

# Chalcedon Report

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## Regeneration, Not Revolution

### Why Bad Diagnoses Lead to Even Worse Cures

By Martin G. Selbrede



**W**e hear much these days about evil being attributed to institutions, systems, structures, cultures, etc. When people speak in this way, they are promoting the view that evil is metaphysical: it is inherent in the world and the elements that make up that world. Evil is external to us, but intrinsic to the world. Once evil is seen as being embedded in the fabric of impersonal things, it is fought at the metaphysical level without reference to personal morality.

This viewpoint is popular because if evil is metaphysical, man is a victim. If evil is moral, however, man is a perpetrator. Humans therefore attribute evil to metaphysical things to flee from personal responsibility. Metaphysics becomes the great scapegoat that allows man to play the victim card. By depersonalizing evil, man exonerates himself while priding himself on raging against the machine.

Today one's legitimacy is measured in terms of the new language of metaphysics, as in this recent statement in *Time* magazine (italics added): "And are those who have *found success* within *existing structures* an *extension* of *systemic failure* or the ones *best equipped to fix them*?"<sup>1</sup> This language is the new normal. As Orwell's biographer pointed out, "Newspeak first corrupts writers morally, then politically" by compelling the use of such "ready-made prose."<sup>2</sup> Out of this

moral corruption comes the new focus on metaphysics.

#### Revolutionary Thinking

Revolution is fueled by man's faith in metaphysical determinism. Conservatives fight to preserve the existing metaphysics against the revolutionaries who want to supplant it, but both sides agree that metaphysics sets the bounds of discourse. The human heart is off limits.

In *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, R. J. Rushdoony illustrates this shift away from personal responsibility into metaphysics by citing Marxist Lincoln Steffens's public lecture on Genesis 3:

You want to fix the fault at the very start of things. Maybe we can, Bishop. Most people, you know, say it was Adam. But Adam, you remember, he said that it was Eve, the woman; she did it. And Eve said no, no, it wasn't she; it was the serpent. And that's where you clergy have stuck ever since. You blame that serpent, Satan. Now I come and I am trying to show you that it was, it is, the apple.<sup>3</sup>

Rushdoony points out that the doctrine of economic determinism embedded in "it was, it is, the apple" is "a denial of the personal responsibility affirmed by Scripture."<sup>4</sup> It breeds an entirely different set of actions and solutions, shaping a future of perpetual war between competing metaphysical institutions and systems. The excuses

offered by Adam and Eve were metaphysical in nature, and Steffens walks the same path in affirming man's victimhood.

#### Escape from Responsibility

Proverbs 13:15b teaches us that "the way of transgressors is hard," putting the focus on moral transgression of the law. By shifting the focus to metaphysics, to institutions, man escapes this indictment by shaping new explanations for his difficulties. By erasing the moral dimension of God's world, man seeks solutions in metaphysics, and because his problems aren't actually metaphysical in nature, he remains at war with his fellow man and himself. Consider Rushdoony's comments on the idea of *invisible rulers*:

Many people like to believe that somewhere invisible rulers pull the strings which govern all of us ... [Actually], the strings that pull us come out of our *heart* and mind.<sup>5</sup>

We are therefore awash in Manichaeism—a heresy pervading our era precisely because it favors the metaphysical over the moral. Rushdoony observes that it's not so much a heresy as it is a rival religion.<sup>6</sup>

[T]he contrast in Manichaeism is not between good and evil as moral positions but as metaphysical ones.<sup>7</sup>

The heightened rancor in today's discourse can be traced to the coercive dominance of Manichaeism, where even the solutions to problems are

offered in Manichaean terms, which guarantee their failure. The *actual* solution, one rejected by Manichaeism, is laid out by Rushdoony:

For Biblical faith, salvation is by Christ's atonement and by His regenerating work in us. From being rebels against God, we become members of Christ's new humanity. This conversion makes us a new creation in the moral, not the metaphysical sense.<sup>8</sup>

But man seeks solutions outside of the moral dimension, which is why he hates God's law, which exposes him as a covenant-breaker by marking out how he *should* walk. God's law blocks man from playing the victim card and retreating into metaphysics, which is why man rejects it and refuses to see himself as a transgressor against moral order.

### Flattening the Moral Dimension

This retreat from morality into man's preferred surrogate, metaphysics, is vividly accounted for in the Old Testament:

Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets ... (Zech. 7:12)

The shift to metaphysics requires *suppressing* what man knows to be true in his own heart. To make good on his do-it-yourself guilt-avoidance program, he makes his heart "as an adamant stone" so that the law cannot penetrate his conscience. The shift to metaphysics is built on self-inflicted heartlessness.

### To Build a Hiding Place

No text of Scripture better describes man's retreat to metaphysics than Ecclesiastes 7:29:

Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

This Scripture even contains the shift from morality to metaphysics: man was made *upright* (a moral attribute) but he seeks out many *inventions* (metaphysical things). It's worth looking

at this text a bit more closely. Consider Bartholomew's analysis of the author's (Qohelet's) perspective:

The unusual use of *lebad* (only)—this is the only place in the OT in which *lebad* introduces a main clause—alerts us to the importance of what is to follow ... There is something wrong, says Qohelet, with humans and, by implication, not with God ... God made humankind "straight" and not crooked, but humans have sought out many schemes. In most cases in the OT when "straight" (*yasar*) is used of humans it carries ethical and religious connotations, as it does here ... The human was created good, but something has gone terribly wrong.

*Hisbonot* should thus be understood to refer to "human inventions, a planned and technically conceived activity which is often wrong, ineffective, or evil" ... Something about Qohelet's search has led him into his own version of human schemes ... Qohelet has found that his own search for wisdom "by wisdom" is merely his own particular version of humanity's scheming.<sup>9</sup>

Bartholomew drives forward to his conclusion concerning this crucial verse:

God made humans straight but they have devised many schemes. It is not the world that is crooked but humans.<sup>10</sup>

When you anchor reality to metaphysics instead of morality, that last thought is exactly reversed: the *world* is crooked and man needs to fix it by coercively manipulating it to comply with his schemes, devices, arts (as Luther translates it), or his "inventive refined degeneracy" (as Delitzsch puts it).

### Refuge from the Curse

Scripture attaches a curse to this shift toward metaphysics, as is evident in Jeremiah's warning to that effect:

Thus saith the Lord; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose

heart departeth from the Lord. (Jer. 17:5)

To trust *in man* is metaphysics, and to make *flesh* to be *one's arm*, is also metaphysics. One arrives at this point when one's *heart* departs from God (which embodies moral rebellion against Him). This retreat into metaphysics for security and strength brings God's curse upon those who travel this wide path leading to destruction.

Peace has always been a byproduct of moral conduct: when we keep God's law, the sword shall not go through our land (Lev. 26:6). The source of war is moral. There *is* no metaphysical path to peace: this is the great lie of our times, one that man craves would hold true for him so he can be let off the hook. To build a path to a peaceful future on metaphysical grounds is to make bricks without straw: man's moral corruption will only fester in endless revolutions outside of moral regeneration in Christ.

The shift back from metaphysics to morality, to personal responsibility, is the key to our future, the only way through the tumult before us. In a recent *Arise & Build* article<sup>11</sup> I drew attention to Isaiah's teaching that moral character is the key to surviving the ongoing burning judgments of God:

Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil; He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure. (Isa. 33:14b–16)

This is alien thinking to our era because man has imparted idol status to his metaphysical schemes and devices. Consequently, men remain "estranged from me through their idols" (Ezek. 14:5). They do not have ears to hear the moral dictum laid down by Christ: thou shalt live by every word that proceedeth

from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4—a text that leaves *no room whatsoever* for appeals to metaphysics).

Man refuses to accept the fact that the human heart is desperately wicked above all things (Jer. 17:9) and his flight into metaphysics is his way of saying “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.” But man’s strategy leaves the most evil thing unchanged and still sitting in the driver’s seat. This amounts to a cover-up, one following what Dr. Gary North called the old debater’s trick: if your case is weak, pound the podium and shout. Shout so that the source of evil (the heart, Mark 7:21ff.) is given a pass while institutions, systems, and things are indicted at an accelerating pace.

### What Shifting to Moral Solutions Does NOT Mean

Regrettably, the principle of Regeneration, Not Revolution has been interpreted to mean that Christians ought not have an impact on the things of this world: on governments, culture, society, etc. This principle has been wrongly taken in a pietistic way, as if the most we can do when a social evil prevails is to pray for God to spread salvation in the right places. By no means does the pursuit of moral solutions entail moral cowardice on our part, let alone inaction! The prophets of the Old Testament went toe-to-toe with evil leaders and rulers, prosecuting covenant lawsuits against them at the risk of their lives. John the Baptist modeled moral courage against Herod Antipas of the most extraordinary kind and was ultimately martyred for it.

The Baptist’s conduct is often misconstrued in this way: “We don’t see John the Baptist doing anything to overthrow the government, so we should follow his example and abstain from fomenting political change, which formed no part of his message.” But do we *really* follow his example? He promoted transformation through clear moral instruction directed to soldiers and tax collectors (Luke 3:12–14) *that radically altered their conduct*. He reproved the tetrarch, *earning the*

*ruler’s enmity*. It’s *because we think in metaphysical categories* that we miss the total relevance of the Baptist’s actions in going to the root of Judea’s problems.

Further, our generation’s ignorance of God’s law creates a very anemic view of what constitutes moral matters we are mandated to pursue. This is the second point where we cripple and muzzle ourselves. The first involves looking for specific mandates for metaphysical change (such as political revolution) because we’ve drunk the Manichaean Kool-Aid. The second is not understanding that “Thy commandment is exceeding broad” (Ps. 119:96b) and that the man diligent in his labors will stand before kings.

The transformation of the political and social domain is depicted in Isaiah 32:1–8 in moral terms focused on justice. The King James Bible preserves the imperative sense in 2 Samuel 23:3, which injects a moral requirement deep into the political domain:

The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.

Dualistic, Manichaean, and pietistic distortions of Biblical faith essentially rob the moral realm of its power, putting all the emphasis on the metaphysical realm—the realm where revolutionaries rage against the status quo while its defenders take up arms in its defense. The Bible cuts across *all* these categories *by indicting man himself*, and then putting forward regeneration as a key step forward.

### Regeneration, Not Revolution

When metaphysics dominates our horizon, reconciliation is inaccessible and peace is impossible. But God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19) because we *need* reconciliation as a result of our moral rebellion. The future of this world is being driven by this moral reconciliation between God and man, and (as a result) between man and man.

How then do we evaluate the relative merit of the moral dimension versus the

metaphysical? One Scripture in particular sets the two domains against each another in a memorable way.

Better a dish of herbs where love is,  
than a fatted ox and hatred with it.  
(Prov. 15:17)

Here the Scripture tells us which is truly better: not the more luxuriant metaphysical situation, but the vastly more modest one. What tilts the balance in that direction? The moral element, which far outweighs metaphysical considerations. So too is moral change in man, through regeneration, the better path to a brighter future.

Revolutions merely shuffle the deck using the same cards (or murder countless millions to “improve” the deck’s contents). Regeneration alone delivers true transformation that will abide, that has an actual future. 🌟

1. *Time* Vol. 196, Nos. 3–4, 2020 (July 20 & 27, 2020), p. 82.
2. Michael Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorized Biography* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 62.
3. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, [1973] 2020), p. 572.
4. *ibid.*
5. Rousas John Rushdoony, *An Informed Faith* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon/Ross House Books, 2017), vol. 3, p. 804. Rushdoony concludes that in actual fact “we are the invisible rulers who will not rule” (p. 807).
6. *ibid.*, p. 715. On page 11 of *God’s Plan for Victory* Rushdoony says further of Manichaeism that “it is more than heresy: it is apostasy.”
7. *ibid.*
8. *ibid.*
9. Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 268–269.
10. *ibid.*, p. 275.
11. <https://chalcedon.edu/resources/articles/embracing-the-god-who-shakes-our-world>

# The Literal Reconstruction of a Heart

By Martin G. Selbrede

When my grandson, Holden Porter Selbrede, was born seven weeks early on Good Friday 2020, everything looked fine initially. It's not unusual for a preemie weighing under four pounds to need oxygen at the outset of life outside the womb.

But several days later Holden still couldn't do without oxygen, and the worried parents (my son Christian and daughter-in-law Megan) had to wait interminably for tests to tell what was wrong. The infant was transferred to Dell Children's Medical Center in downtown Austin—in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown. It wasn't long before only one of Holden's parents was allowed in the hospital at a time.



The echocardiogram showed that Holden had hypoplastic left heart syndrome, a congenital heart defect where the chamber of his heart responsible for pumping blood to his body was too small. This explained his gasping for oxygen. His heart was also pumping too much blood to his lungs, which stood to damage those blood vessels from excess pressure.

Neonatal cardiac surgery had advanced far enough to provide a solution, albeit a risky one involving three staged open-heart surgeries to alter the way the heart pumps blood. The alternative was unacceptable: "comfort care" until he died in the hospital. With many hundreds praying for the young



My son, Christian, reading John Milton's "Nativity Ode" to Holden in the hospital prior to his first major surgery.

boy, Holden started down the long, dangerous path to convert a faulty four-chamber heart into a working three-chamber heart.

## Two Open-Heart Surgeries Before His Due Date

Holden's first open-heart surgery was to install constrictive bands on the vessels leading from his heart to his lungs—the vessels where the pressure was too high. PAB (Pulmonary Arterial Banding) readjusted the flow balance between his lungs and his body as a temporary measure. Photos show how many tubes and sensors were distributed over the child's body—he was monitored non-stop twenty-four hours a day. Like many preemies, he had minor bleeding in the brain, but this was a barrier to proceeding with the next surgery, the Norwood Bypass. He was being fed donor's breast milk through a feeding tube through his nose. Observers noted that he was definitely a fighter.

When complications arose, the surgical team convened and determined that it was time for the Norwood, which is considered the most dangerous, highest risk operation in Holden's future. He wasn't even at his due date! The changes in the flow of blood through the heart

following the Norwood would allow the previous constricting bands to be removed, setting him up for the next two procedures: the Glenn operation by the end of 2020 or so, and the Fontan procedure between the ages of two to five years. Each subsequent operation is less risky than the one before (risk being intrinsic to any surgery upon the heart, especially surgeries that reconfigure how the heart actually does its work).

Christian and Megan were gratified at the outpouring of prayer for Holden's sake, and he made it through the Norwood very well: it was his *second* open-heart surgery before he turned two months old! Day by day some of the invasive tubes and catheters were being removed as the boy's need for them



decreased. Adequate feeding became a new post-surgical problem, however, and as this is being written he is being considered for a g-tube (gastrostomy tube) to provide supplemental feeding directly into his stomach. That would be his third surgery at the hospital, which we pray won't ultimately be necessary, but at three months old he weighs less than seven pounds and needs to gain weight to thrive.

We are grateful for the continued prayer support from our Chalcedon supporters for this young warrior for Christ, while marveling at the miracles of modern medicine when they're directed to the actual preservation of life. 🙏