer serves is to express and strengthen the individual's or the community's relationship to God. In this respect, petitionary prayer is no different for Catholics and most other Christians who believe that God is all-knowing, that he already is aware of our needs and desires, which means there is a sense in which we do not need to ask or petition God for these things. Yet, most Christians also believe in a personal God with whom we can have a deep relationship, and that when we petition God we express the nature of that relationship and strengthen that relationship by being active participants in it.

Jim Cook reiterated and strengthened the position that an important role for petitionary prayer is to express and strengthen our relationship with God. But he also emphasized an important question about the efficacy of petitionary prayer. For, though Christians may believe that petitionary prayer serves to strengthen their relationship with God, most also believe that when they invoke God and ask that some need be met or some desire satisfied, their prayer may in fact influence the way things turn out. They believe that God is all-powerful and that an all-powerful God is capable of granting petitions. Petitionary prayer can "work" as we implore God with the hope that he might intervene in the natural course of things in order that our petitions are granted. Cook provided some powerful, personal examples to elaborate his belief in the efficacy of petitionary prayer. This view, of course, presupposes that God does, or at least can, intervene in the course of our everyday lives at any time.

It is at this juncture that Dr. Harrison-Carter raises some difficult philosophical worries for the doctrine of petitionary prayer.

She discussed the implications for petitionary prayer if we believe in a God that is timeless. Her query was about whether or not a timeless God can intervene in the world in the way that the doctrine of petitionary prayer assumes. For, if God is timeless, then while this God can eternally know what individuals pray for, such a God could not respond to those prayers. A response would require some change on God's part and a timeless God, by definition, cannot change. Accordingly, Harrison-Carter suggests that theists who accept a view of God as timeless rethink the meaning of the doctrine of petitionary prayer. Fr. Dwyer and Jim Cook both acknowledged this difficulty and the mysterious nature of how petitionary prayer actually works, but contend that this is yet another part of the mystery of faith.

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(Under) the Table Talk

"Tomorrow I have to lecture on the drunkenness of Noah, so I should drink enough this evening to be able to talk about that wickedness as one who knows by experience."

Martin Luther
Table-Talk, No. 3476, tr. Theodore G. Tappert