

DOES GOD HAVE BOUNDARIES?

By JIM COTTER

MY GODSON AND I WERE ARGUING about religion in the way families do – fairly furiously and without resolution. Our disagreement was classic. To the question, ‘Does God finally exclude anyone?’, I was answering, ‘No, for Love would have been finally defeated’. He was answering, ‘Yes, for otherwise how we behave would not really matter’.

Of course he could point to the scriptures and to classic Christian doctrines of hell and eternal punishment. He may well be right. What worries me most is what religious people then do on behalf of this kind of God. For there has been an excluding spirit abroad throughout our history, with an attitude that slides from a critique of behaviour to an exclusion of the person – by excommunication, banishment, death or damnation. The critique is made from the viewpoint of those whom God has chosen, who are pure and superior – or regarded as such or made such by the offering of the Son to appease the wrath of the Father. They can then look down (as does God from a throne in heaven) on those who are unclean and inferior, not of the elect and so destined (or predestined) for condemnation.

So Christian people have projected the ‘betrayers’ in each of us on to the Judas-Jew, the so-called ‘God-killer’ who deals with what the spiritually pure abhor – ‘dirty’ money. Similarly those who are coloured have been perceived as ‘subhuman’, sexual minorities as ‘pests’ and ‘fiends’, and women as less than perfectly formed human beings. Such attitudes have been structured into anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia and misogyny. Does God exclude all such from the hundred and forty-four thousand of the select saved – however symbolic that actual number may be?

Such attitudes and actions have always seemed to me to proceed from a fearful and fear-inducing ‘No’ both to other human beings and to that which is experienced as chaotic within. It is certainly to be found in the scriptures, where it is believed that God has revealed himself as excluder. But if I reject this interpretation as incompatible with the kind of love that casts out fear, that always seeks out the lost, that pours out goodwill upon enemies, and if I regard a belief in a punishing God as yet one

more sign that the New Testament records the interpretation of the first two or three generations of Christians, still reeling from the impact of Christ upon them and hardly beginning to work at the implications of that impact, nevertheless I do have to face the question, 'Does anything I do really matter?'

To answer this, I first have to recognize that I do have the power to exclude. I may exercise it in a benighted or an enlightened way, but I do actually have the power. The 'keys of the kingdom' may have been thought to have been given to the hierarchy of the Church (Catholic) or to the Church as a whole (Protestant), but if the gospel illuminates what is true about all humanity, may not the 'keys' also have been given to all humanity? We may not have particularly realized or claimed this power, but in practice individuals as well as corporate bodies do exercise a power to withhold forgiveness or to forgive, a power to bind or to loose, to imprison or set free, to delay or to hasten justice. Is it then possible to understand this power as that which is to be used responsibly, with a place for a proper 'No' as well as a proper 'Yes', not excluding for ever, but creating a boundary that is necessary as a prelude to a more complete inclusion?

For Love is by no means casual or sentimental. Love may forgive to seventy times seven, may, in W. H. Vanstone's terms, refuse to have limits, refuse to exercise control, refuse to withdraw, may be tested by the emotionally deprived to see whether it really will be limitless, precarious and vulnerable.¹ But in seeking to heal and to save it will have to face and work through the realities of pain and gonewrongness if the former is to be relieved and transformed and the latter made to come right. If Love is truly to be Love it will have to be tough, it will need to prune, there will be much for it to face, endure, absorb and transfigure. But if it is the only power that can create lasting change without making for further harm and conflict, then in the end it cannot be a destroyer. Again, any exclusion needs to ask whether it is serving the purposes of Love. It may very well do that, but it has to be demonstrated before we can assent to it.

Christians especially do well to reflect on Hosea, chapter 11. Hosea has refused to stop loving his wife even when she has deserted him and prostituted herself. He sees in this a reflection of the nature of God, tempted to give up his people who continually stray from his ways, but who cannot in the end do so for he is God and not a human being and cannot destroy those whom he loves. From the heart of the Hebrew scriptures comes an insight that is nowhere surpassed in the New Testament. The command to love our enemies is one of its implications,

too mindnumbing and alien to our self-centred selves to have had much impact yet on the way we usually behave. It might be that what really does matter about our behaviour is that we never give up loving.

But what of the role of an appropriate boundary? Could God be imagined, not as the one who banishes, excludes, condemns from a throne of terrifying judgement, but one who constantly moves among his people seeking to redress wrongs and make justice, being known among us as wise and discerning ruler and guide? After all, boundaries do not have to be solid walls, impenetrable and permanent. Why not think of the portcullis instead, which, if rusty, is fixed in either closed or open position, but if oiled, can be lowered or raised appropriately? Surely our God is not the one who keeps himself always defended in an impenetrable fortress.

It is our human analogies that lead us astray. For while it is clear that we cannot do without the law and the sanction of force implied by laws, it does make a difference if we see the role of law as primarily to do with prohibition and punishment or primarily to do with prevention and protection. It also makes a difference if we understand imprisonment as a human failure to think of and put into action a more effective method of preventing further wrong and reforming the wrongdoer. We might be allowed to think of the divine wisdom as more intelligent and creative than we human beings usually turn out to be.

We may then have to create certain boundaries because of the need to resist personal violation, either of ourselves or of others, and to restrain the actions of those who would perpetrate the violation. But can we think of that 'No' as a prelude to, a pre-condition of, a greater 'Yes'? Can the 'No' of imprisonment be the opportunity for the 'Yes' of the discovery of inner freedom and the sense of responsibility which will in future prevent any further 'trespass' upon another?

We can think of other creative exclusions. A person may say 'No' to certain present options for the sake of saying 'Yes' to one particular – and even as yet undiscerned – possibility. If I do not learn to say 'No' appropriately and wholeheartedly, I will never reach the place of being able to say 'Yes' appropriately and wholeheartedly.

This can be a 'narrow way'. For example, a selection committee may say 'No' to a candidate for ordained ministry who sincerely believes that God has called and who has answered 'Yes' to that call. The challenge is to discern together how best to transform that 'No' into a future 'Yes' that is congruent with the inner 'Yes' that has been a genuine, but possibly limited, response.

Such boundary marking encourages us to explore new perspectives and possibilities. It also encourages a certain detachment, a freeing of

ourselves from being bound to only one course of action, from an over-possessive or compulsive enthusiasm. We may need to 'withdraw' the more accurately and lovingly to be 'engaged'. Our attachments can all too easily lay burdens on others which are not appropriate. Saying 'No' to an attachment can lead to a deeper and more committing 'Yes' to something else. And if this hints at the wisdom of God, it may be the courtesy of a God who Hölderlin thought created by drawing back – as the ocean creates continents. So too do parents, in order to let their children have their own space in which to grow and flourish.

The adult may have to make boundaries of another kind, that which will protect the child – not least the 'adult' in all of us protecting our own inner 'child', the beautiful and wild one, the imaginative, the creative, and the one most vulnerable to intrusion. The poet or composer needs his adult strength to say 'No' to the demands of others, legitimate in themselves but draining the 'child' of energy. Some people stay rigidly open to everything and everyone that impinges upon them because the original affirmation of life given in birth has been so obscured: they feel they have to say 'Yes' to anything and everyone so that some crumbs of affirmation may come their way. They have not yet discovered an inner 'Yes' from which to discern when to say 'No' and when to say 'Yes' to lesser demands and requests. Thus it is immature always to say 'Yes' and to have no boundaries. By contrast, a too rigid 'No' springs from fear and leads to freezing isolation.

There is another way in which the vulnerable needs the protection of boundaries. In her diary of her last year as an opera singer, *Full circle*,² Janet Baker describes how the season at Glyndebourne, élitist as it could seem, gave a rare opportunity for singers to work in depth – precisely because there was a high boundary temporarily erected around the rest of the world, and all other pressures and commitments were kept at bay. She writes: 'A birthplace must have peace, adequate time, protection from the outside world'. The tentative and the vulnerable always need nurturing with care so that too much is not demanded of them too soon. That is also true for a baby, a seed bed, a poem, a piece of scientific research.

There are two ways of understanding the word 'exclusive'. The first is by concentrating on a comparison, for example comparing a rare and expensive jewel with one that is cheap and readily available. The second is by concentrating on the inherent uniqueness of a phenomenon, on what is special about it in its own terms. Janet Baker again:

Certain places, just like certain people, are powerhouses, centres from which radiations come, affecting levels of achievement far beyond their

own boundaries. They have to be 'special' or 'exclusive' because of the nature of their task.

There is a necessary boundary around each of us because of our own intrinsic specialness. Of course such a sense can be corrupted by insidious and subtle persuasions of superiority: the spiritual struggle is to put our specialness at the service of others rather than of our own privilege and status. And that struggle moves to and fro in the history of the people of God. Sometimes they believe they are chosen over against those who are not chosen, sometimes they believe they are chosen to be a light to the nations.

So far we have been looking at the way in which God may be more helpfully imagined as discerning wise guide rather than pronouncing judge. Implicit in the image, however, is the notion that we are separate from God. This can be useful because of the experience of separation that we all know in wrongdoing and in pain. And we can grow through our understanding of when boundaries of separation can be helpful in our spiritual maturing. But is the separation to be thought of in terms of our not belonging, our being exiled, or in terms of a special place within the belonging? Is our membership of the Body of Christ a matter of our definition over against those who are not, or is it to enable us to rejoice in tasting the firstfruits of a harvest, in awakening to a truth about the human race as a whole? We belong together, and we cannot not belong. We are not individuals who can be cast into outer darkness but always 'persons-in-community'. If you are different from the majority that should not lead to suspicion but to a particular welcome and participation. If your gender is ambivalent an immature society pushes you to or over the edge. A mature society will ask what special place you have within the community. It may then 'withdraw' you from certain involvements precisely so that your contribution to the common good might be nurtured and refined. But that will be its purpose, not exclusion. If no 'foreign matter' can be expelled from the Body, and if the Body is humanity, now sensing its global rather than tribal identity, then the human race is without boundaries. Can God be thought of as anything less than that, than 'pure, unbounded love' (Charles Wesley)?

Furthermore, if we must clothe God in human terms, where better than in Christ? His boundary was like that of each of us – his skin, definite yet porous. He could embody the personal God who loves, challenges, invites, requires, who asks of us that we work with one another and with other material stuff in such a way that our boundaries are respected by not trespassing, by keeping that detachment that enables our loving attention to what is, and also by our drawing close in

a mingling and an exchange, by keeping to that involvement that enables our passionate engagement with what is, so as to create what is new in the world. Our skin is symbolic of our edge and our separateness and of our communion and interdependence. God is no longer to be thought of as holy and separate, clean and above it all, but an accepting, astringent and transforming power that delights in drawing close and creating with matter. To be wholly separate is precisely the great temptation, either of pride or of lack of self-worth. It is to divide and destroy, to be divided and to be destroyed. If we cherish our skin (rather than seek to 'save' it) then we cannot flourish by having any sense of innate or permanent separation from anything that is. Neither, we may dare to claim, can God – the God who is one of us, at one with us, and within us.

1 If the surface of the earth has no boundaries or edges, no beginning or end, and yet its character can be described (it too has been thought of as the 'skin' of the planet), that picture might be an intimation of the divine mystery. And if God is in some indefinable sense the 'soul' of the universe, as some scientists are suggesting, then there is no way in which God can get out of it.

NOTES

¹ Vanstone, W. H.: *Love's endeavour, love's expense* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977).

² Baker, Janet: *Full circle* (Penguin, 1984).