

# A World Waiting To Be Won

## Index

Introduction ( by Alan Eyre)

1. We're All Preachers: Motivations For Preaching

1.1 Joyful Urgency

1.2 Making Disciples

1.3 The Focused Life

2. Doctrine Based Preaching

2.1 The Bible is God's inspired, infallible word.

3. "Witnesses unto me"

3-1 "Witnesses unto me"

3-2 Witnessing For Christ

3-3 Paul Preaching Christ

3-4 Boldness In Witness

3-5 The Servant Songs

3-6 The Proof Of The Resurrection Is The Church

3-7 Preaching As Christ Did

4. Humility And Preaching

4-1 Humility And Preaching

4-2 Bent Knees, Wet Eyes, Broken Hearts: Emotion In Preaching

4-3 The More Real, The More Credible

4-4 Preaching In The Workplace: Sample Dialogues

4-5 Guilt And Grace

4-5-1The Extent Of Grace

4-5-2 Grace And Guilt

4-5-3 True And False Guilt

4-5-4 Barriers Against Grace

5. "Into all the world"

5-1 "Into all the world"

5-2 The Great Commission

5-3 The Light Of The World

5-4 Preaching "To every creature"

5-5 Latter Day Fulfilment Of The Great Commission

5-6 The Great Commission In Matthew

5-7 The Great Commission In Mark And Luke

5-8 The Great Commission In John

5-9 Reaching The Unreached

6. Touching The Raw Nerve In Preaching

6. Touching The Raw Nerve In Preaching

6-1 Preaching: Workshop Dialogues

7. Dealing With Error Whilst Preaching Truth

7-1 The Word Will Not Return Void

7-2 The Teaching Style Of Jesus

7-3 Paul's Teaching Style

7-4 Patient Teaching And Preaching

7-5 Glorifying God In Preaching

8. The Hopefulness Of The Preacher
- 8-1 A Positive Spirit In Preaching
9. Christians Unlimited
- 9-1 Christians Unlimited
- 9-2 Limiting God
- 9-3 The Power Of Preaching
- 9-4 God Chooses To Depend Upon Us
- 9-5 Fulfilling The Sufferings Of Jesus
- 9-6 Bringing People To Faith
- 9-7 The Limitations Of Pastoral Work
- 9-8 The Unlimited Christian Potential
- 9-9 Expanding Horizons In Christ
10. The Child In The Midst: Simplicity In Preaching
11. A World Waiting To Be Won: The Latter Day Expansion Of The Gospel
12. Christian Self-Perception
- 12-1 Preaching By Door Knocking: Dialogues
13. The Christian Crisis Of Conscience
14. People Matter
- 14-1 People Matter
- 14-2 A Feeling God
- 14-3 The Personal Pleading Of The Prophets
- 14-4 Passionate Preaching And Prayer
15. Hearts That Bleed
- 15-1 Hearts That Bleed
- 15-2 The Parable of The Three Friends
- 15-3 Passion For The Lost
- 15-4 Loving Our Brethren
- 15-5 Reaching Those Who Left Church
- 15-6 The Heart Of Jesus
- 15-7 The Value Of Persons
- 15-8 A dehumanized world
- 15-9 Grieving for others
- 15-10-1 The Spirit Of Prophecy
- 15-10-2 The Counter-Cultural Message Of The Hebrew Prophets
- 15-10-3 Frontal Attack On Indifference
- 15-10-4 The Prophetic Attack On Pride And Wealth
- 15-10-5 The Prophets And Injustice
- 15-10-6 The Prophetic Criticism Of Israel's Religion
- 15-10-7 The Prophetic Experience And Prophetic Consciousness
16. Salt Of The Earth: The Power Of Influence
17. Some Thoughts On Preaching (Alan Eyre)
17. 1“THIS GOD IS OUR GOD”
- 17.2 THE ORGANIZATION OF PREACHING WORK
18. I Have A Dream: The Church In The Last Days
19. Wounded Christian Soldiers
- 19-1 Christians Who Fall Away
- 19-2 Not Giving Or Taking Offence
- 19-3 Paul And Philemon

- 19-4 Vendettas And Hatred In The Church
  - 20. The Urgency Of Our Task
    - 20-1 The Urgency Of The Preacher
    - 20-2 The Apostles' Preaching
    - 20-3 Urgent Response To The Gospel
  - 21. The Primary Importance Of Preaching
  - 22. We Will Be Saved
    - 22-1 Assurance Of Salvation
    - 22-2 Believing In Salvation
    - 22-3 "Eternal life" Assured Now
    - 22-4 Preaching The Good News
  - 23. The Loneliness Phenomenon
  - 24. How To Fund Missionary Work
- Appendix 1: Follow You, Follow Me (Some thoughts on eldership in a mission context)
- 1-1 Pastoral care in mission churches
    - 1-2 All Christians Are Equal
    - 1-3 All Christians Are Responsible
    - 1-4 The Strategy Of Jesus
    - 1-5 Elders And Deacons
    - 1-6 Bishops And Elders
    - 1-7 Paul As The Model Elder
    - 1-8 The Servant Leader
- Appendix: Elders And Romans 13
- Appendix 2: Winning The West
- 2-1 Missionary Work In The West: Trends From Canada
  - 2-2 The Potential Of The Unchurched In The West
  - 2-3 Australian Church Surveys
- Appendix 3: One To One Preaching: Sample Dialogues
- 3-1 Building rapport in conversations
- Appendix 4: Why Do Some Areas Respond More Than Others?
- Appendix 5: "To the Jew first"
- 5-1 Why We Should Preach To Israel
  - 5-2 Preaching To Israel In The Last Days
  - 5-3 The Preaching Commission Of Isaiah 40
    - 5-3-1 John The Baptist's Style Of Preaching
- Appendix 6: Tears In Heaven: A Missionary Obituary
- Appendix 7: Capitalism And Welfare Policy In The Mission Field
- Appendix 8: Missionary Training Program

The Program [] Carelinks Missionary Method [] Some Psychology for Preachers [] Dealing with the Poor [] Giving Your First Bible Talk

## FOREWORD

This is a book for *all of us* who have “wholeheartedly obeyed” the Biblical doctrines of salvation and “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Romans 6:17; Jude 3). The key word, the operative concept, is “entrusted”. If we invest in a Trust Company, *we* expect profits as well as the company directors who manage our funds. The Lord Jesus has “entrusted” his treasure to us *only and solely* because he expects to get a return on his venture capital through our faithful effort (Luke 19:11-27). We may share in that return if he approves our work.

This book contains no new ideas. For those of us who have been ‘in the truth’ for years, what Duncan Heaster tells us in this book is well known and familiar. Peter’s letters, the apostle tells us himself, were written “as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles” (2 Peter 3:1-2). There can be little doubt that “the command” Peter has in mind is the command to preach the truth. “A World Waiting To Be Won” is exactly like those important epistles.

Yet, after twenty centuries since the angels sang of God’s goodwill to men above the fields of Bethlehem, our brotherhood needs this book. We need it desperately. For two big reasons we need it.

The first and principal reason is simple. “Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). Every magazine in the brotherhood shouts this message. The situation is exactly the same as our Lord Jesus faced himself at the time he spoke those words: the labourers are few. The task before us requires total commitment from us all, however small our individual contribution may be.

The second reason we all need this book is somewhat less obvious, but very real and serious none the less. Early in our modern history as a denomination, the brotherhood was deeply infected with the virus of Calvinism, a deadly heresy. In the 19th century many converts to true Bible teaching were Protestants of some kind before they were baptized, and traditional Protestantism has always been deeply influenced by Calvinism. This heresy did not begin with John Calvin. He simply revived a particularly virulent form of an old spirit of legalism and ritualism characteristic of Pharisees, Judaizing Christians, and many so-called ‘fathers’ of the medieval church. This spirit is totally hostile to the very idea of world evangelism, which is why holders of Bible truth for more than a century did so little of it. It is a spirit of self-righteousness and arrogance which asserts that God is sovereign and we have no say at all in who will or will not be saved, and no part whatever to play in recruiting God’s “elect”. The fact that *we* are God’s elect is a proof that we were predestined for eternal salvation, but preaching is futile because only God knows who to call. We are told to avoid the world, not turn it upside down (Acts 17:6).

At the ecclesia where I was baptized 55 years ago, there was a small notice outside the meeting hall stating that weekly public lectures on the Bible were held inside it. Inside were ten rows of seats for church members at the front, then a rope across the room, and behind the rope one row of seats “for the alien” as potential converts were called. Behind that row was a long table with many books and tracts. The bookstall steward (who is still alive) dutifully laid out his books and then at the end of the meeting locked them away again in the cabinet. I rarely recall anyone occupying that row for the alien. Yet I know that all the elders of that

ecclesia felt perfectly satisfied that their duty to witness was being regularly and satisfactorily fulfilled. Just occasionally a world event would prompt what was called a “special effort”, which was always about prophecy and announced by a very small notice in a local newspaper. We were used to none or very few ever showing up. That ecclesia no longer exists.

Looking back now I marvel at the fact that I should ever have been inspired by this religion. But the fact is, my church of previous connection was far worse! I remember well: in a vast, echoing, smoke-blackened cathedral-like parish church that could hold hundreds, there were sometimes half a dozen at holy communion and the full time priest knew next to nothing about the Bible.

Yet inspired I was. As an early teen I read every book and tract on that table, from cover to cover. I became convinced that this scenario of incredible lethargy and smugness held a great treasure. Just as Paul wrote long ago: “we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). That is Duncan’s message in this book. Heed it well.

One event jolted me into action. Knowing that I was seeking Bible truth, I was invited to a cocoa factory to hear a preacher speak about “Understanding the Bible”. If I had been invited to the world-famous Minster (cathedral) in that city, I would have understood, but a cocoa factory? The very idea seemed absurd.

I went, and the result was startling. Here was an odd little man who worked in the cocoa factory, with signs of some recent accident still grievously disfiguring his body, with passion and eloquence urging us to “understand the Bible” for one utterly compelling reason: *it was a matter of life or death*, nothing less.

Incidentally, it was no surprise to me when much later Alfred Norris, the cocoa man, wrote “Preaching the Word”, the first treatise on worldwide evangelism to jolt us out of our Calvinist straitjacket.

After the meeting in the cocoa factory, I returned to the ecclesia with the special seats for aliens a much wiser young man. I made some overtures that I would like instruction in gospel truth. There were about fifty brethren in that ecclesia, but it was a sister named May Rhodes who led me faithfully and truly into heavenly places in Christ. May Rhodes was a maid, that is to say a ‘menial’ (that really was the word), a domestic servant. Her only book, almost her only possession, was a well worn Bible full of notes, and in her damp, dingy basement room my heart burned as she “opened the Scriptures” to me (Luke 24:32). Almost all I have been and am spiritually, my knowledge and love of the Word, my appreciation of His grace abounding, my search for a suitable wife in the Lord, and my experience as a preacher in sixty countries on six continents, I owe to God through this humble social nobody who was mighty in the Scriptures and fervent in the Spirit (Acts 18:24-25). Fifty-five years later I still consider May Rhodes to have been one of the greatest preachers of God’s truth I have ever known. The secret was simple: she had an utterly unquenchable faith in God and His promises. To me, no other saint more fully epitomizes the words of the Lord Jesus: “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:38).

I wish to highlight and commend to every reader fifteen great truths which Duncan expounds in this book about preaching the truth.

- God depends for the furtherance of His purpose upon our faith in, and individual response to, His abounding grace.
- Preaching is a joint enterprise. We are workers together with Him. It is a work for the glory of God and His Son.
- Preaching is an exercise in humility. We can be proud of others whom we have helped, but not of ourselves. We are sinners preaching to sinners.
- Our aim in preaching is not to win a theological argument, convince others that they are wrong and we are right, sway others with our logic and cleverness, or even prove that we are the only right church. It is the same aim as the Lord Jesus: to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners, open the eyes of the blind, release the oppressed and announce the coming of God's Kingdom.
- Preaching has not achieved its object unless there is sincere repentance and a total change of outlook in the convert, a mirror image of a similar and prior repentance and change of outlook in the preacher.
- We must preach because we *love* our fellow men. We do not love them by putting up invisible walls to keep people out of God's house rather than opening doors to let them in. God - amazing though it is - gave His Son to die a dreadful death because He *loved* the world, loved sinners, including me, the worst of them.
- God is ever hopeful that men and women might repent and partake of His eternal blessings. So must we be, however barren the ground may appear.
- The power of eternal death and eternal life has been committed to us. The salvation of others really is in our hands. Yet God uses our weakness, and even our failures, to further His purpose. However, our failures will testify against us in the day of reckoning.
- It is not just Bible knowledge that we must seek to impart. Our words must be backed up by example.
- There must be an urgency in our message and in the carrying out of it.
- Our witness is to be Christ-centred, not focused around the preacher.
- Disunity amongst the preachers will nullify our work. Far greater priority must be given to unifying the Body of Christ in these last days.
- True preaching appeals to the conscience and heart, not just the intellect.
- Given all the cultural and social obstacles, the astounding effects, the amazing 'success', of first century preaching is humanly inexplicable. It is exactly the same today. There is no human plan that will 'succeed' in converting Muslims, Buddhists, Chinese, or Western materialists. But, according to His word, God has such a plan.
- Competent shepherding is essential if the wonderful work of witness is not to be negated and sheep subsequently lost. If we fail in this, Christ will find the lost but we will lose our reward.

The Scriptural proofs for all these truths are given in great detail in this book, and they are incontrovertible. As Paul once wrote, we are without excuse (Romans 1:20). So read on, and pray and sow your seed and water it, knowing that you and the Lord of the harvest will rejoice together.

"Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him" (Psalm 126:5-6).

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# 1. We're All Preachers: Motivations For Preaching

There is without doubt the sense that preaching the Gospel is fine for those who feel that way inclined, and that we should smile benevolently on their efforts- and yet, it seems to be supposed, not every brother or sister has a duty here. If we understand 'preaching' as involving travelling or writing, this is of course true. Yet we each ought to be witnessing the Gospel to those we daily rub shoulders with in life: and more than this, we have an absolute responsibility to do it.

## Points To Consider

Our witness is a reflection of our experience of the Lord and His salvation, and as such is purely involuntary. Indeed, our attitude to personal witnessing is one indicator of our final acceptability with God. That's a bold statement, purposefully so. But consider the following points:

### 1.1 Joyful Urgency

The Greek word *evangelion* translated 'Gospel' means, strictly, 'good news that is being passed on'; for example, the good news of a victory was passed on by runners to the capital city (cp. the Hebrew association of carrying tidings, and good news: 2 Sam. 18:20). Once it had been spread around and everyone knew it, it ceased to be *evangelion*; it was no longer news that needed to be passed on. But in that time when there was a *joyful urgency* to pass it on, it was *evangelion*. Notice, heralding is not the same as lecturing. Our community for far too long equated preaching, good newsing, with lecturing. Lecturing seeks no result; whereas the herald of God has an urgency and breathlessness about his message. There must be a passion and enthusiasm in us for the message of Christ and His Kingdom. More to feared than over emotionalism is the dry, detached utterance of facts as a droning lecture, which has neither heart nor soul in it. Man's peril, Christ's salvation...these things cannot mean so little to us that we feel no warmth or passion rise within us as we speak about them. Remember how the early preachers were so enthusiastic in their witness that they were thought to be drunk. We are insistently pressing our good news upon others- evangelising. And the Spirit has chosen this precise word to describe that understanding and hope which has been committed to our trust. If we have the Truth, the Gospel, it is *of itself* something that by its very nature *must* be passed on, this is in fact what it is<sup>(1)</sup>. But let's remember that "good news" isn't the best translation of *euanggelion*. The word distinctly means a triumphal message or announcement of victory. It's the equivalent of the Aramaic *besora*, "the word a herald would use to announce victory" (2). The Gospel isn't merely a set of theological truths which appeal to the logic and Bible knowledge of those so inclined to be impressed by that kind of thing, to those psychologically wired so as to have an interest in hobby level theology. Rather is there a definite good news of victory and triumph over all human sin, dysfunction and condemnation to ultimate failure and death.

The LXX uses the word concerning how daily we should "show forth his salvation" (Ps. 96:2). Witness is therefore a daily feature in the life of those who have known salvation; it is not something done solely by attending an ecclesial gathering once per week. This explains why frequently Paul uses the word "Gospel" as meaning 'the preaching of the Gospel'; the

Gospel is in itself something which *must* be preached if we really have it (Rom. 1:1,9; 16:25; Phil. 1:5 (NIV),12; 2:22; 4:15; 1 Thess. 1:5; 3:2; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Tim. 1:8; 2:8). The fact we have been given the Gospel is in itself an imperative to preach it. “When I came to Troas for the Gospel of Christ” (2 Cor. 2:12 RV) has the ellipsis supplied in the AV: “to preach Christ’s Gospel” [although there is no Greek word in the original matching ‘preach’].

You will recall the record of how the desperate, starving lepers found great treasure and went and hid it (2 Kings 7:8). The Lord used this as the basis for His parable about the man who finds the Gospel, as the treasure in a field, and hides it. But surely He intended us to think of what those men did afterwards. “They said one to another, We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace”. They even felt that woe would be unto them if they did not share the good news of what they had found. The same joyful urgency must be ours.

Our witness is an outcome of our desire to praise and worship the loving Father and Son who have been so gracious to us. The ideas of preaching and praise are very intertwined in the Psalms. Their close relation is reflected by the way in which the Hebrew word translated “to call on” means both to call out in witness (e.g. Gen. 12:7,8; Ex. 33:19) and also to call upon in the sense of praise. By calling upon the name of the Lord in praise, as David so often does, we call Him out in witness to the world. And it makes a fascinating study to reflect upon the use of praise and worship in the Millenium, as a means to educating the earth’s mortal population.

The urgency we have in our witness isn't only joyful; there's an element of dead seriousness to it because of the very urgency of our task. Joel 2:32 predicted that when Jerusalem was surrounded by her enemies at the time of Sennacherib's invasion, with all in Judah who could do so having fled into the city for safety, "It shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered [saved]: for in Mount Zion [the temple mount] and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance [RV "those that escape"]". These words are alluded to by Peter when he stood near the temple mount and urged people to be baptized into Christ, to call upon themselves the Lord's Name; and they are applied to all our witness by Paul (Rom. 10:13). Those refugees fleeing before the Assyrian war machine are the people of this world whom we urge to accept deliverance and salvation through baptism into Christ.

## **1.2 A Duty**

“The gospel of the circumcision” being given to Peter and that of the Gentiles to Paul evidently means ‘the duty of preaching the gospel’ (Gal. 2:7). The Gospel is in itself the duty of preaching it. In Corinth, “Paul was constrained by the word, testifying to the Jews...” (Acts 18:5 RV). The AV has “pressed in the spirit”; knowing the word somehow compelled Paul to testify of it. “The word (*logos*) of God ” , a phrase which the NT mainly uses with reference to the Gospel rather than the whole Bible, is sometimes used as parallel to the idea of preaching the Gospel (Rev. 1:9; 6:9; 20:4 and especially Col. 1:25). Paul speaks of having ‘fulfilled’ the Gospel by preaching it (Rom. 15:19 Gk.); the Gospel is in itself something which demands to be preached by those having it<sup>(3)</sup>.

Acts 10:36,37 continues the idea, by suggesting that the word of God is the preaching of it- we cannot know the word and not preach it: “The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace...that word, ye know, which was published throughout all Judea”. The word is the preaching / publishing of it. In Rom. 1:14,15, Paul speaks of his “debt” to preach to both “Greeks and Barbarians” as the reason for his planned trip to Rome-

for in that city there was the widest collection of “Greeks and Barbarians”. And yet he later speaks of our ‘debt’ [Gk.] to love one another (Rom. 13:8). The debt of love that we feel on reflecting upon our unpayable debt to the Father and Son is partly an unending ‘debt’ to loving share the Gospel of grace with others, to forgive the ‘debts’ of others’ sins against us.

Dan. 12:3,10 draw a parallel between those having wisdom and those who turn many to righteousness. The RVmg. translates “those that be wise” as “the teachers”, reflecting the play within the Hebrew sense of ‘wisdom’- to have wisdom is axiomatically to teach it. To possess God’s Truth therefore means that we will teach it to others. Because the preacher had wisdom, he taught the people knowledge; indeed, the Hebrew implies that the more wise he was, the more he taught the people (Ecc. 12:9 AVmg.). And the wealth of Biblical wisdom our community has built up (if indeed it is that rather than pure head knowledge) ought to be reflected in the ever more pervasive extent of our witness. The Hebrew confusion of understanding and teaching is brought out by comparing the AV and RV of Ezra 8:16: “Men of understanding” (AV), “which were teachers” (RV). To have true understanding is axiomatically to teach it. We can’t hold it passively within ourselves. The Gospel is to be preached; Paul realized this in some of his very last words, as even then, he makes one of his plays on words: “...that through me the proclamation might be fully proclaimed” (2 Tim. 4:17 RVmg.). The Gospel, the proclamation of the Kingdom, is to be proclaimed. We cannot possess a proclamation, designed to be proclaimed, without proclaiming it.

Mt. 25:27 contains the Lord’s condemnation of the man who hid his talent- “Thou oughtest” to have given the talent to the exchangers. Either he should’ve given it to the Gentiles, or he should have at least done something, in lending it to his Jewish brethren even against the Law. “Oughtest”, *dia*, means you must have , you had to- very possession of the talent meant we have to, we must, share it with others in some way- we are all preachers. I have often pondered what we are to learn in our generation from the strict statement that males without the ability to procreate were barred from the Lord’s congregation during the Old Covenant (Dt. 23:1). Perhaps the point is that all those who are the Lord’s people must recognize their ability to procreate for Him, in the bringing forth of yet others in their Lord’s image.

### **1.3 We Are The Message**

“What the Soviet cosmonaut wanted when he looked for God in the dark void outside his spacecraft window is...the hungering desire of our age. We want proof, evidence, a personal appearance, so that the God we have heard about becomes the God we see”<sup>(4)</sup>. And the only evidence is in you and me. People are interested, they are hungering and searching for Him; and the evidence they seek is in our radically transformed lives. They won’t get a voice out of a whirlwind or sight of a Heavenly form; they just get a glimpse of you and me. In this sense the [human] medium *is* the [Divine] message. Indeed, the Hebrew word for "message" can mean either a message or a messenger- hence Gen. 50:16 AV "messenger", RV "message". In the Divine thinking which is so often reflected in the Hebrew language, the man is his message, the messenger is the message.

The figure of seed is used by the Lord in His parables to represent both the word, and also the children of the Kingdom. If we have God’s word of truth within us, we will of ourselves be the witness, for the possession of that word will naturally lead to witnessing it. Likewise the figure of pearls is used concerning the Gospel (Mt. 7:6) and yet also about the faithful (Rev. 21:21; Mt. 13:45). If we have the word of truth within us, we are identified with that word

and will thereby witness it to men. I want to put two passages from Paul together in your minds. He tells the Ephesian elders to “take heed to yourselves” before adding “and to all the flock” (Acts 20:28). To Timothy likewise: “Take heed to yourself, and to your teaching [of others]” (1 Tim. 4:16). Clearly enough, Paul saw that who we are is related to the effectiveness of our preaching. The preacher is some sort of reproduction of the Truth in a personal form; the word made flesh. The Truth must exist in us as a living experience, a glorious enthusiasm, an intense reality. For it is primarily *people* who communicate, not words or ideas. Personal authenticity is undoubtedly the strongest credential in our work of communicating the message. Thus Paul could speak of his afflictions as being his credentials (2 Cor. 11:21-33; 1 Thess. 2:1-4; 2 Tim. 3:10-12). And God’s true servant commands himself by the endurance of opposition (2 Cor. 6:4,5).

Rev. 12:11 may imply that our testimony to others is proportionate to our victory against the devil. Preaching is therefore an expression of basic righteousness. God teaches sinners His ways because He is essentially good (Ps. 25:8); and if we are righteous, we will manifest Him in this. God wishes to manifest Himself through our witness; He wants to use each one of us as a witness to Himself. Consider two parallel descriptions of Paul’s early preaching:

Paul “preached Jesus, that he is the son of God” (Acts 9:20);

Gal. 1:16 describes this as God being pleased to reveal His Son in Paul.

Paul had the Son of God within him; he had the spirit / mind of Christ. And it was this which gave credibility and power to his preaching Jesus as the Son of God. And God eagerly manifested Himself and His Son through this. Luke’s Gospel was an account of all that Jesus “began” to do and teach (Acts 1:1)- with the implication that the Acts record is the history of what He *continued* to do, through His people.

The preacher is his message; if the doctrines of the Gospel are truly in us, then we ourselves will naturally be a witness to it in our lives. The Gospel is the savour of Christ; and yet we personally are the savour (2 Cor. 2:14,15); we are the epistle and Gospel of Christ (2 Cor. 3:3). Thus *the Gospel* was to be preached for a witness to all nations (Mt. 24:14); and yet “ye are witnesses... you will be witnesses” (Lk. 24:27; Acts 1:8). The preacher of the Gospel is the Gospel; the man is the message, just as the very same word / message was made flesh in the Lord. Israel of old were taught this. They were to keep and do the commandments of God, and this would be the witness of their wisdom and understanding to the nations around them- who would thereby be brought to Israel’s God (Dt. 4:6-8). The imparting of wisdom and understanding therefore didn’t come so much through specific doctrinal exposition, as through living out those principles in daily life.

One part of our message is of the Kingdom of God; we should be living witnesses to the current rulership of God over our lives, and thereby we testify with credibility and integrity to the future establishment of that Kingdom on earth at the Lord’s return. If we are living the eternal life, the Kingdom life, then we are in ourselves advertisements for the good news of the Kingdom. Daniel is an example of this. The Aramaic verb *habal* occurs several times in Daniel, and between them we build up a picture of how Daniel was a living witness to the Kingdom. The word means to hurt / destroy. We find that the Kingdom of Babylon was to be cut down and destroyed; whereas the Kingdom of God was to never be destroyed (Dan. 4:23; 2:44). The mouths of the lions were closed so that they did not “hurt” [s.w. ‘destroy’] Daniel (Dan. 6:22); and because of this, Darius praises God, saying that His Kingdom would never

be 'destroyed' (Dan. 6:26). Daniel was not destroyed; and thus Darius came to believe that God's Kingdom would not be destroyed. Because Daniel was set up as a living part and foretaste of that Kingdom. To a far greater extent, "the Kingdom of God" is a title given to the Lord Jesus- because He in His mortal life was the essence of that Kingdom, the embodiment of the Kingdom life.

After the Lord converted the Samaritan woman at the well, He commented to His disciples that such work was His food- "to do the will of Him that sent me and to finish His work" (Jn. 4:34). But soon afterwards He claimed that "the works which the Father has given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me" (Jn. 5:36). It's tempting to think that the "works" He spoke of were His miracles- but the linkage with Jn. 4:34 suggests that they were also references to the change He achieved within people. These transformed people were His witness- and the Samaritan woman is a classic example. For when He had done the Father's work in her, she rushed off to witness to the world. In Jn. 6:28,29 the Lord seems to consciously steer us away from understanding His "works" as merely the miracles of e.g. feeding and physical healing. In response to the question "What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?" He responds: "This is the work of God, that you believe on Him whom He has sent".

#### **1.4 A Natural Response**

The spirit of all this is picked up in Rev. 22:17: "The Spirit ("The Lord the spirit", Jesus) and the bride (the church) say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come". The whole spirit of the Lord Jesus is to invite others to come and share His salvation. He that hears will say to others "Come". Paul reflects on his preaching to the Corinthians: "I delivered *unto you*... that which *I also received*" (1 Cor. 15:3). Andrew likewise "found" Christ and then [s.w.] 'finds' his brother for Christ (Jn. 1:41). What we hear and learn we naturally desire to spread to others. There are many links between John's Gospel and Revelation. In John, Christ often invites men to "come" (Jn. 1:39; 4:16; 5:40; 7:37; 21:12); and members of "the bride" also, quite naturally and artlessly, invite others to "come" too (Jn. 1:41,45,46; 4:29). My point is that the natural response of the one who hears is to say to others "come". It won't be something which has to be done as a great act of the will, we won't need to be fed with ideas by some preaching Committee; he that hears will say, "Come". Our witness in this sense is therefore a very personal thing. Mt. 11:25-30 records how Jesus prayed to the Father, thanking Him for the relationship and knowledge revealed to Him; He then pauses to reflect that indeed He is the appointed way to the Father (:27); and then He launches out into a public appeal for people to come to the Father through Him. This is a pattern for us; personal prayer and private reflection are to merge naturally into a public witness.

How purely natural this process is can be seen by observing the way in which people learning the Truth *very often* share their new found knowledge with others. Time and time again this happens; a student on the correspondence course will introduce what he has learnt to others. And there is a big Biblical theme that in the Millennium, the mortals will preach to other mortals *as they begin to understand* the Gospel (Is. 2:3; Jer. 50:5; Mic. 4:2; Zech. 8:21).

We so often hide behind excuses: my Bible's not marked, I don't know all the verses, it's better if someone else does it, I might not say the right thing. All this is symptomatic of a very serious basic problem: perhaps we don't *really* believe; or perhaps like so many, we believe on one level, and yet on another level we simply don't believe (Mk. 9:24; Lk. 17:5). For our knowledge of God will somehow flow out of us naturally. According to G.B.Caird,

"The Hebrew word for 'teach' (*limmad*) is a causative stem of the verb 'learn' (*lamad*)" (1). The connection reflects how what we learn is what we quite naturally teach to others. Preaching in that sense is a natural, unforced process- if we have *really* learnt as God intends.

New converts are generally characterised by an uninhibited zeal and success in preaching to others, even though their familiarity with the Bible may not be that great. It has been a real joy recently to see new believers making so many converts. If we really believe, we will *naturally*, as an intrinsic aspect of believing, talk about it- and not just for the first year or so after our baptism. If you doubt the truth of this consider the enthusiasm of those you have encountered who are newly baptised. If you do not share their enthusiasm to speak the gospel, consider...why not? Speaking forth the word to others is part of spiritual fruit: it's something quite natural: " The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise" (Prov. 11:31). The Lord had to command those who knew Him not to speak out that knowledge (Mk. 1:34 cp. 44)- because people knew Him, they quite naturally wanted to preach it. One cannot truly know the Lord and not tell others of Him. This is the power of true knowledge, believed as it should be believed.

The Lord told the cured demoniac to go back to his friends (Mk. 5:19) and family (Lk. 8:39) and witness to them. Clearly enough, the man didn't have any friends- for he had a history of violence and lived alone, many having tried unsuccessfully to bind him due to the grievous harm he must have inflicted upon many. Yet the man went out and preached to the whole area (Mk. 5:20). Was this just rank disobedience to what His Saviour Lord had just told him? Perhaps, due to unrestrained enthusiasm. But more likely is that the man now considered the whole world around him to be his family and friends, and therefore he witnessed to them. His care for others in desiring to witness to them flowed quite naturally from his experience of conversion at the Lord's hands.

The Lord gave His parable about how *He* has invited us, through the call of the Gospel, to a great supper. He then went on to say: "When *thou* makest a dinner, or a supper..." we ought to invite those who can't recompense us (Lk. 14:12). Quite simply, the very experience and wonder of having been invited to the Kingdom should lead us to likewise invite others. But further. If we have truly understood the implications of the Lord's gracious calling, if we have truly perceived our desperation, we will take *the* lowest place, considering ourselves the *lowest* and least worthy. And we will therefore go out and invite others of the same class to which we perceive ourselves to belong- the poor, the maimed and blind.

## Notes

(1) G.B. Caird, *The Language And Imagery Of The Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1988) p. 87.

### 1.5 Compelled To Witness

This is why the outcome of the judgment seat will be a reflection of our attitude to witnessing to others: " What ye (the twelve disciples) hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops... *whosoever* therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven" (Mt. 10:27,32). The Lord seems to go beyond briefing His men before they set off on their preaching mission; He goes on to say that in a sense, *whoever* follows their example will be confessed before the Father.

Notice what He *isn't* saying: He isn't saying that if you're keen about preaching, this is the be-all-and-end-all of spiritual life, and this alone will guarantee your acceptance with God. He says that what we hear (i.e. believe) in the ear, our own very personal understanding and belief of the Gospel, must be spread abroad openly to others. Our salvation is through faith in God's absolute grace; but if it is *real* faith, we will preach it on the housetops, we simply can't keep the knowledge of *such* grace, such great salvation, to ourselves. " Having, then, such hope, we use much freedom of speech" in preaching (2 Cor. 3:12 YLT).

Peter sums it up in his defence: " We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). He told the Sanhedrin that to make true Christians agree not to preach was simply an inappropriate suggestion, because " we *cannot but* speak" out- it was something which went part and parcel with the experience of the risen Lord Jesus. Peter was not just an illiterate fisherman; so many of his words and phrasing indicate a thorough familiarity with the Greek Old Testament. Here, he seems to have Num. 24:13 at the back of his mind; Balaam says that although Balak is forbidding him to speak, he cannot but speak what God has inspired him with, even if it is intensely unpopular with those around him.

Of course, the Christian preacher is not inspired as Balaam was, but the principle is the same: it is impossible to keep quiet, because of the very nature of what we believe and who we are. John had the spirit of Peter when he wrote (in one of his many allusions to Peter's words) that what they had heard and seen, that they declared / witnessed (1 Jn. 1:1,3), as if hearing and seeing / experiencing Christ inevitably lead to witness.

Who we are is the essential witness. This is a point I see time and again in Scripture. "Their line is gone out into all the earth" (Ps. 19:4) is quoted in the New Testament about our witness of the Gospel. And yet the similarity is between the preacher and the stars above. "There is no speech nor language; their voice cannot be heard" (Ps. 19:3 RV)- they are simply there, who they are. And this is the witness which will go to the ends of the earth. We can get all too caught up with 'mission work' in the sense of taking the message to all the earth through advertising and visits; but the essential witness, which will extend to the very core of this world, is the silent witness of who we *are*. We have assumed that there are men and women sitting in their homes trying to figure out whether, e.g., God is a trinity or not, just waiting for our preaching to reach them. Yet this just isn't the case. When men and women saw the result of the Lord's ministry, they asked: "What new doctrine is this?" (Mk. 1:27). Now this is how we need people to be with us- to ask us, with the implication they are ready and willing to listen, what exactly it is that we believe. But they only get to that point by seeing the effect of our lives and witness.

## 1.6 A Realisation

The account of the disciples' response to the realisation of the resurrection shows perfectly how men will rise above every barrier, both within them and without, to speak the good news of what they now realise to be absolute truth. Mary, bashful ex-hooker that she was, " went and told them that had been with him" , the broken-down women " with great joy... did run to bring his disciples word" , those on the Emmaus road " went and told it unto the residue" , " the other disciples *therefore* " told Thomas, John told Peter " It is the Lord" , and finally they all " went forth, and preached everywhere" the news of the resurrection (Mt. 28:8; Mk. 16:10,13,20; Jn. 20:25; 21:7). The speed and spirit of the narrative pounds away at a major theme: The natural desire to tell others the Gospel of the Lord's resurrection.

This same spirit of *urgently* passing on good news pervades the preaching recorded in Acts. It seems almost certain that as a community we have generally failed for all too long to appreciate the *height* of the exaltation of the Lord Jesus, and the glorious wonder of His resurrection. Peter and John had seen Jesus of Nazareth despised, hated, dropping from exhaustion in the boat, slumping dehydrated at a well, covered in blood and spittle, mocked in naked shame. And now they knew that He had risen, that He had been exalted to God's right hand, so as to make the salvation of men possible. They could do nothing *but* speak this out. The fact they spoke *a-grammatos* (4:13 Gk.), without proper grammar, the fact they weren't humanly speaking the right men for the job... all this meant nothing to them. The height of the Lord's exaltation and the salvation this enabled just had to be shared with others.

If only we can grasp the wonder of who the Lord Jesus has been exalted to be, if we could enter more deeply into the real meaning of that empty tomb, the Son of God stooping and walking out into that early morning, we too will have that same *natural*, uninhibited desire and ability. Yet sadly, very sadly, all too many of us seem to be able to say or think is: 'Jesus wasn't God, He wasn't part of a trinity, even now He isn't equal with God'. All of which is true, and needs to be said. But there is *so much more to it* than that; and it is an appreciation of who the exalted Lord really *is* which will give us that uncontrived, irrepressible desire to tell the world.

It simply can't be that we rejoice in our own salvation, and don't want to breathe a whimper of that good news to others. Esther made her request for "my life...my people" in parallel; and when her own safety was assured, she didn't just relax and mop her brow with relief, she went on to petition for them- with all the risks this involved for her (Esther 7:3; 8:3). We can't possibly just rejoice in our own salvation, that we have found the Lord and are secured in Him; if we have truly experienced this, we will wish to share it with others.

### **1.7 Real Appreciation**

Our lack of evangelical zeal therefore reflects a lack of appreciation of the Lord's resurrection, a failure to grasp the height of His present exaltation. God reconciled us by the cross, and *therefore* to us was given the work of preaching the Gospel of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18,20)- a sharing with others of our own experience. This was clearly what fired the first century ecclesia. I'd paraphrase Acts 5:28-31 like this: 'Question: Why do you keep preaching when we told you not to? Answer: Christ rose from the dead, " and him hath God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance" '. Peter says he must obey God and preach as he was commanded, and then Peter goes straight on to say that Jesus died and was resurrected by God. It's as if he saw the Lord's death and resurrection as the command to go and preach. We can never ever be passive to the Lord's death.

The cross impels us to witness. John begins his preaching of the Gospel by saying that he had beheld the glory of the Lord Jesus (Jn. 1:14)- and I suggest he was referring to how he beheld the cross and the Lord's manifestation of the Father's glory there (Jn. 17:24). The cross, the glory of the Lord shown there, was what motivated John's preaching, just as it should ours. The Lord's parable of the wedding banquet which was rejected by those invited is instructive here. He spoke of how "my [i.e. God's] oxen and my fatlings" had been killed (Mt. 22:4). Perhaps here we have an intensive plural- God's one great ox and fatted calf had been slaughtered, i.e., Christ had been crucified, all things were now ready- and therefore, on the basis of how wonderful that is, we should bid all men and women to partake in Him.

The blessings now mediated by the exalted Lord mean that *whatever* the barriers, those who appreciate those blessings and the *height*, the pure, wondrous *height* of His exaltation and what this thereby enables for us, will *naturally* preach it. The Gospel is “the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4 RSV). 2 Cor. 2:14-17 invites us to see the Lord Jesus after His victory- which can only refer to His victorious death on the cross- leading a victory parade, in which we are the triumphant soldiers, carrying with us burning incense. This represents our preaching of the Gospel, as part of our participation in the joyful glory of the Lord’s victory on the cross. And yet that incense is used as a double symbol- both of us the preachers, who hold the aroma, and yet we are also the aroma itself. We are the witness. The light of the candlestick is both the believer (Mt. 5:15) and the Gospel itself (Mk. 4:21). But the motivation for it all is our part in the victory procession of the Lord, going on as it does down through the ages, as He as it were comes home from the cross. We are the witnesses in the same way as the Lord Jesus was the word made flesh- in His very person, He was the essential witness and message. When He said “I do always those things that please [God]”, it is recorded that “As he spake these words, many believed on him” (Jn. 8:29,30). There was something real and credible. He was His words made flesh. It is apparent to any reader of the Greek text of the Gospels that Jesus almost always left the verb “believe” without an object (e.g. Mk. 4:40; 5:34,36; 9:23). The question naturally arose: ‘Believe in what or whom?’. And seeing the speaker of the words, the answer was there before their eyes.

Lk. 24:46-49 records Luke's version of the great preaching commission given in Mk. 16 and Mt. 28. He doesn't record that the Lord actually told the disciples to go out and preach. Instead He says that the OT prophets foretold the world-wide preaching of the Gospel of His death and resurrection, " and ye are witnesses of these things" . It's as if He's saying, 'If you are a witness to all this, you must be a witness of it to all' (cp. Acts 1:8). If we are witnesses, we will bear witness; we will naturally. We have to; and note how Lev. 5:1 taught that it was a sin not to bear witness / testify when one had been a witness. This may well be consciously alluded to in the language of witness which we have in Lk. 24:48. We each have the witness of the Lord's resurrection in ourselves (1 Jn. 5:10). But in a witness in a courtroom isn't expected to argue the case, prove the truth or press for a verdict; but rather to simply report what actually happened in their experience. This is where I personally see little point in ‘apologetics’- trying to prove there is a God or that the Bible is true. These are matters of faith in the end. We are called not to apologize for God but rather to be witnesses from ourselves of the work of the Father and Son.

David in the Psalms often makes the link between appreciation of God’s ways and the inevitable witness this will result in. Thus: “Make me to understand the way of thy precepts: so shall I talk of thy wondrous works” (Ps. 119:27). This contrasts with our community’s amassing of pure, intellectual truth- but without very much telling of it forth to others. “He that is wise [i.e., has true wisdom] winneth souls” (Prov. 11:30 RV).

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## Notes

(1) There is a fine section on this word in William Barclay, *New Testament Words* (London: SCM, 1992 ed.). P. T. O’Brien confirms this: “euangelion...signifies not only the content of what is preached, but also the act or process of the proclamation” (*Gospel And Mission In The Writings Of Paul*, Paternoster, 1995, p. 113).

(2) Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Random House, 2005) p. 62.

(3) Thus in 2 Tim. 4:17 Paul can reflect "...that through me the message might be fully proclaimed, and that all the Gentiles might hear". The Gospel is fulfilled by preaching it. And the Gospel is essentially the promises to Abraham, about all nations being blessed. This promise is fulfilled in our preaching of it- which is why the Acts references to the disciples being "multiplied" consciously refers to the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham about the multiplication of the seed. "The fullness of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:25) also refers to this idea of the final number of converted Gentiles being a fullness or fulfilment- of the promises to Abraham. But that fulfilment, as with that of many prophecies, is dependent upon and according to our preaching of the Gospel [see 'Christians Unlimited' for more on this].

(4) Philip Yancey, *Disappointment With God* (Zondervan, 1997) p. 46

(5) *Into All The World.*

## 1.2 Making Disciples

If we are real witnesses, testifiers to the reality of the Lord's death and resurrection, we *must* therefore, by the very nature of our experience, be witnesses of these things to the world. The resurrection is the witness that God has given of His Son. Whoever believes that witness, will have within themselves the witness- they will be witnesses to God's witness (1 Jn. 5:10 Gk.). The Lord twice told the disciples: " Go ye...go ye" (Mk. 16:15 cp. Mt. 28:19 and contexts). He was encouraging them to do the natural corollary of what they had experienced.

Indeed, following Christ, which is to carry His cross, is paralleled by Him with preaching His Kingdom (Lk. 9:59,60). To live out the essence of the cross, in daily self-control, unconditional kindness and forgiveness, patience with those who provoke us....this is the real witness (Lk. 9:23-26). If we don't preach, we aren't following Him. And if we do follow Him, it's axiomatic that we therefore preach Him. "From henceforth thou shalt catch men. And...they forsook all, and followed him" (Lk. 5:10,11) definitely parallels preaching with following the Lord. Following after Him is the way to be fishers of men (Mk. 1:17), and yet following Jesus is so often understood by Him as a call to carrying the cross. A focus on Him and the life of His cross leads to a catching of men for Him in a quite natural way. The aim of our preaching is to "make disciples", learners / followers of Him whose life was characterized by cross carrying (1). This is why Rom. 15:16 speaks of the preacher as offering up his converts upon the altar [note how Acts 11:7 uses the same image of 'offering up' sacrifices to describe preaching]. And this connects with how Paul had earlier spoken in Rom. 12:1 of offering ourselves as living sacrifices in dedication. The aim of the preacher, therefore, is to provoke a sacrificial life in his or her converts, after the pattern of the Master whom they learn of.

Of course, our success in this depends to a large extent upon the nature of the lives *we* live. Several times in the Psalms, David's poetry matches 'myself' with "all men"; he wants all men to share in *his* experience of Yahweh. Thus: "*My mouth* shall speak the praise of the Lord: and let *all flesh* bless his holy name" (Ps. 145:21). As Yahweh provided a pillar of fire to give light in the night to His people in the wilderness (Ps. 105:39), so Israel were to arrange for a fire to be burning throughout the night in the tabernacle. They were to give light in response to God's giving light to them. As with any form of parenting, it's a sobering thought that our image, our view of the Lord Jesus, will be replicated to some extent in those whom we convert. This is why it's so wrong to mix in any way our personal image with that of the Lord in our preaching. And yet let's give full weight to how Paul's convert Timothy was so in step with Paul that he could by visiting Corinth draw their attention to how Paul's ways were "in Christ". The Lord foretold that thanks to the preaching of His people, the world would come to believe that God had sent Him- yet He had just commented that the disciples had believed that God had sent Him (Jn. 17:8,23 RV). It is our beliefs about Jesus which we are to pass on to others.

- " I believed, and *therefore* have I spoken" (Ps. 116:10) is quoted in 2 Cor. 4:13 concerning the attitude of the preacher; *because* we have believed, *therefore* we preach, after Paul's pattern. He apprehended men for Christ, "seeing that I also was apprehended" (Phil. 3:21 RVmg.). It's a natural relationship. We naturally have a debt to preach to all men, as we have a debt to love all our brethren- because of what has been done for us (Rom. 1:14). God has put in *each* of us the preaching of the word of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19 AVmg.). Prov. 21:28 (Heb.) likewise implies that the man who has heard truth will constantly speak about it. Those who heard God's call to repentance were to *naturally* teach repentance to others (Jer. 9:20 cp. 19). We have shown elsewhere that if we have really received forgiveness, and have thereby grasped hold of salvation here and now, the wonder of our own experience will inevitably lead us to tell others, as it did David and Peter<sup>(2)</sup>.

- The enigmatic Jn. 7:38 must be read in this context: " He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly (" innermost being" , NIV) shall flow rivers of living (Gk. spring) water" . What " scripture" did the Lord have in mind? Surely Ez. 47:1,9, the prophecy of how in the Millennium, rivers of spring water will come out from Zion and bring life to the world; and perhaps too the references to spring water being used to cleanse men from leprosy and death (Lev. 14:5; 15:13; Num. 19:16). Out of the innermost being of the true believer, the spring(ing) water of the Gospel will *naturally* spring up and go out to heal men, both now and more fully in the Kingdom, aided then by the Spirit gifts. The believer, *every* believer, *whoever* believes, will preach the word to others *from his innermost being*, both now and in the Kingdom - without the need for preaching committees or special efforts (not that in themselves I'm decrying them). The tendency is to delegate our responsibilities to these committees. There is no essential difference between faith and works. If we believe, we will do the works of witness, quite spontaneously. And note how the water that sprung out of the Lord's smitten side is to be compared with the bride that came out of the smitten side of Adam. We, the bride, are the water; thanks to the inspiration of the cross, we go forth in witness, the water of life to this hard land in which we walk.

- Every one who is taught the Gospel will naturally *bring forth out of his treasure* (his innermost heart- Lk. 6:45) things new and old- his new knowledge, plus his old things of the old covenant (Mt. 13:52 cp. Song 7:13).

- That we can't be secret believers is brought out by 2 Jn. 7 [Gk.]. Anyone who does not confess publicly that Jesus came in the flesh is described by John as a deceiver and even anti-Christ. The French [Segond version] is clearest: "ne déclarent pas publiquement". Whilst the passage is open to a number of interpretations, in our context the point perhaps is that to secretly believe in Christ isn't possible- it must in some way be declared publicly or else we are "deceivers".

- Hebrew poetry rhymes according to the ideas presented rather than the assonance of the words. However, this doesn't mean that in a couplet, the first part is directly equal to the second part. Subtle differences are set up in order to make a point. Am. 3:8 is an example of this. The lion has roared: who shall not fear? God has spoken: who can but speak forth [AV 'prophesy', but not only in the sense of predicting future events]? If a lion roars, so a man naturally fears as a result of it. God speaks, and just as naturally we can do nothing but speak it forth. Hence Am. 3:9 goes on to exhort the hearers to publish God's purpose to the Gentile nations around them. The lion roars, and man fears; and we are set up to expect: God speaks, and man should fear. But there is an intended dashing of this expectation. God has spoken, just as the lion may roar; but we are not to *fear* but rather to *speak it forth* to others. We come

down, therefore, to something very basic, something in the foundation of our faith: that the Bible is the inspired word of God. But if we believe that, if we hear that voice of Yahweh, we will inevitably, axiomatically, speak it forth to others.

- The Lord deftly broke the bread and gave it to the disciples, in evident anticipation of the breaking of bread and His death for the life of the world. They then presumably broke the bread again (for they collected remnants of the broken food) and in their turn gave it to the crowd. Our receipt from the Lord, our experience of His cross, must be reflected quite naturally in our sharing it with the world. Our witness to the world is therefore not just putting bits of paper in letterboxes or handing them out on the streets; it is a very real and personal telling out of our own very personal share in the Lord's death (Mt. 15:36,37). The Lord gave the broken bread to the disciples, eloquently speaking of the gift of His life. They in their turn "did set before the people" (Mk. 8:6). We must pass on that which was given to us by the Lord. Paul is our example in this (1 Cor. 11:23). We must, of course, have a valid relationship with the Lord in the first place, feeling we have definitely received something from Him, if we are to pass it on. The Greek term for "set before" recurs in 1 Tim. 1:18 and 2 Tim. 2:2 concerning how we simply *must* pass on the word which has been given to us. Quite simply, if we've really heard it, really received it, we must pass it on.

- What we hear in the ear, that we must preach on the housetops (Mt. 10:27). This is built on the language of 1 Sam. 9:15,25, where God speaks in Samuel's ear, and then he speaks that word to Saul on the housetop. The Lord is saying that in essence, we are all in Samuel's position; we hear the word of this world's salvation, the word about "the Kingdom" as it was for Saul, and that very fact is in itself the imperative to overcome our natural reservations and share it with those for whom it is intended- even if, as with Saul, we consider them unlikely and unspiritual hearers.

- Our way of life will make an inevitable witness to the world. Simply not moaning and groaning in the daily round will be a holding out of the word of life to those with whom we trudge through this life (Phil. 2:14 cp. 16).

- Paul seems to have assumed that all of us would preach and make converts (not leave it to just some of our community): he speaks of how "every man" in the ecclesia builds upon the foundation of Christ, but how he builds will be judged by fire. If what he has built is burnt up at the judgment, he himself will be saved, but not what he has built (1 Cor. 3:10-15). I would suggest that the 'building' refers to our converts and work with other believers. If they fail of the Kingdom, we ourselves will be saved, but our work will have been in vain. This parable also suggests that the salvation of others, their passing through the fire at the judgment, is dependent upon how we build. This may be hyperbole to make a point, but it is a powerful encouragement that we are *all* elders and preachers, and we *all* have a deep effect on others' spirituality. We have responsibilities to those who respond to our preaching. The preaching of the Kingdom of God is not only in words but by the power of example (1 Cor. 4:20). He makes the same assumption in 1 Tim. 6:1, in warning believing slaves to act faithfully before their unbelieving masters, lest the doctrines of God be blasphemed by them. Paul takes it as read that the slave would have taught the doctrines of the faith to his master, and therefore any misbehaviour by him would cause those teachings to be mocked. And again in Tit. 2:5, he writes that wives should behave orderly so that "the word of God be not blasphemed". He assumes that all believing men and women would be preachers of the word, yet if the wives were disorderly in their behaviour they would bring mockery upon the message preached.

- Paul 'assuredly gathered' that " the Lord had called us for to preach the Gospel unto them" (Acts 16:10). The Lord calling is usually used concerning His calling of men to understand and obey the Gospel. Perhaps Paul is saying that the reason why we are called is to preach, and in this context he realised that the people *he* was to preach to, were the Macedonians. He later reminisced: " As we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak (i.e. preach)" (1 Thess. 2:4). Likewise Heb. 11:13 teaches that all the faithful went through the same process: persuaded - embraced - confessed to the world around them. Confessing was part of the natural response to belief of the promises. Hearing God's word in faith is associated with declaring it (Jer. 9:12). "Your participation in the [preaching of the] gospel" is paralleled with "your faith" (Phil. 1:5). If we really believe, we will be involved in the preaching of what we believe.

- "Ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning" (Jn. 15:27) was exemplified in Acts 4:13, where it was apparent from the nature of the disciples' preaching that they "had been with Jesus". To be with the Lord, to have experience of Him, meant that one would witness to Him; such is the true experience of Him that it is axiomatic that it issues in witness. All who have truly known the Lord will witness to Him. And if we don't...do we know Him, have we "been with" Him...?

- Rom. 10:9,10 stresses that belief *and* confession are necessary for salvation. This may be one of the many links between Romans and John's gospel, in that Jn. 12:42 speaks of those who believed but wouldn't confess. Confession, a public showing forth of our belief, is vital if we are to be saved. It's perhaps worth noting that baptisms tend often to be attended largely by believers, and be performed indoors, e.g. in a bath at someone's home, or a church hall. It's quite possible to learn the Gospel, be baptized- and nobody out in this world ever know. It's down to us to ensure this isn't true in our case.

- The righteous man is like " a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth (in this work of preaching?) shall prosper" (Ps. 1:3). These words are quoted in Rev. 22:2 concerning our holding out of life to the mortal population at the Lord's return. The conclusion? If we witness now we are living the Kingdom life now, and therefore we will be perpetuated in that time. The fact we teach others to do righteousness will therefore be a factor in our acceptance (Mt. 5:19); although not the only one. There is a connection between us 'freely giving' the Gospel now (Mt. 10:8), and being given 'freely given' salvation at the last day (Rom. 8:32; Rev. 21:6). The freeness of God's gift to us should be reflected in a free spirited giving out of the Gospel to others.

- Israel were constituted a Kingdom of priests; a whole nation who would preach forth God's ways to those about them. And this designation and commission is applied now to the new Israel (1 Pet. 2:5,9 cp. Ex. 20:5). Males who could not procreate were barred from the congregation (Dt. 23:1), possibly in prototype of how spiritual procreation was to be a vital characteristic of the future Israel. Israel were seen by the Lord as the tree by the roadside (Mt. 21:19), whose fruit should have been for all that passed by (Dt. 23:24). But because there was not even the glimmer of this kind of giving of fruit, they were condemned by the Lord.

- Consider the following passages in the Spirit's biography of Paul: " Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred within him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry" and therefore he preached to them (Acts 17:16). In Corinth, " Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ" (Acts 18:5). " Now, behold, I go

bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem" (Acts 20:22) is difficult to divorce from the previous passages. It may be that the Holy Spirit confirmed the desire of Paul's own spirit; but I am tempted to read this as yet one more example of where he felt overwhelmingly compelled to witness. " Paul purposed in the spirit...to go to Jerusalem, saying, after I have been there, I must also see Rome" (Acts 19:21). It was as if his own conscience, developed within him by the word and his experience of the Lord Jesus, compelled him to take the Gospel right to the ends of his world. His ambition for Spain, at a time when most men scarcely travelled 100km. from their birthplace, is just superb (Rom. 15:24,28). Indeed, " Woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). It may be that in these words Paul is alluding to how the High Priest had to have bells so that " his sound may be heard...that he die not" (Ex. 28:35; this idea of the sound being heard is picked up in Ps. 19 concerning the spread of the Gospel). Whatever the predestined and foreknown purpose of God with Paul as a preacher may have been, the fact still stands that the record emphasises the quite natural spirit of compulsion to preach which arose within him. Paul himself seems to have foreseen the tendency to leave the work of preaching to a few 'specialists' within the ecclesia. He tells *every and any* believer who is invited out to lunch with a non-believer to eat what is set before them; and yet in this piece of advice Paul is quoting the Lord's command to His seventy preachers (1 Cor. 10:27 cp. Lk. 10:8). Surely Paul's point was: 'You're all preachers, just like those seventy specially commissioned preachers, and in your everyday contact with the world, you too have a special commission to preach as they did'.

- We are the salt of the earth (Mt. 5:13). Salt inevitably affects, by reason of *what it is*, whatever is next to it. We are lights in a dark world. Lights give light. If the salt doesn't have the influence of salt, it is thrown away. Our poor recent record of preaching by personal contact is very worrying when seen in this light. We have hidden behind leaflets and press adverts and giving money. But if we aren't the salt, if we don't show *our* light in our little world; are we in fact the salt or the light of the earth? This unconscious spirituality, this natural witnessing, is the essential reflection of our experience of the Lord Jesus. He didn't say 'Do good works so that men may see the light'. He said " *let your light shine*" - and then men will see your good works and glorify the Father. "We preach...Christ Jesus as Lord...seeing it is God...who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:5,6 RV). Because the light was shone to us, we reflect it to others.

- Paul puts the same principle another way when he says that we're all mirrors (2 Cor. 3:18 RV). A mirror by its very nature, because of what it is, reflects the light which falls upon it to others. If we have *really* seen the light of the Lord Jesus Christ, we will *inevitably* reflect it to others. Many of the Lord's parables portray the [preaching of] the Gospel of the Kingdom of God as a kind of secret force: treasure hidden in a field, the tiniest seed in the garden, wheat growing among weeds, a pinch of yeast worked into dough, salt on meat...these are all images of something which works from within, changing other people in an ongoing, regular manner.

- The word of God comes down like the rain and brings forth fruit in we who respond, *so that* there may be more seed produced for the *next* harvest, as a result of the fruit brought forth in us (Is. 55:10 RV). If we are properly responding to the word, we will be playing our part in bringing forth the next generation of harvest. Joseph - Jesus bought / redeemed the people *so that* they might go forth and sow the seed (cp. the Gospel; Gen. 47:23 cp. 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:19). Likewise Jesus 'found' Philip, and he in his witnessing 'found' Nathanael (Jn. 1:43,45). Our finding of men for the Lord reflects His finding of us.

- The Lord Jesus through the cross can “present you holy and unblameable and unreprovable”. Yet by our preaching we “may present every man perfect in Christ” (Col. 1:22,28). The connection is clear: because we are being presented perfect in Christ through belief and baptism, we preach the opportunity of this experience to others. Likewise the Law often stressed that on account of Israel’s experience of being redeemed from Egypt, they were to witness a similar grace to their neighbours and to their brethren.

- *Whoever* drinks of the water of life will have *within* them a spring that also gives eternal life (Jn. 4:15). The purpose of a spring is to give water to men. Experiencing the Lord's words and salvation *inevitably* leads to us doing likewise to others, springing from somewhere deep within. This was in fact one of the first things God promised Abraham when He first instituted the new covenant: " I will bless thee (i.e. with forgiveness and salvation in the Kingdom)...and *thou* shalt be a blessing" , in that we his seed in Christ would bring this same blessing to men of all nations by our witness (Gen. 12:2,3). When the Lord offered salvation to the woman at the well, He spoke of how it would be a spring of life going out from her. She wanted it, but apparently just for herself. Therefore when she asked to be given such a spring, the Lord replied by asking her to bring her husband to hear His words (Jn. 4:15,16). Surely He was saying: 'If you want this great salvation for yourself, you've got to be willing to share it with others, no matter how embarrassing this may be for you'. In a similar figure, the Bible begins with the tree of the lives [Heb.], and concludes with men eating of the tree and there appearing a forest of trees-of-life. Our experience of salvation will be the basis of our witness to men in the Millennium, just as it should be now. On the basis of our experience of reconciliation with God, we have been given “the ministry of reconciliation”, in that God “hath put in us [Gk. settled deep within us] the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18,19) . That which is deeply internal issues in an outward witness. For this reason all discussion of how that outward witness should be made is somewhat irrelevant- the witness naturally springs from deep within. If it doesn't, we have to ask whether we have anything much deep within.

- Paul seems to have taught as part of the Gospel that the Lord expects those who come to Him to share that good news with others. Preaching the message isn't an option- it's part of the package of conversion which we accept. It has been argued that the very style and content of the four Gospels is in order to encourage the hearers / readers of the Gospel to be themselves evangelistic. Hence the records all conclude, in one way or another, with the great commission to go and spread the message. The Gospels are persuasively written, aiming for conversion, and concluding with an appeal for baptism- they are transcripts of the early preaching of the Gospel.

- The Lord realised that the necessity of personal witness would be unwelcome by His followers. But He saw it is part of the inevitable cross which we must each take up: " *Whosoever* (these words aren't just meant for those who specialise in preaching) will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross...whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's (i.e. the sake of preaching the Gospel), the same shall save it...whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words...of him shall the Son of man be ashamed" (Mk. 8:34-38). Witnessing is essential. But it involves a denial of self and a decided will; as that moment of actually taking up the cross required a conscious willing decision by the Lord. If only we could see the *tragedy* of all these people going, suicidally, to an eternal grave...when we have the way of escape to show them. Merely being embarrassed by their possible reaction to us is no real excuse for not having a heart that bleeds for their need. In encouraging His preachers to courageous witness, the Lord reminded them that there

is nothing hid that will not be revealed at the judgment (Mt. 10:26). Then, it will be openly apparent to all. And so in who we are there must be the unhideable, inextinguishable flame of testimony. The Lord didn't shout out in the streets who He was. He wished His followers to follow Him in *showing* the message to the world just as He did- in who He was (Mt. 12:18).

The basic thesis outlined above is not only Biblical. It's demonstrated by a statistical analysis of the growth of Christianity in recent years. It is clear from this too that *generally*, the method of preaching God prefers to use is *personal preaching* by the believer; not leaflets, press adverts, Bible exhibitions etc. The only times when it seems He does widely work through these methods are when His Gospel is being pioneered in a new country. In this case, of course, there are no believers to preach the Gospel by personal contact. In country after country throughout Africa, Eastern Europe and indeed the whole world, we have had the same experience: the Gospel was introduced by leaflets or press adverts. There was a good response, and believers were baptized. Once there were a reasonable number of converts, the response to the leaflets and press adverts strangely dropped off, often for no evident reason. *We kept on* advertising etc., but with far less response. This has happened so consistently that it seems we are seeing God's principles in operation. Clearly He prefers to work through personal witnessing rather than the more indirect methods of leaflets etc.; not that I am in any way decrying these things in themselves. The Lord could've explained the Gospel and His requirements directly to Saul; but He chose instead to send Saul to Ananias, to work through some human mechanism on earth (Acts 9:6). In many Western churches, over 90% of converts have been from personal contact or the children of believers- rather than from witness to those totally in darkness. It could be asked whether the power of this statistic has really registered with us. Surely God is telling us something: He doesn't expect us to hide behind the excuse that we are preaching because we left a leaflet on a bus. He wants us to not only do that sort of thing, but more importantly to deeply believe His Gospel, and thereby to naturally, effortlessly tell it forth to others.

Preaching has to be personal. For God is all about the salvation of persons; and He hungers for intimacy with her persons whom He has created. We each make an individual witness, and that witness is intended by God to be uniquely suitable for certain people within our sphere of contact. Jeremiah is an example of how our witness to others should be framed in the language of our own experiences, thus giving it credibility. He had just been in the dungeon, where he had sunk down in the mud (Jer. 38:6). But he soon afterwards appeals to Zedekiah to have the courage to do what God wants and not what his princes think is humanly smarter. Metaphorically, Jeremiah says, it was Zedekiah whose "feet are sunk in the mire" (Jer. 38:22). 'Spiritually, you're like I was physically', was what Jeremiah was saying. And because he personalized his message in this way, it became all the more credible. Thus a blind brother can speak about our spiritual blindness with an obvious appropriacy and credibility which the sighted lack. This is why all witness simply has to be personal-impersonal handing out of tracts or hiding behind web sites on the internet isn't the essentially personal witness which God intended.

### ***Do We Really Believe?***

And so I come to my fundamental point. I'm not saying 'Let us strive the more earnestly, brethren, to preach, we really ought to do more of it, you know'. I'm not saying this, because it would be a waste of time. No human words can influence any of us to preach, *really* preach as God intends us to. What I'm saying is that preaching to others is a natural,

automatic, spontaneous response to belief of the Gospel, and therefore we can use an analysis of our attitude to preaching as a powerful tool for self-examination as to whether we *really* believe. What I'm saying is that it's quite possible to 'believe' on a surface level, but not *really* believe. It's easy enough to reflect such surface level 'belief' in some kind of tokenistic preaching- e.g. sheepishly saying "I've got a friend at church who..." , or even in giving out leaflets or going on a preaching campaign (not that in themselves there's anything wrong with doing these things). As I've said, *such* kind of preaching isn't *necessarily* a proof of our belief. It's easy to have the attitude that because we assist in certain physical things connected with (e.g.) the correspondence course, or we give a leaflet to the JW who calls, that we are thereby discharging our responsibility to preach <sup>(3)</sup>. But if we *really* believe the Gospel, we'll tell it forth naturally, the sense of discharging responsibility just won't be there. We won't have to psych ourselves up to preach; we'll artlessly show it forth in our lives, and talk about it, talk... .

And if we don't do this, *do we believe*? Remember how the record parallels not confessing with not believing in Jn. 12:42. We were called and converted *so that* we might give light to others. We were "put in trust with the Gospel" , literally 'en-faithed' with it, God gave it to us in faith that we would preach it (1 Thess. 2:4). Paul uses a strong and emphatic Greek construction in 1 Tim. 1:11 when speaking of how the Gospel was "committed to my trust". The Greek means 'to me, myself, I, personally'. Those raised 'knowing the truth' should pause and reflect whether the wonder of the fact they have been given the Gospel is registering with them as it might. God believes in us; this is why He has graciously called us to know His Truth. Thus when Paul writes in 1 Tim. 1:14 about his own conversion: "The grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus", he perhaps means that it was the love and faith of Christ in him, Paul, that was the basis of his being converted by the Lord Jesus.

Reflect a while on what is really being taught in Jn. 2:23-25: "Many *believed* on his name, beholding his signs which he did. But Jesus did not *trust* [s.w. 'believed'] himself unto them, for that he knew all men, and because he needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for he knew what was in man". When a person trusts / believes in the Lord properly, unlike those who believed only a surface level, then the Lord trusts Himself unto them. He believes in them as they have believed in Him. Paul often speaks of how the Lord has trusted / committed [s.w.] the preaching of the Gospel unto him (1 Cor. 9:17; Gal. 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:11; Tit. 1:3). We believe, and therefore we speak forth the Gospel (2 Cor. 4:13). Perceive the parallels within the Jn. 2:23-25 passage:

He knew all men = He knew what was in man

Jesus did not *trust* [s.w. 'believed'] himself unto them = because he needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man

If we truly believe in Jesus, He believes in us, and we therefore bear witness concerning Him. If we don't truly believe in Him, He will not commit / trust / believe Himself unto us. But by grace we have truly believed. It is therefore axiomatic that we bear witness of Him.

God has therefore trusted us with the job of preaching His Gospel. That He trusts us, believes in us, is a surpassing thought. If you trust someone completely with a task, to the point it is clear that now if they don't do it, it won't be done, they often respond with a maturity and zest which wouldn't be seen if they merely were given partial responsibility [children are a

good example of this]. And so God has done with us. Of Abraham God said: “I have known him, *to the end that* he may command his household and his children after him” (Gen. 18:19 RV). The knowledge of God was not so that he could enjoy it alone; it was given to him as it is given to us *to the end that* we might share it with others. We are compared to a candle that is lit (cp. our baptism) *so that* it may give light to others (Lk. 8:16; 11:33); the woman (the Lord Jesus) lights a candle (He uses believers) to find his lost coin (through our efforts) (Lk. 15:8; this must be seen in the context of the other two references in Luke to lighting a candle). If we don't give light (God's word, Ps. 119:105) to others, we are a candle under a bucket, and therefore we will lose our faith, the flame will go out. So it's hard not to conclude that if we don't naturally give the light to others, we don't believe. The very nature of a lit candle is that it gives light; *all* candles do this, not just some.

The Lord wants to use us as His candle, and He will arrange situations in life to enable this. The family at Bethany may have been an example of this. The Jews had commanded “that if any man knew where he was, he should shew it” (Jn. 11:57). And “Jesus *therefore...came to Bethany*” (Jn. 12:1 RV). He purposefully attracted attention to His connection with the Bethany home. And so it was that “much people of the Jews learned that he was there”(Jn. 12:9), and the context makes it clear that this was a source of witness to them (Jn. 12:10,11). The Lord sought to expose their secret discipleship, to take the bucket off their candle. And He will do likewise with us. Jonah is of course the great example. He refused to “cry” the message of repentance to Nineveh; he wanted to be an incognito prophet. But an incognito prophet is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. So the Lord brought about a situation in which he desperately “cried” to God; and then told him to go and “cry” to Nineveh. The very same Hebrew words are used about his crying to God and his crying / proclamation to Nineveh (Jonah 1:2; 2:2; 3:2,4). Jonah was forced by circumstance to share his relationship with God with the world around him which he despised.

Naaman is another example. He wanted to be a secret believer, even bowing down to Rimmon to keep his boss happy. God seems to have allowed this, but He worked in Naaman's life, I suggest, so that his faith was no longer secret. For soon after his conversion, his master got the hunch that one of his courtiers was “for the king of Israel” (2 Kings 6:11). And Naaman would have been the obvious suspect, as he had gone to Israel and been cured of his leprosy by an Israeli prophet. We then read that the army of Syria came against Elisha the prophet and sought to surround him in order to capture him. They were then judged by God. Could it really be so that Naaman would have led that army? Surely the situation arose so as to force Naaman to resign the job. Thus God worked to stop him being a secret believer, and to remove him from a position where he could not live with a free conscience before the Father. And so God will do in our lives- if we respond.

I know what I'm saying won't go down well. As a community, we have to admit that generally our members are hopelessly shy to breathe a word to the man next to them about the good news of Christ and His cross. But if we don't tell others the Gospel, *do we believe it...?* Could it be that for all our Biblical research and struggles for purity, our attitude to witnessing shows that many of us don't actually *believe* the *basic Gospel* very deeply at all? Confession (preaching of the Gospel) is made *unto salvation* (Rom. 10:9); there is a connection between our preaching and salvation, because salvation depends upon faith; and if we believe, if we have drunk the living water, it will spring up in us and bubble over to others. Because David did not conceal God's mercy and truth [a phrase often referring to the Gospel covenant to Abraham] from others, therefore God would not conceal His mercy and truth from David (Ps. 40:10,11). The farmer who sows seed is likened to every preacher of

the Gospel; and yet his own life and the lives of others depends upon the sowing of the seed. This is how vital preaching is; it isn't the only virtue which the redeemed believer is expected to demonstrate, but it is one of them.

### Natural Growth

Finally, these thoughts about the spontaneity of the Gospel lead us to a more general principle. It isn't only preaching that comes naturally to the serious believer. As brothers and sisters have a natural affinity to each other, so true Christian fellowship is something which naturally occurs. Thus a group of new converts can meet at a Bible School for the first time and *naturally* gel with each other. There's no need to tell them to be close to each other. They are brothers and sisters, and they know it, and they act like it quite naturally. We are all members of the same body, and therefore there is a natural sympathy between us, e.g. a natural sense of hurt when one part of the body suffers (1 Cor. 12:26). The body grows together, it edifies itself in love (Eph. 4:16). Growth is a natural process, it doesn't really occur through being pulled and stretched by the words of another brother in an article or Bible talk. Yet on the other hand, we shouldn't feel that OK, we are in Christ now, we are growing, we can just sit back and watch the changes in our personality. It won't happen like this.

The power of growth comes from two related ways. Firstly, the word of God is the power by which we were conceived, and it is this which will give us that power of new birth inside us (1 Pet. 1:23; James 1:18). Regular, systematic, *personal* Bible study is the absolute key; not just hearing the words of another brother at a Bible address and intellectually assenting, more or less, to the truth of what he's said; but *searching* the scriptures for ourselves; "desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow *thereby*" (1 Pet. 2:2). It is the word of the Gospel that brings forth fruit in us (Col. 1:6). The seed is the word (Lk. 8:11), and it springs up in the new convert, the sower (the preacher) knows not how (Mk. 4:27). God gives the growth, not the brethren who preach or do pastoral work (1 Cor. 3:6). This is true comfort for those who worry that because a believer is in isolation, away from contact with other believers, they will find the way to the Kingdom hard. If the word is allowed to be in us, it will spring up and enable fruit to grow, we know not how. Thus there is a parallel drawn in Acts between the growth of the word and that of the church (6:7 Gk.; 12:24; 19:20).

Secondly, the dynamic for spiritual growth is related to having the spirit / mind / disposition of Christ (Col. 1:11 cp. Eph. 3:16). It is the influence of Christ that makes us grow and become more loving and spiritual (Col. 2:19; 1 Thess. 3:12). His spirit brings forth love, patience etc. (Gal. 5:22; Eph. 5:9). Our connection with Him brings forth fruit (Jn. 15:5; Rom. 7:4). If we concentrate our thinking upon Him, on appreciating the moral glory of His character, we will be changed into that same image by the possession of His spirit / mind (2 Cor. 3:18 RV). Truly do we sing to Him: "Thy fellowship shall make me strong". On the cross, He declared God's character *so that* His love might be in us (Jn. 17:26). If we begin to see the height of His righteousness, to appreciate albeit from afar the beauty of His perfection, we will begin to attain His spirit, the radiating glory of His face will rub off on us, more and more. So growth will come naturally if the word, the *logos* of Christ is in us. We won't need to be told how to live, we won't need to agonise so much over our spiritual inabilities. The changes will come, naturally and irresistibly- if we give the word of the risen Lord the place it should have in our hearts.

## Notes

(1) The aim of our fulfilling the great commission is above all to "make disciples", to get more followers behind Jesus, more learners of Him, a greater bride for Him. Gramatically in Mt. 28:19-20, *mathateusate* ("make disciples") is the main verb, and *poreuthentes* ("while going"), *baptizontes* ("baptizing"), and *didaskontes* ("teaching") are subsidiary participles. In other words, the focus of our work must be upon making disciples for Christ, on thereby bringing about His glory. All the baptizing and teaching which we do is subsidiary to this aim, and they can therefore never be ends in themselves.

(2) See 4-1 *Humility And Preaching*.

(3) This attitude seems to have arisen from a wrong emphasis being placed on the passages in Ezekiel which state that the duty of the prophet was to warn Israel of impending judgment, and if they did that, they would be free of their responsibility. The impression is given that the prophets therefore said "Look out Israel, judgment day is coming!" and then walked away breathing a sigh of relief that they wouldn't be condemned themselves for failing in their duty. But the purpose of the prophets was to plead with Israel to repent, to describe the judgments for sin with the earnest hope that this would bring about repentance among those who heard. If they didn't do *this* they would be condemned. The Lord says that we are *all* the watchers of the door of the house of the ecclesia (Mk. 13:34,35; Lk. 12:39,40), as the prophets were the watchmen over the city of Zion, God's Old Testament ecclesia. We *all* therefore have a responsibility to guide and warn the ecclesia, not just to scrape out of condemnation for ourselves, but from a genuine, earnest desire to help others to the Kingdom road.

## 1.3 The Focused Life

The ultimate pattern for mission is in God Himself. His Name, YHWH, means 'I will be who I will be / am who I am'. And the declaration of His Name is followed by statements of how He 'will be' grace, love, justice, judgment etc. (Ex. 34:5-7). He will work out His purpose of glorifying the characteristics of His Name. If we align ourselves with this aim of glorifying God's Name, then our lives become focused, our aims and goals are clearer. Our baptism into the Name means that His mission, His restless, 24/7 working towards the goal of His glory filling the earth, becomes ours.

Various images are used in the Bible to bring home to us our sense of purpose. We are to see ourselves as soldiers disciplining ourselves for action, fighting in the only ultimately worthy cause with victory in sight; as slaves of a great Master; as athletes running a race. "Every man that strives in the games is temperate in all things. Now they do it to receive a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I [Paul] therefore so run, as not uncertainly; so fight I, as not beating the air" (1 Cor. 9:25,26). Paul saw himself as very much in reality, and not just shadowing boxing. Why does he bother saying this- that he boxes not as one who merely beats the air? Surely because he perceived that many people don't grasp the 'reality' of life. They think it's all some virtual game, online rather than real life. But Paul saw the real issues of eternal life and eternal death very clearly. Those who responded to his preaching and teaching really would live forever; those who rejected it or fell away from it would ultimately remain eternally dead. Paul perceived that we are dealing with the ultimate of all realities: the love of God, His feelings for us, His mission and purpose for us, how every moment the King

of the Cosmos is yearning for us, the life eternal, the sense of the future men might miss. And so Paul fought for it all, not uncertainly, and not as one who feels only half in reality. It was his life. "For me to live is Christ" was how he summed it up (Phil. 1:21). The early church likewise had "a single purpose" (Acts 2:46 ISV). They were exhorted "that with steadfast purpose they would cleave unto the Lord" (Acts 11:23). And right back at the foundation of God's Israel, they were taught: "You shall not take up the name of the Lord your God for unreality" (Ex. 20:7) (1). They were to see the ultimate reality required of those who bear God's Name.

### **"In Christ"**

But from where do we get our specific mission? Who is our pattern? Paul takes a prophecy concerning how Christ personally would be the light of the whole world (Is. 49:6), and applies it to himself in explanation of why he was devoted to being a light to the whole world *himself* (Acts 13:47- although 26:23 applies it to Jesus personally). Paul even says that this prophecy of Christ as the light of the world was a *commandment* to him; all that is true of the Lord Jesus likewise becomes binding upon us, because we are *in* Him. Note that Paul says that God has commanded *us* to witness; it wasn't that Paul was a special case, and God especially applied Isaiah's words concerning Christ as light of the Gentiles to Paul. They apply to *us*, to all who are in Christ. Because everything said about Christ is a commandment to all of us who are in Him. What would Jesus do, who would He be, if He lived in your street, did your job, was married to your partner, mixed with the guys *you* mix with? The answer to that is our mission. In this sense He has in this world no arms or legs or face than us. Paul was a placarding of Christ crucified before the Galatians (Gal. 3:1 Gk.); to the Corinthians he was "the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:10 RSV). There is a prophecy of the Lord Jesus preaching: "How beautiful are the feet of *him* that preaches the Gospel" (Nah. 1:15); but it is quoted in Rom. 10:15 with a subtle change of pronoun: "How beautiful are the feet of *them* that preach". We are the Lord Jesus to this world, because we are brethren in Him.

### **Paul: Working Model**

Paul felt very clearly his sense of mission. He speaks in Troas of how "none of these things move [deflect] me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy" (Acts 20:24). Some years later at the end of his life he could write that "I have finished my course" (2 Tim. 4:7). He didn't let anything distract him- and our age perhaps more than any other is so full of distractions. Paul clearly had a purpose- to spread the Gospel in a semi circle around the Roman empire (2 Cor. 10:15), beginning from Jerusalem, through Asia and Italy, then Spain (Rom. 15:19), North Africa and back to Jerusalem. Speaking of how he planned his journeys, he comments in 2 Cor. 1:17: "When I therefore was thus minded, did I use lightness? or the things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yes yes, and no no?". Again we see a definite purpose, not the kind of human intention which vacillates between yes and no; for this is inimical to the person who has true purpose. The mission in our minds, the path ever before us, makes our decision making so much clearer than it is for those who dither over which flavour coffee to have tonight... Truly could Paul say at the end: "But you have followed my teaching, my conduct, and my purpose in life; you have observed my faith, my patience, my love, my endurance, my persecutions, and my sufferings" (2 Tim. 3:10,11). And he is set up as a model for each of us (1 Tim. 1:16).

### **Practical Implications**

The focused life is far simpler to live than the selfish, unfocussed life. Which school for our kids? The one which will be best for them spiritually. Which music to listen to? The type which helps me be more spiritually minded. How much time to spend online? Enough for communication and gathering needed facts, or mindlessly sitting on Facebook and drifting around the net? How to react when the phone rings at 03:30 a.m. and wakes us up? The focused mind will stumble out of bed towards it eager for the opportunity which the call may give to glorify the Name. The mission-less mind will moan and groan about whoever is daring to disturb their sleep. Spend 20 minutes discussing which chocolate is more tasty, or be so focused on the Lord's work that what tickles which taste buds becomes an irrelevancy? What to do as we have to wait outside an office for an appointment for 10 minutes? The focused mind sees a great opportunity to read some verses from a pocket Bible, to pray. The unfocused person will instead fret under the irritation of having 'nothing to do'. They will wonder whatever to do on a rainy Sunday afternoon; the focused mind will scarcely notice the weather. How to spend our retirement? Eagerly move up a gear in our service of God... or fritter away golden years? What to do with some unexpected money- go out for a meal, or give it to the Lord's service? Which jacket to buy- the nice expensive one, or the cheaper one and use the difference for the Lord? In all these questions, the focused believer, the disciplined mind, will instinctively and quickly choose correctly. Every time.

Anyone with a true sense of mission will at times meet obstructions in their path Moses is a classic example. His true greatness, like ours, is seen when we don't permit the hour of defeat to divert us from the path or to permanently drown us in despair. Those who let this happen lack a sense of mission. And life is littered with them, from alcoholics to the billions of empty minds sitting watching TV or the internet tonight in a state of passive depression. Luke's Gospel describes the Lord as ever "going up to Jerusalem"- even when He was actually travelling *away* from Jerusalem geographically. Luke clearly perceived the way that the Lord's face was set to go to Jerusalem and die there. Any travelling the other way was only in order to ultimately get there. When He finally exhaled in the words "It is finished", He knew that He had achieved what He had always been travelling towards. The sense of being aligned with the Father's purpose was what inspired the Lord at perhaps His lowest point: "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name... For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world- to bear witness to the truth." (Jn. 12:27,28; 18:37 ESV). We are asked to *take up* His cross; a highly conscious act which demands our 100% commitment. If it doesn't, the invitation, the words used, have no meaning. Having a sense of mission, knowing we have given our lives to achieving what God wants and is behind, enables us to see all setbacks in a positive light. The breakup of personal relationships, financial crises, illness, lack of response in one field, betrayal, rejection, incomprehensibly unreasonable attitudes of others against us... all these things "work together for good" in the final picture. Thus Paul reflected: "the things that have happened to me have really helped the progress of the gospel" (Phil. 1:12). If we are truly focused on God's agenda, knowing we have His backing, then all setbacks, even our death itself, will be understood by us as all for the ultimate advancement of the aims we are working towards. It's a battle, a war, a campaign, a race, which we can't ultimately lose. With God on our side, we have to win. And we shall.

Paul urged Timothy to not get sidetracked- especially by those "occupying themselves with myths and endless genealogies. These things promote controversies rather than God's ongoing purpose" (1 Tim. 1:4 ISV). Living as we do at a time of information explosion, we can likewise be distracted by peripheral details and thus deflected from the essence of our

mission in this world. She said that, we suspect from website X that Y probably believes Z... and before we know it, our spare evening, our hours, our days, are gone. Gone forever. We each have an individual set of opportunities, potentials, divine intentions for our service, some uniquely personal way in which we are to fulfil the overall mission of God. Heb. 12:1 could imply that before each of us an individualized racetrack is set, and we are to run that race having laid aside every distraction. Ask God to reveal to you His intentions and specific plans for you.

The parable of the talents is naturally relevant to our theme. Note how valuable just one talent was- equivalent to 20 years earnings of a working man (2). This seems to me to be an element of unreality in the story, that flags up a lesson. The point is, we have been entrusted with a *huge* amount. We tend to see it as something ordinary; that we have a faith, a denomination, just like many others do. But the personal, individualized gift which we have been given is simply *huge*. Imagine if you were given say \$1 million to use for the Lord's service. You'd be quite busy working out how to spend it all. But the point is, we have each been given *far more* than this. The parable has specific application to our witness; for it was just prior to the Lord's departure that He gave us the great preaching commission, corresponding to how in the parable, the Master leaves His servants but just beforehand, gives His servants the talents to go and trade with. Hence the one talent man is criticized for not having lent the talent on usury, a practice which Jews could only practice with Gentiles. He should've taken his talent, the riches of the Gospel, to the Gentiles. And yet I'd suggest that 21st century disciples aren't one talent people. We have been given *so much*- not least literacy and having the Bible in our own native languages.

Time and again, David takes comfort that "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me" (Ps. 138:8). God will fulfill His purpose for us- if we align ourselves with it, and thus see in everything that happens in our lives *His* will being forwarded. We can choose to not align ourselves with His will. The Pharisees rejected the purpose of God against themselves by not being baptized by John (Lk. 7:30 ESV). His will is not that we should sit around doing Sudoku, watching movies, bantering on the internet, trying to get as much money as possible to finance our nice meals, expensive coffees and designer clothes. His will, as expressed in His very Name, is that He 'will be' grace, love, care, justice, salvation, righteousness, all over the world and to every man and woman. If these things are our focus, our mission, our purpose, our passion, our underlying hearthrob, if *His* will is behind *our* will... then everything somehow comes together for us in a dynamic and fulfilling existence, both in this world and in the life eternal. And God *yearns* that we might have a spirit like this: "He yearns jealously over the spirit that He has made to dwell in us" (James 4:5). And be sure that He will be ever working in our lives to try to get us to have this focus.

## Notes

- (1) This is the preferred translation of many Jewish scholars. See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary On The Book Of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997) p. 243.
- (2) William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), p. 879.

## 2. Doctrine Based Preaching

The doctrines of the one faith are of themselves an imperative to preach them. “Paul was constrained by the word” to testify to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:5 RV). As demonstrated in *We're All Preachers*, if we have believed it, we will quite naturally tell it forth to others. In Gal. 1:9 we read the phrase “preach any Gospel”. The Greek word behind that phrase is simply *euaggelizo*- the Gospel. The Gospel is the preaching of it. To know the Gospel is in itself an imperative to preach it. We intend now to analyse some of these doctrines and see in what way they of themselves form an imperative to preach them.

### 2.1 The Bible is God's inspired, infallible word.

Therefore we will read, preach and study it with a zest no other piece of writing can command. The wonder of the fact that this book really is the words of God Himself needs repeated meditation. Out of Heaven, Israel heard the voice of God Himself (Dt. 4:36)- a God so infinitely far away, spoke to men. And those words have been recorded. When we read His word, we hear His voice. Thus “Scripture” is put for “God” (Rom. 9:17; Gal. 3:8) and vice versa (Mt. 19:4,5). When we speak and preach God’s word, we are relaying God’s voice to men, and should make appropriate effort to deport ourselves as the ministers of His word and voice- not to mention diligently ensuring that our expression and exposition of His word is correct and not fanciful. We are to speak / preach “as it were oracles of God” (1 Pet. 4:11 Gk.). We are *His voice to men* in our preaching of His word. Because the word is so pure, *therefore* we love it (Ps. 119:140). John Carter rightly observed: “Upon our understanding of what the Bible is, our attitude to it will be determined”<sup>(1)</sup>.

A comparison of 2 Tim. 3:16 with 4:2,3 makes it clear that because the inspired word is profitable:

for doctrine *therefore*

    preach the word; be instant in season, out of season (i.e. whether  
    you naturally feel in the preaching mood or not)

for reproof *therefore*

    reprove

for correction *therefore*

    rebuke

for instruction in righteousness *therefore*

    exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine.

### 2.2 Baptism into Christ is essential for salvation.

So therefore we'll preach the Gospel and try with all our heart to persuade others (including our children) to be baptized. We will realise that the unbaptized world (including apostate 'Christianity') has no hope, and we will treat them accordingly.

### 2.3 The Lord Jesus was our representative.

2 Cor. 5:14-21 urges us to preach the salvation in Christ to all men, because He died for us, as our representative. He died *for* [the sake of] all (5:14,15), He was made sin *for* our sake (5:21); and therefore we are ambassadors *for* [s.w.] His sake (5:20). Because He was our

representative, so we must be His representatives in witnessing Him to the world. This is why the preaching of Acts was consistently motivated by the Lord's death and resurrection for the preachers. Phil. 2:9 in the AV says that the Lord Jesus has a name "above" every name. Yet His Name surely cannot be "above" that of Yahweh. The Greek for "above" is usually translated "for [the sake of]", and I would suggest we read Phil. 2:9 as saying that the name of Jesus is for [the sake of] every name, in that every man and woman was potentially comprehended in His all-representative sacrifice. By baptism into the name of Jesus, they confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. There was and is no other name given under Heaven by which men can be saved; "every name" under the whole Heaven must take on the name of Jesus in baptism. This is why Acts associates His exaltation (Acts 2:33; 5:31) and His new name (Acts 2:21,38; 3:6,16; 4:10,12,18,30; 5:40) with an appeal for men and women to be baptized into that Name. Realising the meaning of the Name of Jesus and the height of His exaltation meant that they realised how "all men" could have their part in a sacrifice which represented "all men". And thus they were motivated to preach to "all men". And thus Paul's whole preaching ministry was a bearing of the Name of Jesus before the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

#### **2.4 Jesus is the Christ**

If we deny Christ, we deny that Jesus is the Christ (1 Jn. 2:22); and yet we deny Christ if we don't preach Him (Mt. 10:33). It follows that if we really believe that Jesus was not just Jesus of Nazareth but the Christ of God, therefore we won't deny Him but will preach Him. This is why there is connection between confessing Jesus as Christ and preaching Him (Jn. 9:22; Acts 18:5; Phil. 2:11). A grasp of who the Lord Jesus really is and the height of His present exaltation will naturally result in a confession of Him to the world, as well as a deep personal obedience to His word and will (Heb. 2:1). "But and if ye should suffer for righteousness sake...fear not their fear, neither be troubled; but sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord: being ready always to give answer to every man" (1 Pet. 3:14). *Knowing and having* Christ as Lord of our hearts will in a practical way enable us to overcome tribulation, and will lead to a suitably humble witness in response.

#### **2.5 The ascended Christ was highly exalted and given the Name above every Name, so that for those who believed this, they would bow in service at the Name of Jesus.**

Peter preached in and about the name of Jesus- this is emphasised (Acts 2:31,38; 3:6,16; 4:10,12,17,18,30; 5:28,40,41; 10:43). The excellence of knowing Him and His character and the wonder of the exalted Name given on His ascension (Phil. 2:9; Rev. 3:12) lead Peter to witness. Because of His exaltation, we confess Jesus as Lord to men, as we later will to God at judgment (Phil. 2:9). According as we confess Him before men, so our judgment will reflect this. Lifting up Jesus as Lord is to be the basis of giving a witness to every man of the hope that lies within us (1 Pet. 3:15 RSV). The knowledge and experience of His exaltation can only be witnessed to; it can't be kept quiet. 3 Jn. 7 refers to how the great preaching commission was obeyed: "For his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing (material help) from the Gentiles" (Gentile believers). For the excellence of knowing His Name they went forth in witness, and moreover were generous spirited, not taking material help to enable this. The knowledge of the Name of itself should inspire to active service: for the sake of the Lord's Name the Ephesians laboured (Rev. 2:3).

Because "all power is given unto me...go ye *therefore* and teach all nations" (Mt. 28:18,19). The great preaching commission is therefore not so much a commandment as an inevitable

corollary of the Lord's exaltation <sup>(2)</sup>. We will not be able to sit passively in the knowledge of the universal extent of His authority / power. We will have to spread the knowledge of it to all (see "Into all the world" for more on this, especially the way 1 Tim. 3:16 alludes to the preaching commission as having already been fulfilled the moment it was uttered, so strong is the imperative).

The greatness of Christ clearly influenced Mark's witness; he began his preachings of the Gospel (of which his Gospel is but a transcript) by quoting Isaiah's words about how a highway was to be prepared "for our God" and applying them to the Lord Jesus, whom he saw as God manifest in flesh. Appreciating height of who Jesus was and is, clearly motivated his preaching. And it should ours too. This is why Paul in the face of every discouragement could preach that "there *is* another king, one Jesus" (Acts 17:7). This was the core of his message; not only that there *will be* a coming King in Jerusalem, but that there *is* right now a King at God's right hand, who demands our total allegiance.

## **2.6 Through His resurrection, forgiveness of sins became possible for all men.**

If we believe this, we will preach it world-wide. He died and rose as the representative of all men; and therefore this good news should be preached to all kinds and all races of people. Men from all nations were in prospect sprinkled by His blood (Is. 52:15); and therefore we must extend the knowledge of this to all men, both in our collective and personal witness. Lk. 24:48 simply comments that the disciples were witnesses to the resurrection and the fact that forgiveness and salvation was therefore potentially available to all men. The parallel records in Mt. and Mk. say that they were told to go out and witness to the resurrection world-wide. Putting them together it is apparent that if we are truly witnesses of the resurrection in our own faith, then part and parcel of this is to take this witness out into our own little worlds.

His resurrection is an imperative to preach. When Peter is asked why he continues preaching when it is forbidden, he responds by saying that he is obeying God's command, in that Christ had been raised (Acts 5:29-32). There was no specific command from God to witness (although there was from Christ); from the structure of Peter's argument he is surely saying that the fact God raised Christ is *de facto* a command from God to witness to it which must be obeyed.

Because the Lord's resurrection enabled forgiveness of sins (1 Cor. 15:17), Peter therefore on this basis makes an appeal for repentance and appropriation of the Lord's work for men through baptism into His death and resurrection (Acts 2:31-38; 3:15,19 "therefore"). Because of the Name the Lord has been given, salvation has been enabled (Acts 4:12 cp. Phil. 2:9). "God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3:26); "the God of our fathers raised up Jesus...exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give (i.e. inspire) repentance to Israel, and forgiveness" (Acts 5:30,31). The fact of the Lord's resurrection has obtained forgiveness of sins for all who will identify themselves with it through baptism into Him; and this is why it is thereby an imperative to preach it, if we believe in it. The disciples were told to go and preach of the resurrection of Christ, and *therefore* of the required responses this entails: repentance, acceptance of forgiveness and baptism (Lk. 24:46). Preaching is motivated by His resurrection; why do it, why fight with beasts at Ephesus, if Christ be not raised...? (1 Cor. 15:14). Baptism saves us "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 3:21 cp. Rom. 4:25; Col. 2:13). We who were dead in sins were "quickened together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5). If we believe in Christ's resurrection, we will therefore repent, confess our sins and

know His forgiveness. Thus believing in His raising and making confession of sin are bracketed together in Rom. 10:9,10, as both being essential in gaining salvation. Because He rose, *therefore* we stop committing sin (1 Cor. 6:14). We can't wilfully sin if we believe in the forgiveness His resurrection has enabled. Men should repent not only because judgment day is coming, but because God has commended repentance to us, He has offered / inspired faith in His forgiveness *by the resurrection of Christ* (Acts 17:30,31 AV mg.). The empty tomb and all the Lord's glorification means for us should therefore inspire personal repentance; as well as of itself being an imperative to go and share this good news with a sinful world, appealing for them to repent and be baptized so that they too might share in the forgiveness enabled for them by the resurrection.

## 2.7 The Lord's blood was shed for our redemption.

Paul had a debt to preach to all men (Rom. 1:14). But a debt implies he had been given something; and it was not from "all men", but rather from Christ. Because the Lord gave us the riches of His self-sacrifice, we thereby are indebted *to Him*; and yet this debt has been transmuted into a debt to preach to all humanity. Our obligation to the Lord for His death for us issues in an obligation to preach that message to others. Consider the implications of 2 Cor. 5:20: "On behalf of Christ, as though God were intreating by us: we beseech you on behalf of Christ: be ye reconciled to God [because] him who knew no sin he made to be a sin [a sin offering?] on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him". *Because* of the cross, the atonement which God wrought in Christ's offering, we beseech men to be reconciled to God. Appreciating the cross and the nature of the atonement should be the basis of our appeal to men. And indeed, such an appeal is *God* appealing to men and women, in that there on the cross "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself". The blood and spittle covered body of the Lord lifted up was and is the appeal, the *beseeching* of God Himself to men. And this is the message that we are honoured to preach on His behalf; we preach the appeal of God through the cross.

Through His death, the veil was torn open, so that we might enter into the Holiest "by the blood of Jesus, by the way which He dedicated for us...through the veil, that is to say [the sacrificing of] his flesh" (Heb. 10:19-22 Gk.). This assumes that the followers of Jesus are already in the position of the High Priest standing in the Holy Place, but through what He opened through the cross, each of us must now go through into the Most Holy. And what was the purpose of the High Priest's entry? To obtain forgiveness *for others, to mediate for them*, just as Jesus did on the cross. His cross compels us to not merely passively contemplate our own salvation, but to go deeper into the very presence of God in our ministry *for others*. Yet the High Priest had to cleanse himself meticulously; access had been limited to the Most Holy as a result of inadequate preparation by some in the past (Lev. 16:1,2). The Lord's death opened up the veil, for us to pass through with the utmost effort made by us in personal sanctification, in order to further God's glory in the salvation of others. We cannot simply refuse to enter, turn away from the torn veil. To do so is to turn away from what the cross has achieved, and to place ourselves outside its scope. We must go forward, go onwards into the presence of God to replicate in essence the Saviour's work, with the awed and humble spirit of the High Priest entering the Holiest on the day of atonement. He would surely have carefully analysed his motives, as to *why* he was passing through that veil, and whether he was sufficiently personally sanctified for the work he was doing. He would have been comforted by knowing that his motives were solely for the glorification of his God in the redemption for his people which he was seeking to obtain.

## **2.8 The judgment seat will come. All the responsible will come before it. The rejected will gnash their teeth in anger against themselves.**

The prophets pronounced judgment to come on behalf of Yahweh, but then their prophecies often change pronouns for a few verses as they plead with Israel, and even Gentile nations (in the case of Isaiah and Jeremiah) to repent, so that these judgments will be averted (after the pattern of Jonah and Nineveh). Their knowledge of judgment to come, their belief that the word they knew and preached would really be fulfilled, led them to a true sense of concern for those who would suffer from it, and they begged them to therefore repent. Zephaniah pronounced judgment, and then diverted to personally appeal to his people (Zeph. 2:1-3). We shouldn't be frightened to preach judgment to come. When God's judgments are manifest in the earth, *then* the nations will come and worship before Him. The harder side of God in slaying Ananias and Sapphira likewise resulted in men and women being converted in their masses. Judgment to come, and our responsibility to that judgment, shows that God is God, and flesh is flesh. It isn't something that can be turned away from. God judged nations in order that men might *know* Him as Yahweh (e.g. Ez. 25:11; 28:22; 30:19). Yahweh is exalted in His judging of men (Is. 5:16). His judgments make His Name / character manifest. "Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy Name?...all nations shall come and worship before thee; *for thy judgments are made manifest*" (Rev. 15:4). A number of OT passages (e.g. Is. 25:3) hint that a remnant of Israel's Arab enemies will actually repent and accept Yahweh's Truth- *after* their experience of His judgments (this is expanded upon in *The Last Days*). The manifestation of His judgments is for the benefit of humans, that they may come to know God and appreciate their own sinfulness. When God finally arises in judgment, "all men shall fear, and shall declare the work of God; for they shall wisely consider of his doing" (Ps. 64:9). God is to be feared and worshipped because of the hour of His judgment (Rev. 14:7); "when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness" (Is. 26:9); for "the Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth" (Ps. 9:16). Thus Israel will know that "I am the LORD" in their final condemnation, as Ezekiel so often prophesied. This clearly associates God's judgment with a learning process. "When the scorner is punished, the simple is made wise" (Prov. 21:11). The repentance of Egypt will be because "the Lord shall smite Egypt...and they shall return to the Lord" (Is. 19:18-22). "Rejoice, O ye nations, with his people" (Dt. 32:43) is quoted in the NT (Rom. 15:10) concerning Gentile response to the Gospel. But they will rejoice and respond *because* of God's terrifying judgment of His enemies outlined in the context (Dt. 32:41-44). In some way, the harder side of God attracts, in that men see in truth that He is God and they but men. It's rather like how the idea of conditional salvation, and that not for everybody but a tiny minority, I find both hard to accept and yet the very thing that clinches the actual reality of 'the truth' we hold. Or like Josiah, whose zealous reforms started with reading "the book of the covenant" (2 Kings 23:2), probably the list of curses which were to come for disobedience (2 Kings 22:19 = Lev. 26:31,32). In this sense Paul used the terror of possible condemnation to persuade men (2 Cor. 5:11). Interestingly, the very words which Jeremiah was tempted not to speak forth, so stern was their message of judgment to come, were what had the power to lead Israel to repentance (Jer. 26:2,3).

Often the prophets break off from predicting coming condemnation to *plead personally* with their hearers to repent [this explains some of the strange shifts of pronouns in the prophets]. Take Micah. Chapter 2 is full of a message of judgment against Israel. And then Micah pleads: "And I said, Hear, I *pray* you, O heads of Jacob...is it not for you to know [the coming of] judgment?" (3:1). Likewise: "For this will I wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked: I will make a wailing like jackals...at Beth-le-Aphrah have I rolled myself in the dust"

(Mic. 1:8,10 RV). Rolling naked in the dust...this was the extent of Micah's passion for the repentance of his audience. He comes to the point where he would fain make sacrifice for Israel, even to the point of offering his firstborn son, so strongly did he take upon himself the sins of his people. But he tells Israel that even this will be no good; they must repent themselves: "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord...shall I come before him with burnt offerings....shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?...what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly...and to humble thyself [in repentance]" (6:6-8). In all this, Micah came close to the spirit of the Father and Son. For the Father would give His firstborn for their sin. Like the Father and Son, he came looking for fruit on the vine of Israel: "my soul desired the firstripe fruit" (Mic. 7:1). This chapter goes on to describe God warning Micah of how Israel would betray him and seek to kill him, despite his love for them, in language evidently prophetic of the Lord's sacrifice (see Harry Whittaker, *Bible Studies* for full documentation of this. It's a fine piece of Biblical scholarship). Thus in Micah's love for Israel, in the depth of his appreciation of the reality of judgment to come, he came to know the spirit of Christ crucified in the depth of his zeal to appeal to them. And we too know with quite some accuracy the judgment to come upon Israel and our fellow man. We cannot know this and knowingly tut tut to each other about it, and do sweet nothing about it.

If we know it, we will appeal to men with conviction, as Isaiah's heart cried out for Moab like a young heifer about to be slaughtered, feeling for them in what would come upon them, and desperately appealing for their repentance. Because the Moabites would cry out and their voice would be heard, "my heart shall cry out for Moab" (Is. 15:4,5,8). As the Lord Jesus is a representative Saviour, we too must feel the judgment that is to come upon others, and in that sense cry out for them as they will cry out. "Therefore shall Moab howl for Moab" (Is. 16:7)-but Isaiah, feeling for them so strongly, also howled for them; "my bowls shall sound like an harp for Moab" (16:11). And he felt the same for his own people, Israel. He repeatedly pronounces "woe" upon them (Is. 3:9; 5:8,11,18,20,21,22; 8:11), and yet in that very context he can exclaim: "Woe is *me*" in chapter 6; he identified with them to the point of also feeling unworthy and under woe [in this clearly typifying the Lord's identity with us]. This level of love inspired Jeremiah to adopt the same attitude (Jer. 48:20,31-34); he too howled for those whose howling in condemnation he prophesied (Jer. 48:31 s.w.). As Moab cried out like a three year old heifer (Jer. 48:34), so did Isaiah for them (Is. 15:5). All this was done by Isaiah and Jeremiah, knowing that Moab hated Israel (Is. 25:10) and were evidently worthy of God's condemnation. But all the same they loved them, in the spirit of Noah witnessing to the mocking world around him. Our knowledge of this world's future means that as we walk the streets and mix with men and women, our heart should cry out for them, no matter how they behave towards us, and there should be a deep seated desire for at least some of them to come to repentance and thereby avoid the judgments to come. Particularly is this true, surely, of the people and land of Israel. It ought to be impossible for us to walk its streets or meet its people without at least desiring to give them a leaflet or say at least something to try to help them see what lies ahead.

And there are many other Biblical examples of this genuine pain at the lostness of this world, and their refusal of the Gospel's grace; not least our Lord Himself weeping over Jerusalem. Think of how He was angry [i.e. frustrated?], "being grieved for the blindness of their hearts" (Mk. 3:5). Are we just indifferent or evenly smugly happy that men are so blind...? Or do we grieve about it to the point of angry frustration? Remember how Moses and Paul would fain have given their eternal life for the conversion of Israel, this is how they felt for them. Reflect too again on Jeremiah; how he responds to the prophecy he has to utter against the hated Philistines by begging the Father to limit these judgments, presumably on account of their

repentance: “O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? Put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still” (Jer. 47:6). Think too of how he almost interrupts a prophecy he is giving to Israel about judgment to come by appealing for them *therefore* to repent (Jer. 4:13,14). Our handling of the prophecies of judgment to come should have a like effect upon us: they should inspire us to an inevitable witness. In the light of the Lord’s coming in judgment, we are thereby ‘charged’ to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:1,2).

## 2.9 The Power Of The Cross

Throughout the NT, there is a clear link between the preaching of the cross, and men and women being converted. There is a power of conversion in the image and message of Christ crucified as our representative. Man cannot remain passive before this. Baptism is an appropriation of His death and resurrection to ourselves. This is why the response to the preaching of the cross in the 1st century was baptism. And the response doesn’t stop there; it continues, in the living of the life of the risen Jesus in our lives after baptism: “For the death that he died, he died unto sin...the life that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Even so reckon ye also yourselves to be dead unto sin but alive unto God [because you are] in Christ [by baptism into Him]” (Rom. 6:10,11 RV). The death He died, the life He lives, are all imperatives to us now. Some were tortured “not accepting redemption” (Heb. 11:) ; by implication they accepted the true redemption of the blood of Christ rather than the pseudo-redemption offered by this world. Again, the redeeming work of Christ is what fortifies men against the fake Kingdom and redemption of the anti-Christ anti-Kingdom of this world. Romans 6 compares baptism to a change of masters. The point has been made that this is a reference to manumission, whereby a ‘redeemer’ gave a ‘ransom’ to a god, which meant that a slave was freed from his master and became a free man, although he was counted as a slave to the god to whom the redeemer had paid the ransom. Indeed, *lutron* , one of the words translated “ransom” with regard to the blood of Christ, has this specific meaning. Deissmann comments: “When anybody heard the Greek word *lutron*, “ransom”, in the first century, it was natural for him to think of the purchase money for manumitting slaves” <sup>(2)</sup> (*Light From The Ancient East* p. 323). C.K. Barret in *The New Testament Background* p. 52 agrees with this.

This means that when we come to understand the atonement, we understand that the price has been paid to free us from slavery into the service of God. We are in the position of a slave who suddenly discovers some gracious benefactor has made the longed for payment of ransom. And so he goes free, but is willingly and eagerly in slavery to the god to whom his redeemer had paid the price. In our case this is none other than the One, Almighty God of Israel. And the ransom is the precious blood of Christ, which thereby compels our willing slavery to the new Master. There are other references to manumission in Gal. 5:1,13 RV: “For freedom did Christ set us free...ye have been called unto freedom” and in the references to our being bought with a price, i.e. the blood of Jesus (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23). And this is the horror of 2 Pet. 2:1- “denying even the Master that bought them [out]”. To turn against their gracious redeemer was the ultimate sick act for a slave freed through manumission. And this is the horror of turning away from the Lord. The death of Christ is thereby a warning to us of the end of sin and therefore the need to change. The death of the covenant victim was to act as a warning for what would happen to those who broke the covenant. Thus “The men who transgressed my covenant...I will make like the calf which they cut in two” (Jer. 34:18 RSV). In the account of a Babylonian covenant it was written: “This head is not just the head of the goat...it is the head of Mati’ilu...If Mati’ilu breaks the oath, then as the head of this goat is cut off...so shall the head of Mati’ilu be cut off” (A. Jeremias, *The Old Testament In The*

*Light Of The Ancient East* Vol. 2 p. 49). Thus the dead animal was seen as a representative of the person who entered the covenant. The death of our Lord, therefore, serves as a reminder to us of the end for sin. We either put sin to death, or we must be put to death for it. Gal. 3:15; Heb. 9:16 and other passages liken the blood of Christ to a covenant; and yet the Greek word used means definitely the last will and testament of a dead man. His blood is therefore an imperative to us to do something; it is His will to us, which we must execute. Thus His death, His blood, which is also a symbol of His life, becomes the imperative to us for our lives and living in this world. Note how blood is a symbol of both life and also death (Gen. 37:26; Num. 35:19,33; Lev. 20:9). Both His death and His life form a covenant / testament / will for us to obey- in both baptism and then in living out the death and life in our daily experience.

The Truth of the Gospel is the only way to come to salvation. All other religions apart from true Christianity will not give salvation nor a relationship with God. Realising this, David pleads with his people to be a missionary nation: “Give thanks unto Yahweh, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people...for great is Yahweh, and greatly to be praised: he also is to be feared above all gods. *For all the gods of the people are idols; but Yahweh made the heavens*” (1 Chron. 15:8,25,26). The more we realise the pathetic fallacy of human religion, indeed the whole and utter vanity of life under this sun, the more we will preach Yahweh’s Truth to a tragically wandering, aimless world.

### ***The Power Thereof...***

Sadly, our community has all too often separated doctrine from practice. We haven’t seen that doctrine is intended to bring forth living and love towards others. The doctrines of the one faith aren’t merely empty theological statements devised as a test of our obedience and understanding. They are as they are to inspire a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ. We have analysed some aspects of doctrine, especially relating to the atonement, to an extent that is inappropriate; and we have virtually divided over these matters. And yet the pseudo-intellectual minutiae over which there has been such strife contain no power to live the new life. It is the basic Gospel itself which has the power to bring forth the new man, after the image of Christ. It is crucial to what I would call ‘true theology’ [defence of first principles, upholding the Truth, call it what you will] that it is not separated from the call of doctrine to be the vital force for the transformation of human life. It seems to me that after 150 years of ‘holding the Truth’ and not really preaching it very much nor living it very deeply, Western Christianity has developed a complex intellectual theological system, which although it is all perfectly true, looking for a praxis. That praxis, I submit, is in the preaching of the Gospel to the poorer world, and within the more desperate parts of Western society. In these places there is plenty of praxis, striving to find an adequate theological / doctrinal underpinning. People don’t know their Bibles, don’t know doctrine, and yet they so want to be taught. So we must teach doctrine- it’s what they so need. But may our preaching be as it were theology on fire, logic on fire; doctrinal truth preached with a genuine passion, not just a cold academic statement of our position. Things *are* coming together, slowly, as Western Christianity starts to see its need to reach out, and is encouraged by the successes the Lord has granted. We are starting to realize that the true theologian cannot avoid the challenge of knowing personally life in its most traumatic forms. It has been truly observed: “theology cannot but have a mission”. Unless ‘theology’, doctrine, defence of it etc., are put at the service of our mission, to save men and women and glorify the Lord, then there can only be an ever increasing gap between the ‘theologians’ and the grass-roots ecclesia, especially in the mission field. The two halves *must* come together, else the new converts will wander, and

the ‘theologians’, shocked at the lack of perception in the converts, will likewise go their own way, into ever increasing abstraction and theory. This was the problem of the scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 23). We can so easily be like them; concerned with doctrinal correctness but devoid of human compassion.

It is worth observing the very simple fact that the New Testament is essentially a missionary document- all the expressions and articulations of doctrine / theology found there are all in the context of the preaching of the Gospel and the immediate problems of men and women in responding to it. This is why we aren’t given a cold statement of faith or catechism in the New Testament, but rather the history of the mission of Christ at its’ first beginning. Ephesians 6 sums up all we have sought to say when it speaks of “the readiness to preach which the Gospel of peace gives”. Those in Corinth who had believed the Gospel had “utterance and knowledge” (1 Cor. 1:5), the Greek “meaning that they spoke out (“utterance”) the Truth because of their strong grasp of its meaning (knowledge)” (Michael Ashton).

The Gospel records are transcripts of the original preaching of the Gospel delivered by e.g. Matthew or John. Thus John wrote down his gospel “*that you may believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the *Son of God*, and that by believing you may have *life in his name*” (Jn. 20:31). His first letter was written, it seems, to the converts which his Gospel preaching had made: “I write these things to *you who believe* in the *name* of the *Son of God* so that you may know that you have eternal *life*” (1 Jn. 5:13). It has even been suggested that John was writing in order to win converts to Christianity from a specific synagogue somewhere in the Diaspora <sup>(3)</sup>. Another suggestion is that John is aiming at converting Samaritans <sup>(4)</sup> or at least, a group of Gentiles perhaps associated with a synagogue. For John records how Samaritans came to Jesus, how “the world” includes them and not just Jews (Jn. 4:42); how physical descent from Abraham is irrelevant now (Jn. 8:33-41); how the true Israelite is anyone who has been born again (Jn. 1:47; 3:3-8), and John stresses that the true sheep of Jesus for whom he died are not just Jews (Jn. 10:16; 11:51,52). John records Jesus’ explaining that He has already done the sowing, but the reaping of the Samaritans / Gentiles is up to us the reapers (Jn. 4:35-38). The lesson is that we must each preach the Gospel to others in a way that is relevant to them, not compromising the basic message, but articulating it in ways that connect with their needs and situation. The New Testament is simply full of encouragement and example in this.

## Notes

- (1) John Carter, *Dare We Believe?*.
- (2) There is some similarity with the way in which the exaltation of Israel / God’s people was so that all men would be witnessed to (Dt. 4:6).
- (3) W.C. van Unnik, “The Purpose of St. John’s Gospel”, *Studia Evangelica* 1 (1959): 410.
- (4) Edwin D. Freed, “Did John Write His Gospel Partly To Win Samaritan Converts?”, *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970): 256.

## 3 “Witnesses unto me”

The Lord commissioned us to go into all the world and make disciples of all; but He describes this in other terms as being witnesses of Him to the world (Mt. 28:19; Acts 1:8). Our witness must fundamentally, therefore, be Christ-centred. The same Greek words are used about treading underfoot the seed of the Gospel, and treading underfoot the Son of God (Lk. 8:5; Heb. 10:29). Our knowledge of Him and living in Him are the essence of our

witness. He is essentially our witness. The great commission is framed in language which picks up on the descriptions of the Lord's own preaching earlier in His ministry. His idea clearly enough is that He will no longer be on earth; therefore His people must be 'Him' to the whole earth:

***The great commission to us***

Make disciples (Mt. 28:19)

Preach the Gospel, teach people  
(Mk. 16:15)

Proclaim repentance (Lk. 24:47)

Forgive and retain sins (Jn. 20:23)

Retained sins (Jn. 8:21-24; 9:41)

Witnessed to others in obedience to  
the great commission (Acts 1:8)

Cast out demons, heal (Mk. 16:16)

***The personal preaching of Jesus***

Made disciples (Mt. 4:18-22; Mk.  
1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-11)

Proclaimed the Gospel (Lk. 4:18),  
taught people (Mk. 6:30)

Proclaimed repentance (Mk. 1:15)

Forgave sins (Mt. 9:1-9; Mk. 2:1-  
12)

Witnessed what he had seen and  
heard (Jn. 3:11)

Cast out demons (Mk. 3:15; 6:7,13),  
healed (Mk. 6:13)

We are all aware, at least theoretically, that at our baptism we became "in Christ". Through that act we obeyed all the Lord's invitations to believe "in Him", or as the Greek means, to believe *into* Him. We believed *into* Him after we heard the Gospel, by baptism (Eph. 1:13). We are now connected with the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; we are treated by God as if we are His Son. His supreme righteousness is counted to us; we have a part in His redemption and salvation, because we are *in* Him (Rom. 3:24). In God's eyes, we became newly created people, because we were *in Christ* by baptism (2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 1:16,17). He made *in Himself* a new man (Eph. 2:15). But do we *appreciate* what it means to be "in Christ" as well as we might? Paul could say that he spoke to his brethren in the face / countenance of Christ (2 Cor. 2:10 Gk.). This is how close we are to Him. We are the face of Christ to this world, and to our brethren; He has no arms or legs or face on this earth apart from us, His body. God "makes His appeal by us" (2 Cor. 5:20 RSV). As we reflect Him, so will be the perception of others of Christ. We are "witnesses [on account of our being] in him" (Acts 5:32 RVmg.). We are His epistle to men and women; His words of expression consist in our lives and characters (2 Cor. 3:3). The *richness* of His character, the wisdom and knowledge of the Father that is in Him, is there for our eternal discovery (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:27; 2:3). We were baptized into His death; He had a cup to drink of (His death) and a baptism to be baptized with (His burial) which we now become united with (Rom. 6:3,4; Col. 2:10-12). As such great attention was focused upon that suffering Son in His death, as such lavish, almost senseless extravagance of care for His burial: *all* of this becomes lavished on us as we become *in* Him. All that is true of Him becomes in some way true of us; as He is the seed of Abraham, so we become; and so the list could go on. Every stage of His being is applicable to we who are in Him:

- At the beginning of the world, when He was yet in the Father's plan, we were in Him (Eph. 1:4)
- Even the language of His virgin birth is applied to us (Jn. 1:13)
- God *sent forth* Christ to save the world, and likewise we are *sent forth* in witness (Gal. 4:4 cp. Mt. 9:38; 22:3; Acts 13:4). The Saviour Himself said that as He was sent into the world, so He sent us (Jn. 17:18).
- As He witnessed in His ministry, so must we (Rom. 2:19 cp. Mt. 4:16)
- As He had a predetermined and foreknown destiny (Acts 2:23), so the same words are used about us who are in Him (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4,5).
- "I will make an everlasting covenant with you", plural (Is. 55:3) is quoted about Jesus personally in Acts 13:34; and yet the covenant applies to us too.
- As He will rule the world with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9) and brake the nations to powder at His return (Dan. 2:44), so will each of those in Him (Rev. 2:27). And notice how Ps. 2:1,2, a prophecy about opposition to Jesus personally, is appropriated to those who preach Him, because they are in Him (Acts 4:25,26).
- As He witnessed before Pilate, so must we witness (1 Tim. 6:12,13)
- As He prayed for those who despitefully used Him, and blessed and cursed not as the thieves did, so must we (Mt. 5:44; 1 Pet. 3:3)
- Baptism commits us to a life of sharing His death and resurrection. When John fell at the Lord's feet "as dead", the Lord responded by saying: 'I too *was dead*, but no more; I'm alive for evermore, and as I died with you and for you, so I live with you and for you, and you do the same for me' (Rev. 1:17,18).
- There are times when Paul uses the word "Christ" when we'd have expected him to use the word "church"- e.g. "Is Christ divided?... as the body is one... so also is Christ" (1 Cor. 1:13; 12:12). This synecdoche serves to demonstrate the intense unity between Christ and His people- we really are Him to this world.
- 'Christ' is simply the Greek form of 'Messiah'. We suffer as 'Christians', Peter says. We are in that sense Messiah, and as Messiah was a suffering Messiah, so we must bear our part in His sufferings. This would have been a radical thing for the first century Palestinian Jewish mind; to accept that by conversion to 'Christ-ianity', they became as it were Christ.
- The description of the believer as a "living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1) alludes to the scapegoat, the only living sacrifice, which was a type of the risen Lord (Lev. 16:10 LXX = Acts 1:3). As the Lord ran free in His resurrection, bearing away the sins of men, so we who are in Him and preach that salvation can do the same. As Christ bore away our iniquities (Is. 53:11), so "we then that are strong ought to bear the iniquities of the weak" (Rom. 15:1).
- We died, rose and in a spiritual sense even *ascended* with Him to heavenly places in Him, and even *sit with Him there* (Eph. 2:6). 1 Cor. 15:12 reasons that there absolutely must be a resurrection of those in Christ, simply because *Christ* rose. Those in Him absolutely must rise, therefore; to disbelieve in our resurrection is to disbelieve in His.
- We build our spiritual house upon the rock, and He does just the same; we work together with Him in this, because we are in Him (Mt. 7:24; 16:18).
- "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee" is how Mk. 1:2 quotes Mal. 3:1; but "before thy face" is added, as if to create a reference to the Angel sent before Israel in the wilderness, to find a resting place (Ex. 23:20). The parallel is set up between John and the Angel, and therefore between Jesus and the people of Israel. The Lord Jesus *is* His people. He personally is the vine, the one body- symbols of the whole community. He isn't the trunk, and we the branches. We are the branches, and He is the whole vine. We are Him to this world. Thus Eph. 3:20,21 and many other passages parallel Christ and the ecclesia. "The servant" of Isaiah's prophecies is therefore both Israel and the

Lord Jesus. The fact He was and is the representative of God's people means that those in Him must act and witness as Him.

Those seminal promises to Abraham hinged around what would be realised *in*, not "by", his seed. I emphasize again: all that is true of the Lord Jesus is now true of us, in that we are in Him. Often the promises about the seed in the singular (the Lord Jesus) are applied to us in the plural (e.g. 2 Sam. 7:14 cp. Ps. 89:30-35). Baptism is not an initiation into a church. It isn't something which just *seems* the right thing to do. And even if because of our environment and conscience, it was easier to get baptized than not- *now* this mustn't be the case. We really are *in Christ*, we are born again; now we exist, spiritually! And moreover, we have risen with Him, His resurrection life, His life and living that will eternally be, is now manifest in us, and will be articulated physically at the resurrection. All the outward forms will slowly fade and pass away... but the essence will remain. And the essence is that we are *in Christ*, we are His, not this world's, and the life we have in Him will eternally continue. His God is our God. God is rarely addressed as "Father" in the Old Testament- not once in the Psalms. And yet "Father" becomes the usual term used by Christians to address God in the New Testament. Surely this is because being "*in Christ*" means that Christ's relationship to God becomes possible for us. As He called God "Abba"- a strikingly unusual term for God- so we can too. Indeed it could be argued from an analysis of the term "Father" in the New Testament that this title for God became progressively popular amongst Christians as the first century went on. Thus Mark, the first Gospel record, has only three references to God as "Father", whereas there are over 100 such references in John's Gospel [which appears to have been written last]; and Paul's letters are *progressively* full of the term and the idea. And so with us too on an individual level- the idea of God as Father becomes progressively attractive to us as we grow in intimacy with Him.

## 3-2 Witnessing For Christ

Secondly, there is the matter of preaching. The Lord Jesus calls both Himself and us "the light of the world". The Lord's difficult comment that "When I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (Jn. 9:5 RV) now falls into place. He is "the light of the world" whenever we, who are in the world, are His light to people. This would also explain why the Lord appears to mix His pronouns in Jn. 3:11,12: "Verily verily I say unto you, *We* speak that we do know, and testify that *we* have seen; and ye receive not *our* witness. If *I* have told you earthly things, and ye believe not...". The Lord's speaking, witnessing, telling and testifying is *our* witness, because all who are in Him are witnessing for and in Him.

We are baptized into the Name of Jesus, and bear that Name in the eyes of men. The Hebrew concept of a name meant really a renown, an understanding of the person. The Bride comments that "thy name is as ointment poured forth" (Song 1:3), likening the name to the smell of perfume. The "scent" of a nation is likewise their reputation, the message they give out (Jer. 48:11; Hos. 14:7). We are the savour of Christ (2 Cor. 2:16), we bear His Name, and therefore anyone carrying the Name is thereby a witness to Him. "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye" (1 Pet. 4:14) uses 'the name of Christ' as meaning 'preaching the name of Christ'. The two ideas are so closely related. In the course of this witness, men will 'speak evil' of us, and yet in doing so they are speaking evil of the Christ we are so identified with (1 Pet. 4:4,14). "For his name's sake they went forth" in obedience to the preaching commission (3 Jn. 7). Because we bear the Lord's Name by baptism into it, we *are* Christ to this world. Likewise, those in covenant relationship in the Old Testament bore

Yahweh's Name, and were therefore in all ways to act appropriately lest their behaviour "profane my holy name" (Lev. 22:32).

More than this, our faith will be strengthened by knowing that because we bear the Name, all that happens to us happens to our Lord and His Father. Thus Asa prayed: "Help us...in thy name we go against this multitude...let not man prevail against *thee*" (2 Chron. 14:11). It is absurd that man should prevail against God; and yet Asa believed that because His people carried His Name, therefore it was just as impossible that man should prevail against *them*. In the work of witness, OT prophecies about the Lord Jesus are applied to individual believers- Stephen is an early example (Zech. 12:7 LXX = Acts 8:1). The Lord's death was to result in a unity between us that would lead the world to understand Him and the love the Father has for Him (Jn. 17:21,23); and yet through the loving unity of believers, the world knows *them*, that they are His disciples (Jn. 13:35). We are an exhibition to this world of the relationship between the Father and Son. Hence our behaviour is so crucial. For if we are divided and unloving, this is the image of the Father and Son which we are presenting.

1 Jn. 5:6 says that Jesus came" [past tense] in water and blood [His baptism and crucifixion?], but He still testifies by three things-His Spirit [making alive the believer], the water [baptism cleansing us] and the blood [atoning for our sins]. The choice of 'three' things doesn't refer to a trinity- rather is it the principle of Dt. 19:15, requiring two or three witnesses. And note how inanimate things are spoken of as giving witness (Gen. 31:45-48; Dt. 31:28)- the three that bear witness don't refer necessarily to three persons, as the trinity wrongly states. Those things which He enabled, witnessed through us today, provide the witness to the fact that He 'came' in the past.

The fact we are really and truly witnessing for Jesus, in His Name, doing His work, ought to endlessly inspire us to unflagging labour in this enterprise. We are to be "always abounding in the work of the Lord" Jesus, knowing it is never in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). And yet it is the work of preaching which has just been defined as not being in vain (:14); the more abounding labour is in the work of preaching (:10). Preaching is the work of the Lord Jesus in that He is working through us to do His saving work, and therefore we ought to be constantly active in His cause.

A related chain of thought arises from considering how the Lord Jesus is described as "finding" His people- the lost sheep, lost son, the idle workers in the marketplace (Mt. 20:6; Lk. 15:5,6,8,9); and yet He sends us out to "find" [s.w.] those who are to be invited into His Kingdom (Mt. 22:9), just as the disciples 'found' fish when they obeyed the Lord's commission to fish (Jn. 21:6). We do the Lord's work for Him in this sense. And yet of course people "find" the narrow way themselves, they "find" the treasure and pearl of the Gospel (Mt. 7:14; 13:44,46); but only because we have gone out and 'found' them. The Lord's finding of us leads to us doing His work in finding others for Him and on His behalf. This Jesus "finds" Philip, and Philip's response is to go and 'find' Nathanael (Jn. 1:43,45). And so it must be ours too.

Not only is His face our face, His hands our hands. His *voice* is our voice. Reflecting on how future generations of His people would preach Him, the Lord commented: "If they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also" (Jn. 15:20). The command to all in Christ to go forth and preach-and-baptize (the command is all one) would have been shocking to a first century Jewish audience, who believed that only Messiah Himself or "the prophet" could baptize (Jn. 1:25). The implication of the Lord's command was that all in Him are in fact Him, in their preaching of Him. In Old Testament

times, God described His whole people as His anointed one, His Christ: “The Lord is a strength unto his people, and he is the saving strength of his anointed” (Ps. 28:8 RVmg.). The whole people were His anointed King, His Messiah, the anointed one. And so it is for all those today who are “in Christ”. Thus the prophecy about Christ personally that He would tread upon snakes and wild animals (Ps. 91:13) is quoted as being fulfilled in the disciples, who ‘were’ Christ on their preaching mission (Lk. 10:19; Mk. 16:18). Just as the preaching of the Gospel was to make straight paths for the Messiah to come (Lk. 3:4), so we are to make *our* paths straight (Heb. 12:13)- as if somehow we are the Lord Jesus; His revelation to this world at the second coming will in a sense be our revelation. Hence the final visions of Revelation speak of the Lord's second coming in terms which are applicable to the community of those in Him [e.g. a city of people coming down from Heaven to earth].

### 3-3 Paul Preaching Christ

But Paul is the clearest and commonest example. He was told by Jesus that all those whom he had persecuted were in fact Jesus personally (Acts 9:5). And this idea of the believer being so totally bound up with his or her Lord continues with Paul throughout his life. Thus he takes a prophecy concerning how Christ personally would be the light of the whole world (Is. 49:6), and applies it to himself in explanation of why he was devoted to being a light to the whole world *himself* (Acts 13:47- although 26:23 applies it to Jesus personally). Paul even says that this prophecy of Christ as the light of the world was a *commandment* to him; all that is true of the Lord Jesus likewise becomes binding upon us, because we are *in* Him. Note that Paul says that God has commanded *us* to witness; it wasn't that Paul was a special case, and God especially applied Isaiah's words concerning Christ as light of the Gentiles to Paul. They apply to *us*, to all who are in Christ. And when on trial, Paul explained *his* preaching to the Jews “and then to the Gentiles” as being related to the fact that he had to “shew” the Gospel to them because Christ rose from the dead to “shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:20,23). In other words, he saw his personal preaching as shewing forth the light of Jesus personally.

We too are lights in the dark world (Mt. 5:14; Phil. 2:15), because we are in Christ, *the* light of the world (Jn. 9:5). Notice how in the preceding verse, Jesus said spoke of how “I must work the works of him that sent me” (Jn. 9:4 AV), yet the RV reflects the manuscript difficulties by giving “*We* must work”. Could it be that the Lord said: ‘I must work, we [you in me] must work’? The Lord Jesus was the light of the world on account of His resurrection: “He first by the resurrection from the dead should proclaim light both to the [Jewish] people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:23 RV). If we are baptized into His death and resurrection, we too are the light of this world in that the light of His life breaks forth in us. And this is exactly why belief in His resurrection is an imperative to preach it. And it's why the great commission flows straight out of the resurrection narrative.

There are a number of other instances of where Old Testament Messianic Scriptures are applied to Paul in the context of his preaching Christ:

#### *The Servant / Messiah*

The servant known from birth (Is. 49:1,5)

#### *Paul*

Gal. 1:15,16 [choice from birth, calling, ministry to the Gentiles]

“I have laboured in vain...” (Is. 49:3)                    “That I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain” (Phil. 2:16; 1 Cor. 15:58)

“Yet surely my judgment is with the Lord” (Is. 49:4)                    “He that judgeth me is the Lord” (1 Cor. 4:4)

“Him whom man despiseth” (Is. 49:7)                    “We are despised” (1 Cor. 4:9,10; 2 Cor. 4:9,10)

“The Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you” (Is. 49:& RSV)                    “A chosen vessel” (Acts 9:15)

Is. 52:15

Rom. 15:21 [here Paul appropriates a prophecy of how the news of the crucified Christ would spread to those who had never heard it. He didn't just read those verses as prophecy; he saw in them an imperative to fulfil them. This is an example of where prophecy depends to some extent upon us to fulfil it. The 19th century brethren understood the prophecies of Israel's return to the land like this-they collected funds to enable it]<sup>(1)</sup>.

Is. 49:8 “In an acceptable time have I heard thee”                    Quoted in 2 Cor. 6:2

Is. 53:1

Rom. 10:16

Is. 49:6

Acts 13:47

Is. 43:5

Acts 18:9,10

Paul speaks of how the believers in Macedonia "first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us" (2 Cor. 8:5). He saw their response to the Lord as their response to him- because he appreciated the degree to which he as their converter was a full manifestation of the Lord whom he preached. In the same way as the Lord Jesus came to seek and to save, so Paul appropriates the same two Greek words regarding *his* seeking and saving of others (Lk. 19:10; 1 Cor. 10:33).

## Our Pattern

And repeatedly, Paul's conversion and mission is set up as our model. I have detailed this in <http://www.aletheiacollege.net/bl/14-1Conversion Of Paul.htm>. He had the same calling as we do (Rom. 9:24; 1 Thess. 4:7); in him above all there is set a pattern for all those who would hereafter believe. This may not entail itinerant missionary work as it did for Paul, but all the same, the same essential commitment to Gospel preaching must be at the core of the life of every convert. The great commission is the mission statement of the true church. In 1 Cor. 10:33; 11:1 he bids us follow his example in that he lived a life dominated by seeking to

save others- both in and out of the ecclesia [see context]. This may explain why there is little direct encouragement in Paul's letters to preach; not only was his pattern axiomatically an imperative to live a life devoted to witness, but the following of Christ as he did inevitably issued in a life of witness. Thus Paul *made himself* a slave in order to save others (2 Cor. 9:19), just as the Lord *made himself a slave* on the cross to save us (Phil. 2:5-8). Our work of saving others is therefore part of our sharing in the Lord's cross. Paul was to bear Christ's name to the world *in that he* would suffer great things for the sake of that Name (Acts 9:15,16). His sharing in the Lord's sufferings was the bearing of the Name before men. The Greek word for 'bear' in Acts 9:15 is the same used in Lk. 14:27 about bearing the cross. To bear His name to the world is to bear His cross. The record of the disciples' persecution for the sake of their witness is studded with references to their preaching being *in the Name of Jesus* (Acts 4:2,7,9,10,12 RV). Whoever heard them heard Jesus (Lk. 10:16). The prophecy of Psalm 2 concerning how "the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his Christ" was appropriated by the preachers to themselves even though it is elsewhere applied to the crucifixion (Acts 4:26). Paul exhorts preachers to be "with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel", and then goes on to define that "one mind" as the mind that was in Christ Jesus in His time of dying. Having outlined the mind of Christ at this time, Paul then returns to his theme of preaching, by saying that the Lord's death was so that each of us should be inspired to humbly confess him as Lord to the world (Phil. 1:27; 2:2,5,11).

Mission work, in whatever form, is not glamorous. It is a sacrifice of self, a not saying and doing as we feel, a surrendering of our own rights- to a shower every day, to good food, to safety, to comfort, to the acceptance of men- for the sake of others' salvation, both in the preaching of the Gospel and in helping our brethren to salvation. To lose life is paralleled with the Lord to unashamedly witnessing to Him in an unbelieving world; and He calls us each one to lose our lives in this way (Mk. 8:35). When Paul is described as going "forth without the gate" to preach in Philippi (Acts 16:13 RV), this is the very language of Heb. 13:12 about the Lord going forth without the gate, carrying the cross, and bidding us follow Him. For Paul, to preach was to carry the cross of Christ, and so it must be for us. The Lord likened the preaching of the Gospel to a seed falling onto various types of ground, good, stony, etc. In all the synoptics, the account of the sower parable is recorded at length; and within that parable, the Lord emphasizes this falling of the seed onto the ground. Likewise He likes response to the Gospel message to "a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth... but when it is sown..." (Mk. 2:31,32). But the Lord clearly understood the image of a seed falling into the ground as prophetic of His forthcoming crucifixion (Jn. 12:23-25). The connection in His mind is surely clear- the preaching of the Gospel is a form of death and crucifixion, in order to bring forth a harvest in others. Is. 53:14 prophesied that through the cross, the Lord Jesus would "justify the many". Yet this phrase is picked up in Dan. 12:3 and applied to those who preach the Gospel- and thereby become "*those* who justify the many". The implication is plain enough. Through preaching, we live out the Lord's death for others in practice, we placard Him crucified before the world's eyes. We are not simply "Him" to them; we are Him crucified to them. The honour of this is surpassing.

In Rom 15:21, Paul justifies his preaching by quoting from part of the suffering servant prophecy in Is. 52 / 53. That whole passage is set in a context of explaining "how beautiful are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings...all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Is. 52:7,10). The preaching of good tidings and the declaration of God's salvation was through the crucifixion. Paul quotes Is. 52:15: "To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand". This was Paul's justification for taking the Gospel to where Christ has not been named. Note in passing how the Lord

Jesus sees us as “beautiful” in our witness to Him (as in Song 7:1). Yet further into Is. 53, so much else jumps out at us as appropriate to Paul’s preaching: “Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high [cp. Paul knowing how to be exalted and abased, themes that occur in Is. 53 about Jesus’ death]. As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man [cp. Paul’s thorn in the flesh?], and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for [that] which had not been told them shall they see; and [that] which they had not heard shall they consider”. Paul appeared before Agrippa, Festus, and one or two Caesars, with a visage marred by his evangelistic sufferings.

It was this marred visage of Paul which had impressed the Galatians with how much Paul was Christ-manifest: “Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, [even] as Christ Jesus” (Gal. 4). He could truly say in Gal 2:20: “I am crucified with Christ”, and that before their eyes “Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth ['placarded'], crucified among you...for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (Gal. 3:1; 6:17). Thus to preach through cross carrying means sharing in the Lord’s sufferings. It may mean being crucified by our brethren for it as He was, physical hardship and pain... but this is the ground of credibility for our witness. When Paul speaks of how he has "made myself a servant unto all" in his preaching (1 Cor. 9:19), there is an evident connection with his reasoning in Phil. 2:7 about how on the cross, the Lord Jesus likewise *made* Himself a servant to all. For Paul, preaching was and is to be a sharing in the cross of Christ.

The fact that true preaching is a carrying of the cross explains why Paul felt that the fact that to preach what he did went right against his natural grain, was the proof that indeed a “dispensation of the Gospel” had been given to him. Likewise Jeremiah complained that the visions which he had to preach, about violence and judgment, were quite against the grain of his sensitive soul (Jer. 46:5 RV; 47:6). There is therefore no such person as a natural preacher in the ultimate sense.

The Lord Himself had seen His preaching work as a carrying of the cross. He spoke of how His witness to the Samaritan woman was a ‘finishing of the Father’s work’ (Jn. 4:34). The ‘finishing’ was clearly only accomplished upon the cross, when He cried “It is finished”, and He “fulfilled” or [s.w.] “finished” the Scriptures (Jn. 19:28). Thus in His life, He lived out the essence of His future cross by witnessing to others. Like Paul, we need to grasp what this means for us in practice. Crucifixion was a public, painful, sacrificial act; and true effort in witness will be the same. And this is exactly why Paul can speak of “the preaching of the cross”, the preaching which *is* the cross (Gk.).

### **Showing Christ**

As the Lord was the light of those that sat in darkness (Mt. 4:16), so Paul writes as if all the believers are likewise (Rom. 2:19). The light of Christ lightens every man who is born into the spiritual world (Jn. 3:9), with the inevitable effect that he too becomes the light of the world for others (Mt. 5:14). John “was not the light” in the sense that he was not Jesus personally (Jn. 1:8 RV); but he was in another sense “a burning and shining light” (Jn. 5:35) in that he like us was “the light of the world” on account of his connection with Jesus. The Son was “sanctified and sent into the world” (Jn. 10:36). And yet we too are sanctified (Jn. 17:17,19), and likewise sent into the world (Mk. 16:15). As the Lord was sent into the whole

world, so are we (Jn. 17:18). The inevitability of witness is developed further in *We're All Preachers*.

And there is an old question relating to the parable of the sower which is relevant here: who is the sower? The preacher, or the Lord Jesus? Some Greek texts read “*a* sower” (followed by the AV), others “*the* sower” (cp. the Diaglott). Perhaps the Lord said both: ‘A sower, the sower, went out...’. Surely the sower is the Lord Jesus, but in *our* work of witness we are *His* witnesses. For we represent Him to the world. This is why “the Spirit (the Lord the Spirit, Jesus) and the bride (the ecclesia) say, Come”; ours is a united witness with Him. As He was the lamb of God sent forth for the salvation of men, so those in Him are sent forth with that same Gospel, as lambs (Lk. 10:3). Men heard Paul’s preaching and ‘clave’ unto *him*, as they did to other preachers (Acts 17:34; 5:13); but conversion is a cleaving unto *the Lord Jesus* (Acts 11:23; 1 Cor. 6:17 Gk.). Thus Paul “spoke boldly in the Lord [Jesus], which gave testimony unto the word of his grace” (Acts 14:3). To this extent does the preacher manifest his Lord, to the extent that Paul’s preaching amongst the Galatians was a placarding forth of Christ crucified (Gal. 3:1 Gk.). He could remind the Ephesians that Christ personally “came and preached peace to you” after His resurrection (Eph. 2:17 RV), when it was in fact Paul who did this, motivated as he was by the resurrection of Christ.

Paul could tell the Corinthians that his preaching of the word to them “was not yea and nay...for the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us...was not yea and nay” (2 Cor. 1:18,19). Paul’s preaching was an exact transmission of the person of Jesus; He was not indecisive, He was positive; and likewise Paul’s preaching of Him had the same marks. He quotes this as a counter to the criticism that he was “yea and nay”, a man with no sense of truth or decision. ‘If I am a man in Christ, then I will axiomatically act like Him, and therefore this criticism of me *cannot* be true’. God “was pleased to reveal his son in me, that I might preach him” (Gal. 1:16). To preach Christ is to reveal Him to men through ourselves- this is the purpose for which we are called, that our lamp was lit, to reveal Christ to others through us. And thus Paul could conclude by saying that he bore in his body [perhaps an idiom for his life, cp. the ‘broken body’ of the Lord we remember] the *stigmata* of the Lord Jesus. He was so clearly a slave belonging to the Lord Jesus that it was as if one could see the marks of the nails in his body. “Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins”, Paul stressed (Acts 13:38)- the preaching of the man Paul was in effect the preaching of the man Christ Jesus. Acts 9:22 records how Paul preached “proving that this is very Christ”. This is a strange way to put it; it’s as if Paul himself was standing there showing in his person, Christ Himself. Preaching is a revealing to men of the Christ that is within us; this is what witnessing in Christ is really about, rather than pushing bills or placing press adverts or writing letters. Not that any of these things are to be decried, but the essence is that we from deep within ourselves reveal Christ to men. This is why those who witness to Him, as only those in Him can, testify to His especial presence in this work. The promise that “I am with you always” was in the context of being near the preacher as he or she witnesses.

## Notes

(1) ““Then the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!” said Bilbo. ‘Of course!’ said Gandalf. ‘And why should not they prove true? Surely you don’t disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself?”” (J.R.R. Tolkein, *The Hobbit*).

## 3-4 Boldness in Witness

And this is why those who heard the preaching of Peter and John took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus (Acts 4:13). They saw their “boldness”, and realised they had been with Jesus; for the very same Greek word is used in description of the Lord’s “boldness” in witness (Mk. 8:32; Jn. 7:26; 11:14; 16:25,29; 18:20), and on the cross (Col. 2:15). Note too how they spoke of themselves as God’s servants in the same breath as they speak of Jesus as being His Servant (Acts 4:29,30). They realized that all that was true of the Servant was true of them too. Paul saw the Lord’s “boldness” as an imperative to him to likewise be “bold” in preaching (Eph. 6:19). This is why Peter spoke [s.w.] ‘boldly’, as did all the early church (Acts 2:29; 4:29,31). We all find it hard to be bold in witness, and yet in this as in all spiritual endeavour, ‘thy fellowship shall make me strong’. A deeper sense of the presence of Jesus, a feeling for who He was and is, a being with Him, will make us bold too. Even Paul found it hard; he asked others to pray for him, that he would preach “boldly” [s.w.] as he ought to (Eph. 6:19); and their prayers were heard, for in his imprisonment during which he wrote Ephesians, he preached boldly (Acts 28:31 s.w.); indeed, boldness characterised his whole life (Phil. 1:20 s.w.). In passing, we note how Paul felt spiritually weaker than he was; he felt not bold, when he was bold; and we see how the admission of weakness to others and their prayers for it can grant us the victory we seek. The point is, who the Lord is, we are. Or, we must be. If He was bold, if He was apt to teach and patient, so must we be; indeed, so are we, if we are truly in Him. Likewise, all the Father is, we are to manifest if we bear His Name.

In a simple example, David writes that the righteous are to be upright as the cedar and palm trees, because Yahweh is upright (Ps. 92:12,15). This is why bearing the name of Christ is in itself an imperative to witness it. Thus “the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” is used as a metonymy for ‘the preaching of Christ’ (Acts 15:26; 3 Jn. 7; Mt. 24:9 cp. 14). We are baptized into that Name and thereby it is axiomatic that we become witnesses to it. The Lord Jesus was the light of the world; and by doing “all things without murmuring and disputing...blameless and harmless [as the Lamb]...ye shine as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life” [i.e. the Lord Jesus; Phil. 2:14-16]. The way he put everyone out of the room, turned to the body and said “Tabitha, arise”, and she rose up, is exactly the way the Lord acted (Acts 9:40 cp. Lk. 8:54). Peter told Aeneas: “Jesus Christ healeth thee” (Acts 9:34 RV) when of course it was Peter standing there healing him. Likewise the way Peter beckons to the disciples to hold their peace, declares how the Lord had brought him out of the prison and death, tells them to go and shew these things to the brethren and then goes “unto another place” is a reflection of the Lord’s behaviour after His resurrection (Acts 12:17 cp. Mt. 28:19). Consciously and unconsciously, confirmed by providence, Peter was living out the fact he was in Christ; he was showing the risen Lord to men and women by his words and actions.

## 3-5 The Servant Songs in Isaiah

It is significant that Paul takes a passage from one of Isaiah’s servant songs and applies it to us. The servant who suffered and witnessed to the world was evidently the Lord Jesus. And yet Isaiah is also explicit that the servant is the whole seed of Abraham, “Jacob”, the slowly-developing people of God (Is. 41:8; 44:1)<sup>(1)</sup>. There are many connections within Isaiah between the servant songs, and the descriptions of the people of Israel into which the songs are interspersed. The Saviour-servant was to bring out the prisoners from the dungeons (Is.

42:7), so was every Israelite “to let the oppressed go free...loose the bonds”, and to “undo the bands of the [heavy] yoke” (Is. 58:6) as Christ did (Mt. 11:28,29); His work of deliverance is to be replicated by each of us in our witness. Whoever is in Him will by this very fact follow Him in this work. In Isaiah’s first context, the suffering servant was King Hezekiah. Yet all Israel were to see themselves as ‘in’ him, as spiritual Israel are to see themselves as in Christ. “He was oppressed”, as Israel at that time were being “oppressed” by Assyria. As they were covered in wounds and spiritual sickness (Is. 1:5,6), so the suffering servant bore their diseases and rose again in salvation victory. Significantly, Isaiah 40-53 speak of the one servant, whereas Isaiah 54-66 speak of the “servants” who fulfil in principle the work of the singular servant.

Other parts of the servant songs are quoted concerning us. Paul’s description of the warrior of the Gospel in Ephesians 6 composites together various descriptions of Messiah’s clothing in the servant songs (Is. 11:5 = “loins girded with truth”; 49:2 “mouth like a sharp sword”; 52:7 “bring good tidings / publish salvation” = “the preparation of the Gospel of peace”; 59:17 “breastplate of righteousness”; 59:17 “helmet of salvation”). The songs of the suffering Servant are applied to us in Rom. 8:31, where Paul exalts that "if God be for us, who is against us?" - alluding to Is. 50:8 "The Lord God is helping me- who is he that would convict me?".

Our theme is brought together in Is. 44:26:

That confirmeth	And performeth
The word	The counsel
Of his servant [singular]	Of his messengers.

The singular servant is equated with His “messengers”, whose “counsel” to others is the word which is Jesus, the true servant. This theme of declaring the word occurs repeatedly in this part of Isaiah. Because “I have declared...and I have shewed...*therefore ye* are my witnesses” (Is. 43:12). We are to witness / declare . shew, just as the Father has done. Our unity with the Father and Son is thus reflected in our witnessing in the way they witness; and thus their witness is through us. The unity between the preacher and his Lord is therefore wonderful. Truly He is with us in our life of witness, in our obedience to His command to preach world-wide, unto the end of the age.

### **Proclaiming Liberty**

The Lord Himself quoted Is. 61:1 about Himself <sup>(2)</sup>: He proclaimed liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. But this passage is evidently behind Peter’s assertion that after His resurrection, the Lord Jesus preached to the spirits in prison (1 Pet. 3:18,19). His resurrection was the basis of His command to go into all the world and preach the word; and thereby His preachers went out to do and continue the work which He personally had done. The Lord’s servant being called from the womb (Is. 49:1) was applied by Paul to himself (Gal. 1:15), as it was likewise true of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5). Or take Is. 49:8,9: “In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee [quoted about us in 2 Cor. 6:2 in the context of us being preachers, labouring with God]; and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to raise up the land, to make them inherit the desolate heritages; saying to them that are bound, Go forth; to them that are

in darkness, Shew yourselves" (RV). This is the language of the Lord's preaching, which freed men from the prison house (Is. 61:1,2). Yet because we are in Him, we too have His ministry; our words too can *make men inherit* the Kingdom, and free men from their bondage. "We are witnesses [through being] in him" (Acts 5:32 RVmg.). As the Lord in Isaiah's servant songs was the suffering, saving, atoning servant, lifted up to give salvation world-wide- so are we. For we are in Him. Paul explained his life of devotion to world-wide witness by saying that the fact his Lord was a saving witness to all men was de facto a *command* to him, as one in Christ, to do likewise (Acts 13:47). This is why the concept of the Name of Christ is sometimes put for 'the work of preaching His Gospel', so definite is the connection between baptism into His Name and the work of witness which this naturally entails (Mt. 19:29; Acts 9:16; 15:26; 3 Jn. 7).

Is. 9:6 states that the Lord Jesus personally is "called" or "proclaimed" as peace. This is the same Hebrew word as in Dt. 20:10- Israel were to "proclaim peace" to cities they attacked, demanding either their submission or destruction. And yet *we* are the ones who "proclaim [the] peace" of Christ to men (Is. 52:7). Insofar as we represent Him in our witness, our hearers are faced with a radical choice- to submit to Him or eternally perish. It's easy to forget that this is how God sees it, as we witness to people. We're so used to the rejection of our message that we perhaps fail to see the eternal importance of the choice we lay before people; and this should impart a verve and urgency of appeal to our preaching, rather than an indifferent inviting of people to meetings, discussion, etc.

### Notes

(1) The Is. 42 passage concerning Jesus as preaching to the Gentiles is quoted in the Gospels from the LXX. But this reads: "Jacob is my servant, I will help him: Israel, is my chosen, my soul has accepted him...he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not cry, nor lift up his voice...but...He shall shine out, and not be discouraged" (Is. 42:1-4 LXX). The passages primarily exhorts Israel at the time of their living in Babylon to live up to their role as a missionary nation; they didn't need to cry or lift up the voice in preaching, because their own example and being would be the witness. They would "shine out" as the light of the Gentile world in which they had to live. But they failed in this; and yet the prophecy came true in the Lord Jesus, the true servant of Yahweh. But the prophecy still has to be fulfilled in us, the servants of the Lord, as those in Christ, as we live through our Babylon years.

(2) It is also noteworthy that the parable of Mk. 12:6 has Jesus describing Himself as both a servant- the last servant- and the only beloved son of the vineyard owner.

## 3-6 The Proof of the Resurrection is the Church

If they persecuted Him in His preaching, they will persecute we who, as in Him, preach as His representatives. Thus the early believers, when persecuted, quoted a prophecy foretelling how the rulers would gather together against *Christ* as a comfort to them personally (Acts 4:25-29). Paul placarded Him forth as crucified to men through the example of his own life of death and resurrection, daily, with his Lord (Gal. 3:1). We may well ask how the Jews would "hereafter...see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power" (Mt. 26:64). He is *now* sitting at the Father's right hand; but how would the Jews "see" this? Was it not that in the witness of the Lord's followers to them, those Jews would see the evidence for the exaltation of Jesus? In seeing them, they would see Him.

The resurrection of Jesus was to give assurance “to all men” (Acts 17:31). But how? They haven’t seen Him. There is no Euclidean reason for them to believe in His resurrection. How is it an assurance to all men? Surely in that we are the risen Lord’s representatives “to all men”, and through us they see the evidence of Christ risen, and thereby have assurance of God’s plan for them. In the same way, the wicked and adulterous generation to whom the Lord witnessed were given the sign of the prophet Jonah- that after three days, the Lord would re-appear. But that sign was only given to them through the preaching of the apostles- that generation didn’t see the risen Lord Himself (Mt. 16:4). But the witness of the disciples was as good as- for in their witness, they represented the Lord. When the father of the dumb child brought him to the disciples, he tells Jesus that “I brought unto thee my son”, but the disciples couldn’t cure him (Mk. 9:17 RV); he perceived Jesus as His followers, just as folk do today. When the disciples went out preaching around Israel, Herod heard of the fame of Jesus- because they so manifested Him (Mk. 6:12-14).

The ‘resurrected’ Jonah was a type of the Lord- and he was a ‘sign’ to the Ninevites presumably in that he still bore in his body the marks of a man who had been three days within a fish. It could be that the fish beached itself, and vomited Jonah out of its stomach in its death throes (this is how beached whales meet their end). In this case, the fish would have drawn the attention of the local population, as would have the man with bleached hair and strange skin who walked away from it. We too as witnesses of Christ will have something about us that is unintentionally striking in the eyes of those with whom we mix. There was no human chance that Jonah would be listened to when he came to preach judgment against Nineveh. Some guy standing on the edge of town, saying ‘You’re all gonna be destroyed’. People would have laughed, ignored him, or told him to shut up. But there was something about him that was gripping and arresting. He was living proof that the judgment of God is real, and that His mercy is just as real. Presumably Jonah must have said far more than “Nineveh is going to be destroyed”.

Even in the Millennium, the basis of our witness to the world will be that we are in Christ. Thus Micah’s description of how “the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord, as the showers upon the grass” (Mic. 5:7) is consciously alluding to the then-famous Messianic prophecy of Ps. 72:6: “He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth”. The blessings Messiah brings are to be articulated through the witness of those in Him. Those who have lived in Him will then shine as the brightness of the firmament (Dan. 12:3). But the description of the Lord’s face shining as the sun draws on this; as if to say that our shining in the future Kingdom will be because we were and are in Him. We will shine forth then (Mt. 13:43), as the Sun of righteousness Himself.

## 3-7 Preaching As Christ Did

Not only must we preach because our Lord preached. We must witness *as He witnessed*. Paul understood us to have been anointed in a similar way to who Christ was anointed; and thereby we become witnesses of Him. In this context, he explains that he wasn’t vague and uncertain in the matter of preaching; he didn’t keep vacillating between yes and no because this was not how Jesus preached- in Him was “yes!” (2 Cor. 1:21,17). We carry in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus, and live His resurrection life even now in our mortal flesh- and “We having the same spirit of faith [as He had], according to that which is written, I believed and therefore did I speak. We also believe , and therefore also we speak” (2 Cor. 4:11-13).

Here Paul quotes the Messianic Ps. 116:10 about *our* witness, which is a living out of the spirit which Jesus had in His death and present life and being in Heaven. And we should adopt a similar positive approach. As He ‘began’ in the prophets and expounded “in all the scriptures the things *concerning himself*” (Lk. 24:27), so those in Him “*began* at the same scripture, and preached....*Jesus*” (Acts 8:35). And thus Acts 5:14 AV says that converts were added “to the Lord” whereas the RVmg. speaks of them being added “to them”, i.e. the believers who comprised the body of Jesus.

When Paul wrote that “the servant of the Lord must not strive” in his preaching ministry (2 Tim. 2:24), he was alluding back to how the servant song described the Lord Jesus in His preaching as not striving or lifting up His voice in proud argument (Is. 42:2 cp. Mt. 12:19). And Paul goes on: “...but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing...”. This is all a pen picture of the Lord’s witness to men in Galilee. And yet it is applied to *us*. “Apt to teach” is surely an allusion to the way in which the Lord taught the people “as he was wont” (Mk. 10:1). So it’s not just that we should witness because the Lord, in whom we are, was the “faithful and true witness” (Rev. 1:5; 3:14); because we are in Him, we must witness *as He did*, with something of that same ineffable mixture of candour, meekness and Divine earnestness for man’s salvation. *As* the Lord was sent into the world, so He sends us into the world [Jn. 14:12; 17:18; 20:21 - this is perhaps John’s equivalent of the great commission]. Jesus ‘came down’ to this world in the sense that He was the word of the Father made flesh, and ‘all men’ saw the light of grace that was radiated from His very being. And that same word must be flesh in us, as it was in the Lord. We are to be a living epistle, words of the Gospel made flesh, “known and read of all men” (2 Cor. 3:2). Earlier the Lord had sent out His men *as lambs* (Lk. 10:3)- as those in Him, the Lamb of God. It was written of the Lord’s preaching that He would not “strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice [raised up in this way] in the streets”. And for this reason He asked His converts not to “make him known” in this way; He wanted them to witness *as He witnessed* (Mt. 12:16,19). This is quite something, the more we reflect upon it. He rebuked the self-righteous, restored peoples’ dignity, alleviated their poverty and sicknesses to give them a foretaste of the future blessings of His Kingdom on earth, opposed legalistic and corrupt religious practices, and ultimately gave His life to show that even His enemies were encompassed in His love. This is the pattern for us, especially in our seeking to do these things in the lives of those who respond to the Gospel.

It's interesting to compare the Gospel of John with his epistles. Clearly, he saw himself as manifesting to his brethren what the Lord Jesus had manifested to him. John records how the Lord had said: " I have said this to you...that your joy may be fulfilled" (Jn. 15:11), but he then says of himself that " We are writing these things so that your joy may be fulfilled" (1 Jn. 1:4 RV). He saw himself as the face and mouth of Jesus to his brethren; and so are all of us who are in Christ.

### **Continuing His Work**

It also explains why the record of the Acts is a continuation of all that Jesus *began* to do and teach as recorded in the Gospels (Acts 1:1). The preachers were witnesses *of Jesus* (Acts 1:8). The logical objection to their preaching of a risen Jesus of Nazareth was: ‘But He’s dead! We saw His body! Where is He? Show Him to us!’. And their response, as ours, was to say: ‘I am the witness, so is my brother here, and my sister there. We are the witnesses that He is alive. If you see us, you see Him risen and living through us’. In this spirit, we beseech men in Christ’s stead. Just as the Lord strangely said that His own witness to Himself was a valid

part of His overall witness, so our lives are our own witness to the credibility of what we are saying. Paul in Galatians 2:20 echoes this idea: " I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not *my* life, but the life which *Christ lives* in me; and my present bodily life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me" . The spirit of the risen Christ lived out in our lives is the witness of His resurrection. We are Him to this world.

The spirit [of Christ] in us is what bears the witness [this theme is developed more in "*What seekest thou?*" ]. The description of love in 1 Cor. 13, the outline of the fruits of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22-26, these are all portraits of the man Christ Jesus. The clearest witness to Him "therefore consists in human life in which his image is reproduced" <sup>(1)</sup>. This approach helps us understand the Lord's words about the sign of the prophet Jonah. As Jonah was three days in the whale and then came up out of it to preach to the Gentiles, so the Lord would be three days in the grave and then would rise- as a sign to the Jews. But how was His resurrection a sign to them, seeing they never saw His risen body? Yet the Lord's reasoning demands that His resurrection be a sign to them, just as tangible as the re-appearance of the drowned Jonah. But, the Jews never saw Him after the resurrection...? The resolution must be that in the preaching of the risen Jesus by those in Him, it was as if the Jews saw Him, risen and standing as a sign before them, every bit as real as the Jonah who emerged from the whale after three days.

It is helpful to read Luke and Acts following straight on. It is evident that Luke saw the apostles as continuing the work of preaching that Jesus personally performed. One of the most evident connections is the way in which Luke ten times uses the word 'euaggelizo' to describe the Lord's witness; it occurs only one other time in the other Gospels. And yet Luke uses the word 15 times in Acts to describe the witness of the apostles. He clearly saw them as continuing the 'evangelion' of Jesus. As Jesus preached the Gospel of the Kingdom as He walked around Israel in the late 20s of the first century (Lk. 4:43; 8:1; 9:11; 16:16), so His men continued the very same witness (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23,31). Not only are there links between Acts and Luke, as if the preaching of the apostles continues the personal work of the Lord in whom they lived and moved, but often Acts records the preaching work in language lifted from the other Gospel records too (e.g. Acts 4:2; 5:12-16 = Mt. 4:23). And further, the synoptic Gospels use the same words for the activities of both Jesus and the disciples in respect of preaching, teaching, healing etc. Theirs was a shared ministry. Thus Jesus is recorded as "*showing* the glad tidings of the Kingdom" (Lk. 8:1), but in the same context He asks a new convert to go home "*and shew* how great things God hath done" (8:39), as if he were to continue the '*showing*' of Jesus. Particularly significant is the way Mark's Gospel opens with Jesus going around preaching, appealing for people to repent and believe the Gospel (and this is described as "the beginning of the Gospel"). Mark concludes with *us* being asked to do the same, thereby directly continuing the work of the Lord, because we are in Him.

### **Bringing Forth His Fruit**

In Jn. 12:23-26, the Lord foretold aspects of His coming sacrifice: "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit [spoke in the context of potential Gentile converts]. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it...if any man serve me, let him follow me". Here the Lord goes on to assume that His death, His falling into the ground, would be matched by His

followers also hating their lives, that they might rise again. And He connects His death with glorification. Soon afterwards, the Lord spoke of how his followers would likewise “bear much fruit”, and thus *glorify* God. And in this context He continues with words which can be read as John’s record of the great preaching commission: “I have chosen you...that ye should go [cp. “Go ye into all the world...”] and bring forth fruit” (Jn. 15:8,16). Clearly the Lord connected His bringing forth of “much fruit” through His death with the same “much fruit” being brought forth by the disciples’ witness. It follows from this that the fruit which He potentially achieved on the cross is brought to reality by our preaching. And perhaps it is also possible to see a parallel between our preaching and His laying down of His life on the cross, as if the work of witness is in effect a laying down of life by the preacher, in order to bring forth fruit. Likewise the Lord had earlier linked the life of cross carrying with bearing witness to the world around us (Lk. 9:23,26). As His witnesses we bear His cross as well as share His glory.

Think through the implications of Lk. 3:4, where we read that John’s preaching was in order to make [s.w. ‘to bring forth fruit’] His [the Lord’s] paths straight- but the ways of the Lord are “right” [s.w. “straight”] anyway (Acts 13:10). So how could John’s preaching make the Lord’s ways straight / right, when they already are? God is so associated with His people that their straightness or crookedness reflects upon Him; for they are His witnesses in this world. His ways are their ways. This is the N.T. equivalent of the O.T. concept of keeping / walking in the way of the Lord (Gen. 18:19; 2 Kings 21:22). Perhaps this is the thought behind the exhortation of Heb. 12:13 to make straight paths for our own feet. We are to bring our ways into harmony with the Lord’s ways; for He is to be us, His ways our ways. Thus Is. 40:3, which is being quoted in Lk. 3:4, speaks of “Prepare ye the way *of the Lord*”, whereas Is. 62:10 speaks of “Prepare ye the way *of the people*”. Yet tragically, the way / path of Israel was not the way / path of the Lord (Ez. 18:25). We are not only Jesus to this world but also effectively we are the witness to God Himself. We minister His care to others; to the extent that Paul could write both that he was a minister of God, and also a minister of the church (2 Cor. 6:4; Col. 1:24,25).

The crucial importance of personal, Christ-like example empowering our witness is brought out in Philemon 6: “The communication [sharing] of thy faith may become effectual [Gk. ‘energized’] by the acknowledgment [i.e. recognition, by others] of every good thing which is in you in Christ”. There’s a lot compacted into these words, strung together as they are in a rather awkward sentence. Our sharing of the faith is energized, it takes on power and compulsion as a witness, when others can acknowledge that we are “in Christ” because they see His characteristics reflected in us. This is why effective witness can only be made by those “in Christ”, those who show His personality written in theirs. This will ‘energize’ their sharing of the facts of the Gospel with others. As I have pointed out at such length in *The Power Of Basics*, each doctrine of the Gospel is designed to elicit practical changes in human life. Where those changes are apparent, the preaching of a doctrinal Gospel becomes empowered and energized. Proffering mere doctrinal propositions to this world and nothing else, will never be successful. It will lack power, energy and the compulsion required for conversion.

### A Shared Witness

The apostles bore witness to the Lord Jesus (e.g. Acts 26:22; 1 Cor. 15:15 s.w.), and He in turn bore witness to the [preaching of] the word of his grace (Acts 15:8). In their witness lay His witness. Revelation begins with John witnessing / testifying to the Word [made flesh, i.e.

Jesus], and concludes with Jesus testifying (Rev. 1:2 cp. 22:20 s.w.). The description of the rider on the white horse going out to conquer (Rev. 6:1,2) is intended to be linked with the description of the Lord Jesus in Rev. 19:11. Yet the rider of Rev. 6:1,2 is the ecclesia, going forth to powerfully convert the world in the run up to AD 70 (and also in the last days). Yet in doing so, they were effectively Christ to the world; His triumphant victories over men and women were theirs, and theirs were His. The witness of the Lord and of His disciple were one and the same. And had not John earlier written of how the witness on earth was a reflection of that in Heaven (1 Jn. 5:6,7)? The whole purpose of the Lord's life was that He should "bear witness" unto the Truth of the Father (Jn. 18:37). But John also records the Lord's expectations that all in Him should likewise "bear witness" (Jn. 15:27). And as John recounted the Gospel [of which the Gospel of John is a transcript], He stresses that by doing so he is 'bearing witness', living out the work of the Lord who lived as the faithful and true witness to men (Jn. 3:11; 19:35; 21:24 cp. 18:37). Peter appealed to Israel: "Hear these words...", and then went on to quote a prophecy of how the Lord Jesus would be raised up [i.e. after His resurrection], "and *him* shall ye hear" Acts 2:22; 3:22,24). The record adds that the crowd received *Peter's* word and were baptized (Acts 2:41), whereas elsewhere in Acts men and women receive the word of the *Lord Jesus*. It is simply so, that when we witness, the words we speak are in effect the words of Jesus. Our words are His. This is how close we are to Him. And this is why our deportment and manner of life, which is the essential witness, must be in Him. For He is articulated to the world through us. And it explains the paradox of Mk. 3:14, whereby Jesus chose men that they should "be with him and that he might send them forth to preach". As they went out to witness, they were with Him, just as He is with us in our witness, to the end of the world [both geographically and in time]. And this solves another Marcan paradox, in Mk. 4:10: "When he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked him...". Was He alone, or not? Mark speaks as if when the Lord was away from the crowd and with His true followers, He was "alone"- for He counted them as one body with Him. This was why the Lord told Mary, when she so desperately wanted to be personally with Him, to go and preach to His brethren (Jn. 20:18), just as He had told some of those whom He had healed- for going and preaching Him was in effect being with Him. Note how the Lord changes pronouns in Jn. 3:11: "*Verily, I say unto thee, We* speak...". He clearly identifies the preaching of His followers with His own witness. Paul likewise could say that his converts "became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word..." (1 Thess. 4:9). He brackets himself along with his Lord.

Time and again, the Gospel records reveal how the disciples manifest the Lord Jesus. There are several passages where the text is unclear, as to whether it should read, e.g., "As *they* were on the way" or "As *He* went" (Lk. 17:11 RV cp. AV). The textual confusion may reflect the unity between the Lord and His preachers. Even within the Gospels, incident after incident shows the Lord doing something alone, and then the disciples somehow being presented as doing the same. Take the way He departed "himself alone" when the crowd wanted to make Him king; and then soon afterwards we read that the crowd perceived that the disciples had likewise departed 'themselves alone' [same Greek phrase and construction, Jn. 6:15,22]. The point is that the world is presented as perceiving the disciples in the same terms and way as they did Jesus, even when, in this case, Jesus was not physically with them. And we too are to be "in Him" in our work of witness for Him. The Lord Jesus describes Himself as sent "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"; and yet he sends his preachers likewise solely "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:5,6; 15:24). His mission was theirs, and it is ours. As He was sent out by the Father, so He sends us out; we're all in that sense 'apostles', sent out ones. The Lord sent out the 70 "before his face into every city whither he himself would come". They were heralds of His presence; and He goes on in this

context to tell them that they were “as lambs among wolves”- i.e. they were like Him, *the lamb*- and that therefore “he that rejecteth you rejecteth me” (Lk. 10:1,3,16 RV). Yet significantly, having told the 70 to proclaim His face to the cities where He would come, we find the comment: “Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few [i.e. only 70]: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest. Go your ways...” (:2). Could this not mean that He would have travelled more extensively around Israel in His ministry than He did, but He was limited in the places He witnessed in by whether there were enough heralds to go there in advance and prepare the way? The dearth of workers meant that places He otherwise would have visited, He didn’t- for it seems that He had a policy of only Himself working in areas where His men had broken the ground. And is there not some worrying relevance of all this for our work in *this* day, in *this* hard land...?

All this has quite some practical import. The witness we make stems from our inner experience of and faith in Christ. We are in Him and therefore we effectively *are* Christ to this world. As such, “let a man so account of us as the ministers of Christ”. Our deportment, body language, dress, speech...all these things must reflect the Christ within. Now this doesn’t mean that therefore we must *consciously* dress or act in a Christ-like way when we are preaching, and leave it at an externality. People soon see through externalities. The witness stems from within, and as such these things will be naturally and artlessly reflective of the Lord within who is the master passion of our lives. We must ask, of course, whether He *is* within, and whether our witness is merely contrived, a putting before men of certain true propositions of Biblical exposition, and nothing more... We must examine ourselves, as to what kind of witness we are (and it is more a question of *being* a witness than making one). But if we are in Him and He is within us, then whenever we witness to Him, indeed in our whole lives of witness, He is intensely with us, even to the end of the world.

The Lord’s commission to His preachers comes along with a promise that He would “be with [them] always”. This is perhaps Matthew’s equivalent to John’s promise of the Comforter, who would abide with the Lord’s people for ever. The promise of Holy Spirit support in the work of fulfilling the great commission is not necessarily fulfilled in the ability to do miracles etc. It was in the first century, but not today. Yet the promise that “I am with you always, even [as you fulfil my commission to preach] unto the ends of the world”, is surely fulfilled in the promised Comforter, who is to ‘abide with us for ever’. What does this mean? The Comforter clearly refers to the personal presence of Jesus, even though He is not visibly with us:

<b><i>The Comforter</i></b>	<b><i>The Lord Jesus</i></b>
Will come into the world	Jn. 5: 43; 16:28; 18:37
Comes forth from the Father	Ditto
Given by the Father	Jn. 3:16
Sent by the Father	Jn. 3:17
The spirit of truth	The truth Jn. 14:6
The Holy Spirit	The Holy One of God Jn. 6:69

The disciples would know / recognize the Comforter	As they knew / recognized Jesus Jn. 14:7,9
Would remain within the disciples	Jn. 14:20,23; 15:4,5; 17:23,26
Declares things to come	Jn. 4:25,26
Bears witness, against the world	Jn. 8:14; 7:7
Not accepted by the world	Jn. 5:43; 12:48
Unseen by the world	Jn. 16:16

Because of this, the Lord made a clever word play by saying that “ ‘Peace’ [*shalom*] is my farewell to you” (Jn. 14:27)- when ‘Peace’ was what you said when you met someone, to say ‘Hello’. His farewell in the flesh was His ‘hello’, in that His personal presence would be with them. This Comforter, this personal presence of Jesus, is given *especially in the context of fulfilling the great commission to take Him to the whole world*. He will be with us, there will be a special sense of His abiding presence amongst us, because we are witnessing “in Him”, and our witness is a shared witness with Him. Any who have done any witnessing work, not necessarily missionary work, but any witnessing to Him, will have felt and known His especial presence, as He promised. And we live in a time similar to that when John’s Gospel was written- a time when the church were disappointed the Lord had not returned as quickly as they thought He would, when the eyewitnesses of Jesus in the flesh were not with them any longer. John’s point is that through the Comforter, it’s as good as if Jesus *is* here with us; and he brings out in his gospel how things like the judgment, eternal life, the coming of Jesus etc. all essentially occur within the life of the believer right now.

Peter taught that “God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him” to preach to the Jews (Acts 3:26). Yet the Lord Jesus personally resurrected and ascended to Heaven, having ‘sent’ His followers into the world. Yet because all in Him are so fully His personal witnesses, representative of Him as He is representative of them, in this way it’s true to say that the Lord Jesus personally was “sent” into the world with the Gospel message after His resurrection. And by all means connect this with Peter’s difficult words in 1 Pet. 3:19- that by the spirit of Christ, Christ ‘went’ after His resurrection to preach to those imprisoned. By our sharing His Spirit, we are Him ‘going’ and preaching. In this sense the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Rev. 19:10). And because Peter was alluding to the ‘sending’ of the great commission, he goes on to say that the spiritually imprisoned to whom we preach are saved by the baptism we minister in fulfilment of the great commission, in the same way as the ark saved people in Noah’s day.

### **The Essential Witness**

The above paragraphs have shown beyond doubt that because we are in Christ, therefore we witness Him; and we witness as He witnessed. *His* witness is in fact ours. But there is a sober theme in Scripture: that the essential witness of Christ was in His time of dying. “The preaching [‘the word’] of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18) refers to the way in which the cross itself was and is a witness, rather than speaking of preaching *about* the cross. The blood of Christ speaks a message, better than that of Abel. It is a voice that shakes heaven and earth (Heb. 12:24,26). This is after the pattern of how the commanding voice of Yahweh was heard above the blood sprinkled on “the atonement cover of the ark of the Testimony” (Num. 7:89 NIV). It shows forth, as a voice, God’s righteousness (Rom. 3:25,26 RV). Rev. 19:13 draws a

connection between Christ's title as "the word of God" and the fact His clothing is characterised by the blood of His cross. Ps. 40:9 describes how the Lord Jesus accomplished God's will as the ultimate sacrifice, through the death of the cross. That death is foretold by the Lord, in the prophetic perfect, as 'preaching righteousness to the great congregation' [LXX *ekklesia*]. In living out the dying of the man Christ Jesus in our daily lives, we are making the witness of Christ. In the context of telling His followers to witness to Him, the Lord equates this with taking up their cross daily (Lk. 9:23,26). To not bear that cross is to deny the knowledge of Him before men. To live the crucifixion life is the essential witness. Every act of grace, every evident sign of self-control, every statement of forgiveness towards misunderstanding and unrepentant men...all this is showing something of the cross. And in this, painful and difficult as it is, demanding and driving-to-the-limit as it must be, lies the essence of our being the Lord's witnesses. To witness Christ is not to just painlessly distribute a few tracts. It is to live out the dying of the cross.

In Paul's inspired thought, on the cross the Lord "gave himself" for us (Gal. 1:4; 1 Tim. 2:6; Tit. 2:14). And yet he uses the same Greek words to describe how we are to 'give ourselves' for our brethren (2 Thess. 3:9), to 'give ourselves' in financial generosity to their needs (2 Cor. 8:5), and in Acts 19:31 we meet the same phrase describing how Paul 'gave himself' into the theatre at Ephesus, filled with people bent on killing him, taking the conscious choice to risk his life in order to share the Gospel with others. In this I see a cameo of how the choice of preaching the Gospel is in fact a conscious living out of the Lord's example on the cross. Paul was discouraged from doing so by his friends and brethren; and yet surely he had his mind on the way the Lord 'gave himself' for us in His death, as a conscious choice, and so he brushed aside his reserve, that human desire to do what appears the sensible, safe option... in order to bring others to the cross of Christ. And day by day we have the same choice before us.

"The work that the Father gave me to finish...testifies" (Jn. 5:36 NIV); and thus when "it [was] finished" in the death of the cross, the full testimony / witness of God was spoken and made. When He was lifted up in crucifixion, the beholding Jews knew that His words were truly those of the Father; they saw in the cross God's word spoken through Christ, they saw there the epitome of all the words the Lord spoke throughout His ministry (Jn. 8:28). The Lord's blood was thus a spoken testimony to all men (1 Tim. 2:6 AVmg.). Beholding the cross and the water and blood that flowed from it, John struggled with the inadequacy of human language: "He that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true" (Jn. 19:35). Years later he described himself, in allusion to this, as he "who bare record [in the past tense] of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 1:2). He had earlier commented that the Spirit, water and blood of the cross bore witness (1 Jn. 5:8). John seems to be saying that the Lord's final death which he had witnessed was the word of God, the testimony of Jesus Christ. And as he had been a faithful witness to this, so now he would be of that further revelation he had now seen in the Apocalypse. Because he had beheld the Lord's witness on the cross, he witnessed. For he was in Christ, part of Him, of His life and death. And so are each of us. Paul puts our thesis in so many words, by saying that his preaching to the Galatians had been a placarding forth of Christ crucified before their eyes (Gal. 3:1 Gk.). His witness to them had been a living out of the Lord in His time of dying.

When we read of how we are to be "witnesses" to all the world, a look under the surface of the text shows that the Greek word 'martyr' is being used (Acts 1:8). We're all martyrs. Augustine said that "The cause, not the suffering, makes a genuine martyr." In his play *Murder in the Cathedral*, T. S. Eliot defines a martyr as one "who has become an instrument

of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, not lost it but found it, for he has found freedom in submission to God. The martyr no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of martyrdom". We can all enter into the definition of witness / martyrdom in this sense, insofar as we are 'in' the suffering Christ, even if in practice we may never be called to take a single blow to our body as the result of our witnessing.

### **Identification With Our Audience**

The pattern of preaching which we see in the Father and in the Lord Jesus must be our model. He identified with us in order to 'get through' to us; the power of His personality and work rests in the fact that He was genuinely human. God Himself chose this method, of manifestation in a Son our our nature, in order to redeem us. We can do likewise, in identifying with our audience; living as they do when in a mission field; learning their language, both literally and metaphorically; patient bearing with those suffering from depression, alcoholism, various neuroses... to win them. Thus to the Gentiles Paul became as a Gentile; and as a Jew in order that he might win them who were under the law (1 Cor. 9:20). This is exemplified by the fact that he underwent synagogue floggings (2 Cor. 11:24)- which were only administered to Jews who willingly submitted to the punishment because they were orthodox Jews (2). This was the extent to which Paul became as a Jew in the hope of winning the Jews. Fly by preachers, seeking to establish a colony of their home base, will never achieve much lasting success.

### **Notes**

(1) C.K.Barrett, *Paul* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994) p. 45.

(2) Mentioned in Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion To Jesus In Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) p. 88; E.P. Sanders, *Paul, The Law, And The Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) pp. 177,178 .

## **4. Humility and Preaching**

Two perfectly correct observations have often been made:

1. Despite understanding the true Gospel of salvation, we are not generally very dynamic in preaching it, especially on a personal level. The Presbyterians were pioneering Africa over a century before we cautiously inserted out first press adverts there; the JWs and Baptists were infiltrating Eastern Europe before most Western Christians even knew where cities like Vilnius and Kiev were on the map.
2. Dynamic preaching is often associated with pride. Preaching and humility don't seem to go together. Picture the typical American evangelist in a stadium, full of " I this...I that" , falling over himself in coming out with all his personal experiences. Or even, dare I say it, the well versed young Christian preacher tying up the unsuspecting Roman Catholic in knots, thrashing him with verse after verse. It is so easy for pride to creep in- after all, we're right and they're wrong, and we know it.

### **Powerful Preachers**

The Lord likened His preachers to men reaping a harvest. He speaks of how they fulfilled the proverb that one sows and another reaps (Jn. 4:37,38). Yet this 'proverb' has no direct

Biblical source. What we *do* find in the Old Testament is the repeated idea that if someone sows but another reaps, this is a sign that they are suffering God's judgment for their sins (Dt. 20:6; 28:30; Job 31:8; Mic. 6:15). But the Lord turns around the 'proverb' concerning Israel's condemnation; He makes it apply to the way that the preacher / reaper who doesn't sow is the one who harvests others in converting them to Him. Surely His implication was that His preacher-reapers were those who had known condemnation for their sins, but on that basis were His humbled harvesters in the mission field.

So to help us get a balance between pride and timid silence in preaching, consider the following examples of what *motivated* dynamic preaching by faithful men:

### **Isaiah**

Isaiah realised his unworthiness: " Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips" . He felt he was going to be condemned. But then the Angel comforted him: " Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" . And then immediately he offered to go on a preaching mission to Israel: " Here am I, send me" (Is. 6:5-8). This incident is full of allusion to the sending of an equally hesitant Moses:

<b><i>Moses</i></b>	<b><i>Isaiah</i></b>
God appears in the burning bush	God appears among the seraphim, the burning ones
Moses is reluctant to bear God's word because "I am a man of uncircumcised lips"	Isaiah felt the same- "a man of unclean lips"
Whom shall I send...who will go? (Ex. 3:8,9)	Ditto (Is. 6:8,9)
Moses willing to go (Ex. 3:4)	"Here am I, send me"

### **Peter**

Capturing the spirit of Isaiah, Peter fell down at Christ's feet: " Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord" . But the Lord responded: " Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men" (Lk. 5:8-10). So Peter's deep recognition of his sinfulness resulted in him being given a preaching commission. And in similar vein, Peter was given another commission to teach the word the first time he met Christ after his denials (Jn. 21:15-17). In response to this he stood up and preached that forgiveness of sins was possible to all those that are afar off from God (Acts 2:39). As he did so, consciously or unconsciously, part of his mind must have been back in the way that on that shameful night he followed the Lord "afar off", and far off from Him, denied Him (Mk. 14:54). Peter's vision of the unclean animals in the net taught him that those people whom he considered unclean, he was to "eat", i.e. preach to and fellowship with. When he recounts the vision, he comments [in an account that is strictly factual in all other regards and without any embellishment]: "It [the sheet with the animals] came *even to me*"

(Acts 11:5). He is expressing his unworthiness at being called to the task of preaching, just as Paul likewise expressed his inadequacy.

### **The Disciples**

The even greater commission to go into all the world with the Gospel followed straight on from Christ upbraiding the eleven " with their unbelief and hardness of heart" (Mk. 16:14,15). That 'upbraiding' must have left them wallowing in their weakness. It would have been quite something. The Son of God upbraiding His friends. But straight on from that: " Go ye...go ye into all the world" (Mt. cp. Mk. shows "go ye" was said twice). And He told them to preach that those who believed not would be damned- after having just told them that they were men who believed not. Mark's record stresses three times in the lead up to this that they "believed not"; and then, he records how they were told to go and preach condemnation on those who believed not (Mk. 16:11,13,14,16). They were humbled men who did that. The idea of taking the Gospel world-wide was in fact alluding to Is. 66:17-20. Here those who are spared the 'Gehenna' of the last day judgment will have a sign placed on them, as upon Cain, and they will then be sent "unto the nations...and they shall declare my glory among the gentiles". The rejection process glorifies God's righteous Name, and this world-wide exhibition of the rejected will actually bring men "out of all nations" (:20) to God, just as Israel's condemnation was an "instruction" unto the surrounding nations. The connection shows that in our obedience to the great commission, we go forth as condemned men who in our case, like the disciples, have known the wonder of grace.

### **The Gospel Writers**

The Gospel records were transcripts by the evangelists of their personal preaching of the Gospel. Matthew adds in the list of the disciples that he was "the publican" (Mt. 10:3). And throughout, there are little hints at his own unworthiness- in his own presentation of the Gospel to others. Peter was the public leader of the early ecclesia, and yet the Gospels all emphasise his weaknesses. The Gospels all stress the disciples' lack of spirituality, their primitive earthiness in comparison to the matchless moral glory of God's Son, their slowness to understand the cross. But there are also more studied references to their failures. Mark's account of their words at the feeding of the crowd is shot through with reference to the attitude of faithless Israel in the wilderness: "Where shall we ['And this includes me, Mark...this is what we said to Him...'] get bread to satisfy this people in the wilderness?". John, the disciple beloved by his Lord, brings out the apparent paradox- that he was 'on friendly terms with the High Priest', the great 'satan' of the early Christians, and yet also 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. When John knew full well that the Lord Jesus had taught that a man cannot be friends of both Him and of the persecuting world.

The records seem to stress how slow the disciples were to understand the Lord's essential message; as if to say 'we are preaching this to you, but we know how slow we were to grasp the wonder of it all'. Especially do they stress their inability to accept the message of the cross, which was *exactly* the problem which their hearers had. To the Jews, the cross was a stumblingblock; to the Gentiles, a folly. Luke brings out how "they understood none of these things" and *then*, as a result of that failure to comprehend, Zebedee's wife came asking for special blessing for James and John. Luke is showing how the essential message of cross carrying, to the exclusion of all self-seeking, had been so lost on them all. Having explained His coming and terrible death for them, they come to Him asking for something else; and He gently asked: 'What [more] do you want me to do for you?'. This was the extent of the

writers' self-deprecation as they preached. And it must be noted that the pillars of the early ecclesia, Peter, James and John, are all portrayed as having serious weaknesses in the preaching of the Gospel which we have transcribed in the records. They were not preaching themselves as an infallible organization with charismatic leaders. It's been observed that to title a book e.g. 'The Gospel according to Matthew' was very unusual in the first century. "As a rule, the author would come first, in the genitive, followed by the title indicating the content" (1). But the Gospels are different- the authors purposefully put their names last, recognizing that they were mere channels for the Gospel to pass through. The Gospels likewise emphasize the disbelief of the immediate relatives of Jesus, His "brethren". But they joined the church soon after Christ's ascension (Acts 1:14) and became active missionaries (1 Cor. 9:5). Yet the very Gospels they preached emphasized their initial disbelief and even hostility to Jesus (Mk. 3:21,31; 6:4; Jn. 7:5 etc.).

(1) Martin Hengel, *Studies In The Gospel Of Mark* (London: SCM, 1985) p. 65.

### **Matthew**

The Gospel records, as transcripts of the disciples' early preaching, show the disciples appealing to others to have faith, to believe and be baptized. And yet the same accounts record so often how weak and small was the disciples' faith. Matthew is a classic example: Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20. It was on the basis of this acknowledged weakness of their own, that the disciples could appeal so powerfully to others. The more real they showed themselves to be, the more credible was their appeal.

### **Mark**

There are good reasons for thinking that Mark's Gospel record is actually Peter's; and in his preaching of the Gospel he makes ample reference to his own failures [he contains the most detailed account of the denials of all the Gospels] and to the misunderstanding of his fellows. Both Matthew and Luke record that the Lord asked the three disciples 'Why are you [plural] sleeping?' (Mt. 26:40). It is only Mark who says that the Lord asked this of Peter personally, in the singular (Mk. 14:37). And compare Matthew's "Could ye [plural] not watch with me?" with Mk. 14:37 to Peter: "Coudest not thou [singular] watch?".

### **Luke**

Luke as a doctor would not have been used to publicly confessing his lack of understanding about matters. But in his preaching of the Gospel, he seems to emphasise how he had been blind to the obvious. He records the Lord as pleading with them: "Let these *sayings* sink down into your ears", i.e., 'Please, understand me'. But Luke goes straight on to say: "But they [he includes himself] understood not this *saying*...they perceived it not: and they feared to ask him of that *saying*". Three times he states their blindness, twice repeating how "that saying" which Jesus so wanted them to understand, they didn't. Luke was a Gentile (so Col. 4:11 implies). Note how the other Gospel writers speak of the *sea* of Galilee, whereas the more widely travelled Luke refers to it only as a lake. While Paul was in prison in Caesarea for two years, Luke was a free man (Acts 21:17; 24:27). It seems that during that period, Luke may have spent the time travelling around the areas associated with Jesus, interviewing eye witnesses- especially Mary, the aged mother of Jesus, from whom he must have obtained much of the information about His birth and Mary's song. His preaching of the Gospel in Luke and Acts is made from his perspective- the fact that salvation is for all, not just Jews, is

a major theme (Lk. 2:30-32; 3:6; 9:54,55; 10:25-34; Acts 1:8; 2:17). Luke is the only evangelist to continue the quotation of Is. 40 to include the words “all mankind will see God’s salvation”. And he focuses especially upon the wonder of forgiveness (Lk. 1:77; 7:48; Acts 13:38). Only he records the parable of the prodigal (Lk. 15:11-32), and only he describes the great preaching commission as relating to “repentance and remission of sins” (Lk. 24:47). He begins his account with the announcement that Jesus is good news of great joy; and ends with the apostles returning to Jerusalem with great joy (Lk. 2:10; 24:52). Joy accompanies salvation (Lk. 15:7,10; Acts 8:8,39). So Luke witnessed to the Gospel in terms of who he was- a sinful Gentile- and in terms of what most impressed him: the wonder and joy of forgiveness. He was a doctor. Back in 1882, W. K. Hobart wrote a book entitled *The Medical Language Of St. Luke*, in which he listed more than 400 words shared by Luke and the Greek medical writers of the time. Yes, Luke was inspired to write his record; but all the same, his personality came out in the witness he made and which was transcribed in his Gospel. My point from all this is simply that if we are to be real, credible witnesses, the personal relevance of the Gospel for us will be expressed in how we express it.

“The Gospels are another example of a new creation...they represent a unique departure without parallel in secular literature. Unintentionally, the early Christians, who had no literary pretensions of any kind, created a new genre, a specifically Christian form of art, which had nothing in common with the art of the ancient world” <sup>(1)</sup>. The Gospels were transcripts of the early preaching of the Gospel. Just as they were so different from anything the world had then seen, so the preaching of the Gospel which they record must have been a startlingly different and arresting experience. Here were men who claimed to preach ultimate truth doing so with frequent reference to their own fallibility, getting carried away with their message, bringing out themes in the teaching of Jesus according as the Holy Spirit brought things to their remembrance...in a way quite unlike anything anyone had ever heard. And although we are not inspired as they were, our preaching of the same message should have in essence the same effect.

## **John**

John’s Gospel is the personal testimony of the beloved disciple (Jn. 19:35; 21:24). Not that John was loved any more than the others- his point is surely that ‘I am one whom Jesus so loved to the end’. He describes himself as resting on Jesus’ bosom (Jn. 13:23); yet he writes that Jesus is now in the Father’s bosom (Jn. 1:18). He is saying that he has the same kind of intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus as Jesus has with the Father. Yet John also records how the Lord Jesus repeatedly stressed that the intimacy between Him and the Father was to be shared with all His followers. So John is consciously holding up his own relationship with the Lord Jesus as an example for all others to experience and follow. Yet John also underlines his own slowness to understand the Lord. Without any pride or self-presentation, he is inviting others to share the wonderful relationship with the Father and Son which he himself had been blessed with.

John’s account of Peter’s denial of the Lord is to me very beautifully crafted by him to reflect his own weakness. He [alone of the evangelists] records how he knew a girl who kept the door to the High Priest’s palace, and how he was even known to the High Priest. He speaks to the girl, and she lets Peter in. Then, she recognizes Peter as one of the disciples, that he had been with Jesus, and he makes his shameful denial. But John’s point is clearly this: he, John, was known to the same girl, and to Caiaphas- but they never accused *him* of having been with Jesus. Because they sadly didn’t make the connection between John and Jesus. Yet when they

saw Peter- they knew him as an up front disciple of Jesus. And when Peter ran out in fear and shame, John remained in the High Priest's palace- unrecognized and unknown as a disciple of Jesus. The door girl must have realized that John and Peter were connected- because John had asked her to let Peter in. But she never made the accusation that John also had been one of Jesus' followers. In all this, John reveals his own shame at his lack of open association with the Lord. Significantly, Acts 4:13 records how the Jews later looked at Peter and John "and they took knowledge of them [i.e. recognized them, as the girl had recognized Peter], that they [both!] had been with Jesus". This is the very language of those who accused Peter of having 'been with Jesus'. John learnt his lesson, and came out more publically, at Peter's side, inspired by his equally repentant friend. It's an altogether lovely picture, of two men who both failed, one publically and the other privately, together side by side in their witness, coming out for the Lord.

The style of the inspired Gospel writers [and indeed the writers of the epistles] differs markedly from that of the uninspired Gospels and epistles. The uninspired writers make far more personal attacks upon their critics; the pseudoepigraphical Pastoral epistles are full of reference to the actual names of former or fictitious opponents; Paul, Peter and John are far more sparing. There is far less emphasis upon themselves as the authors, far less [if any] use of the personal pronoun, and a far surpassing humility when compared to the other writers. Thus the Protevangelium of James concludes: "I, James, who have written down this story..." (25:1); and the Childhood Gospel of Thomas begins: "I, Thomas, the Israelite, announce and make known..." (1:1). The *Gospel of Peter* 60 speaks of: "I, Simon Peter, and Andrew my brother, we took our fishing nets..." - whereas Mark, as Peter's Gospel, doesn't refer to this; and Jn. 21:3 records that Peter said "I am going fishing". John especially often refers to unnamed disciples- e.g. "two other disciples" (Jn. 21:3), "a disciple" (Jn. 1:35; 18:15), and references to "the sons of Zebedee" [rather than naming them]. And of course, John refers to himself as "the beloved disciple" rather than naming himself. Significantly, not one of the Gospel writers included their own name as author in the Gospel text. They didn't wish to divert any attention away from the majestic figure who was the centre of their testimony. "Even where Luke (1:1-4) and John (21:24) did in fact make direct allusion to themselves it was with a transparently honest intent which excused them completely from the charge of vanity" <sup>(2)</sup>. And we likewise must not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ. John speaks of himself merely as the disciple whom Jesus loved; and in describing his mother's presence at the cross, he calls her the sister of Jesus' mother, rather than define her by reference to himself. Personal testimony must be the motive, but not the content, of our preaching. Even the Lord Himself seems to have preached with an awareness of His own possibility of failure, for when He spoke of the man who could gain the whole world but forfeit his own soul, He surely had in mind His own wilderness temptation- which undoubtedly recurred. Yet He extends the warning to all His hearers. Likewise we do well to ask ourselves who wrote the book of Jonah. It sounds like Jonah himself. In which case, as with the Gospel writers, we have a man's own testimony to his weakness being his preaching and powerful witness to a sinful world.

## **Paul**

Paul likewise was made deeply conscious of his sin before being given his commission. He was called to preach by grace (Gal. 1:15), and for ever felt unworthy of being either a Christian or an apostle (1 Cor. 15:9). But "straightway" after his baptism, Paul began a zealous campaign of personal witness in Damascus, even before he was told by Christ to preach (Acts 9:20 cp. 22:17-21). Years later he commented: "Unto me , who am less than

the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles" (Eph. 3:8). Therefore he did so "with all humility of mind" (Acts 20:19). He recounts in Acts 22:19-21 how first of all he felt so ashamed of his past that he gently resisted this command to preach: "I said, Lord...I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed...and he said unto me, Depart...unto the Gentiles". The stress on "every synagogue" (Acts 22:19; 26:11) must be connected with the fact that he chose to preach *in the synagogues*. He was sent to persecute every synagogue in Damascus, and yet he purposefully preached in every synagogue there (Acts 9:2,20). His motivation was rooted in his deep recognition of sinfulness. Likewise Peter preached a hundred metres or so from the very place where he denied the Lord.

It seems that the change of name from Saul to Paul ('the little one') was at the time of his first missionary journey (Acts 13:9), as if in recognition of his own humiliation. Paul describes himself as having been called by God, by grace; and in this context he comments how *he* called the Galatians to the grace of Christ (Gal. 1:6 cp. 15). His response to his calling of grace was to go out and preach, thereby calling men to that same grace, replicating in his preaching what God had done for him. Paul directly connects his experience of grace with his witnessing: "I am...not meet to be called an apostle...by the grace of God I am what I am [an apostle / preacher] and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured [as an apostle, in preaching] more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Cor. 15:9,10). He surely isn't boasting that he was worked and preached harder than others. Rather Paul sees a direct connection between the grace of forgiveness that so abounded to him to a greater level than to others, and his likewise abounding preaching work. He speaks as if a man called 'The grace of God' did the work, not him. So close was and is the connection between receipt of grace and labour in the Gospel (he makes the same connection in Eph. 3:8). Note that in the context of 1 Cor. 15, Paul is demonstrating the reality of the Lord's resurrection. Because of it, he received grace and therefore he preached it.

The great commission likewise made the resurrection the imperative behind all preaching. Paul seems to ascribe his own unflagging zeal for preaching to his experience of God's gracious forgiveness of him. And further, he speaks in the third person, suggesting that his fellow preachers had a like motivation: "Therefore, seeing we have this ministry (of preaching), *as we have received mercy*, we faint not" (2 Cor. 4:1). We have suggested elsewhere that Paul was first called to the Gospel by the preaching of John the Baptist. He initially refused to heed the call to "do works meet for repentance". But, fully aware of this, he preached this very same message to others (Mt. 3:8 cp. Acts 26:20). His preaching ministry was proportional to the grace he had received, and in this he saw himself as a pattern to us all (1 Tim. 1:12-16). He makes the connection even more explicit in his argument in 1 Cor. 15:10 and 58: "His grace which was bestowed upon me was *not in vain*; but I *laboured* more *abundantly* than they all" is then applied to each of us, in the final, gripping climax of his argument: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be *ye* steadfast, unmoveable, always *abounding* [as Paul did] in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your *labour* is *not in vain*". And Paul develops the theme in his letters. He speaks of how we received the riches of God's grace (Eph. 1:18; 2:7; 3:8,16); and yet in writing to the Corinthians he uses only to them a specific Greek word meaning 'to enrich'. He reminds them of how we are *enriched by Him* in the knowledge of forgiveness which we have (1 Cor. 1:5; 2 Cor. 9:11), and *therefore* we are to 'enrich' others in our preaching to them of the same grace (2 Cor. 6:10).

When Paul speaks of his sinfulness and weakness, it is nearly always in the context of writing about the privilege and wonder of our commission to preach Christ. He humbly wonders at the trust God places in him, to entrust him with the Gospel. He senses a privilege and responsibility in having been entrusted with the Gospel, to the extent that he can say that his preaching is done more by the grace of God he has received than by the natural Paul (1 Cor. 15:8-10). In Ephesians he coins a word to emphasise his humble status in contrast to the honour of being a preacher: “To me, who am the very least (*elachistotero*) of all the saints, is this grace given, to preach to the Gentiles” (Eph. 3:7). He was a preacher despite the fact he was chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15); only through mercy / forgiveness had he received the commission he had (2 Cor. 4:1). Paul and Barnabas ran amongst the crowd in Lystra shouting “We also are men of like nature with you, and preach unto you, that ye should turn...unto the living God” (Acts 14:15 RVmg.). Exactly because they were ‘one of us’, they could make the appeal of the Gospel. As the Lord Jesus was and is our representative, so we are His representative to men, whilst being ‘one of them’, ‘one of us’. This is why we shouldn’t be afraid to show chinks in our armour, to admit our humanity, and on that basis make appeal to men: that I, as one of us, with all your humanity, your doubts and fears, am appealing to you to grasp that better way. When Paul wrote that if anyone was weak, he was weak, he seems to be saying that the could match their spiritual weakness by his own. This is why personal contact *must be* the intended way to witness. Paul could have written to the Jews in Rome from prison, but he realized that true witness involves personal contact wherever possible: “For this cause therefore did I intreat you to see and to speak with me...” (Acts 28:20 RV). Joshua’s victory over Ai was based on the same secret. He had lamented how Israel had fled before their enemies the first time they attacked Ai, alluding back to the curses for disobedience which Moses had recently pronounced to them. Therefore the second time they attacked Ai, Joshua and his people purposefully fled before their enemies; as if recognizing that the curses for disobedience were justified for them. But by doing this, they ended up chasing their enemies, just as Moses had said they would if they were faithful. No wonder that after the victory, the whole of Israel recited the blessings and cursings (Josh. 8:5,20,33-35 cp. 7:8)!

When Paul speaks of how he laboured more abundantly than all, he seems to be making one of is many allusions back to incidents in the Gospels, this time to Lk. 7:47, where the Lord comments that Mary loved much, because she was forgiven much. It was as if the Lord didn’t need to have knowledge of her sins beamed into Him by a bolt of Holy Spirit; He perceived from her great love how much she had sinned and been forgiven. Paul really felt that Mary was his example, his pattern. And so should we feel. The much love which she had for her Lord was, in Paul’s case, articulated through preaching Him.

One final lesson from Paul in this regard is that he says himself that he was not an eloquent speaker; and the Corinthians were acutely aware of this. And yet it was through his public speaking that many were converted in places like Athens (Acts 17:17). The lesson is clear-God uses us in our weaker points in order to witness powerfully for Him. Uneducated Peter was used as the vehicle with which to reach the intelligentsia of Jerusalem- and you and I likewise in and through our very points of weakness are likewise used to reach people.

### **Hezekiah**

Hezekiah’s response to being granted another 15 years of life was to edit and produce the Songs of Degrees, so named after the degrees of the sundial. Four of the 15 Psalms were by David, one by Solomon; and the other 10 it seems Hezekiah wrote himself but left

anonymous. These ten Psalms would reflect the ten degrees by which the sun-dial went backwards [I am indebted to brother Mark Vincent for this suggestion]. The point to note is that Hezekiah taught others in an anonymous way in response to the grace he had received. True preaching reflects a certain artless selflessness. Likewise Paul writes of his preaching to the Galatians in the third person: "him [Paul] that called you into the grace of Christ" (Gal. 1:6). And likewise he talks about himself while at the Jerusalem conference, where he was given so clearly the ministry of converting the Gentiles, as if he hardly identifies himself with himself: "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago...I knew such a man...of such an one will I glory, yet of myself I will not glory" (2 Cor. 12:1-4- the context makes it clear that Paul refers to himself, seeing that he was the one given the thorn in the flesh as a result of the revelations given to this "man"). In 1 Thess. 1:5 Paul could have written: 'We came with the Gospel', but instead he uses the more awkward construction: 'Our Gospel came...'. He, Paul, was subsumed beneath the essence of his life work- the preaching of the Gospel.

### **Legion**

One minute, poor Legion was screaming at the Son of God: " What have I to do with thee, Jesus?" . Moments later he was converted- and being given a command to personally witness to his own family (the hardest of all preaching commissions; Lk. 8:28,39).

### **Israel**

The whole point of Judah's exile in Babylon was to make them "ruined, unfit for use" like the cloth which Jeremiah buried by Euphrates (Jer. 13:7). And yet the second half of Isaiah is full of expressions of God's desire to use Israel after their experience in Babylon as His witness to the nations. Israel's preparation for their mission was through being made "unfit for use". And so God prepares His missionaries and ambassadors today likewise.

In the Millennium, God will use a repentant Israel to achieve great things in terms of converting this world unto Himself. They will walk up and down in His Name, witnessing to Him as He had originally intended them to (Zech. 10:12); men will cling to their skirts in order to find the knowledge of their God (Zech. 8:23). "In that day will I cause the horn of the house of Israel to bud forth, and I will give thee (Israel) the opening of the mouth in the midst of them (the surrounding nations, see context); and *they* shall know that I am the LORD", in that Israel will preach to them from their own experience of having recently come to know Yahweh (Ez. 29:21). But at the time of the Lord's return, when Israel repent and enter the new covenant with Him, they will remember all their past sins "and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame...for all that thou hast done" (Ez. 16:63). They will be so ashamed that *they will feel as if* they can never open their mouth. But Yahweh will open their mouth, and they will witness. In some anticipation of this, Ezekiel as the "son of man" prophet, a representative of his people just as the Lord was to be, had his mouth shut in dumbness, and he only had his mouth opened when Israel came to know [to some degree] that "I am the LORD" (Ez. 24:27). In all these evident connections something marvellous presents itself. Those who feel as if they just cannot open their mouths in witness are the very ones whom the Father will use; He will open their mouths and use them exactly because they are ashamed of their sins! And so it should be with us.

Likewise Isaiah foretold that when Israel know their forgiveness and salvation, they will therefore quite naturally "declare his doings among the people" (Is. 12:1-5). This will be the motivation for Israel's witness to the world during the Millennium. They will fill the face of

the world with spiritual fruit – and this will be the fruit of the taking away of their sin, and their experience of repentance (Is. 27:6,9 RV).

### **Moses and Jeremiah**

Both Moses and Jeremiah reacted to their preaching commissions by saying that they weren't the right person to do it. Moses wasn't an eloquent speaker, nor [so he said] did he know Egyptian very well any more. His comment was: "Who am I...?" (Ex. 3:11; 4:10). Jeremiah protested that he was simply far too young (Jer. 1:6). But as Peter spoke *a-grammatos*, without grammar to an educated, erudite audience (Acts 4:13 Gk.), so did these men. And this was just the attitude of mind which God wanted to use as His mouthpiece. If you feel your inadequacy, then this is just when you are ready for God's use. It's the young sister who still fumbles for where books are in her Bible who is more likely to be the Lord's agent for conversion, than the well versed and over-confident brother giving a Christian talk.

### **The Samaritan Woman**

The Samaritan woman at the well had a sense of shame and deep self-knowledge over her, as she realised that Christ knew her every sin. It was with a humble sheepishness that she confessed: " I have no husband" , because she was living in sin. She was converted by that well. Immediately she " left her waterpot, and went her way into the city (the record inviting us to watch her from a distance), and saith to the *men* (significantly), Come, see a man...is not this the Christ?" (Jn. 4:17,28,29). There was a wondrous mixture of enthusiasm and shyness in those words: " Come, see a man..." . It is a feature of many new converts that their early preaching has a similar blend. It is stressed that men believed because of the way the woman told them "He told me all that ever I did" (Jn. 4:39). He had recounted her past sins to her (4:18,19). And she now, in matchless humility, goes and tells her former life to her associates, using the very words of description which the Lord had used. He convicted her of her sins, and this conviction resulted in her unashamed witness.

### **Jonah**

There are a number of Old Testament examples of preaching the word after becoming aware of the depth of one's own sins. Consider Jonah preaching the second time, with the marks in his body after three days in the whale, admitting his rebellion against Yahweh, pleading with them to respond to His word. Reflect how when his head was wrapped around with seaweed, at the bottom of the sea at the absolute end of mortal life, he made a vow to God, which he then fulfilled, presumably in going back to preach to Nineveh (Jonah 2:9). His response to having confessed his sins and daring to believe in God's forgiveness, turning again towards His temple even from underwater, was to resolve to preach to others if he was spared his life. And this he did, although as with so many of us, the pureness of his initial evangelical zeal soon flaked. Or consider Manasseh, 2 Chron. 33:16; Jehoshaphat, 2 Chron. 19:3 cp. 18:31; 19:2; Josiah, 2 Chron. 34:29,32; Nebuchadnezzar, Dan. 3:29; 4:2...

### **Job**

The conversion of Job is especially poignant; he prays for his friends, he mediates for them, after gratefully realising that his own search for mediation with God in order to obtain forgiveness had somehow been answered, by grace (Job 42:6,8). After the same pattern, Aaron ought to have died for his flouting of the first commandment in making the golden

calf; but Moses' intercession alone saved him. And afterwards, deeply conscious of his experience, Aaron made successful intercession for the salvation of others (Num. 14:5; 16:22). The way he holds the censer with fire from the altar of incense, representing his prayers, and "stood between the dead and the living [as a mediator]" (Num. 16:48) is a fine picture of the height to which he rose.

### **Nebuchadnezzar**

Nebuchadnezzar's multi-lingual preaching of the greatness of God's Kingdom "to all nations" can easily be read unappreciated (Dan. 4:17,34). But it must have been quite something, involving translating the Gospel of the Kingdom of God into many languages; and it incorporated a very humble expression of his own failures, a recognition of his foolish pride and lack of repentance. And maybe this is exactly why he was the one used by God to make the widest and greatest Old Testament witness to the Gospel of the Kingdom.

### **Adam**

Adam sinned, and God responded to that ineffable tragedy by giving him a "coat" of skin. The same Hebrew word is used concerning the priestly robe. Here we see again the positive nature of our God. There was Adam, pining away in the shame of his sin; and God dresses him up like a priest, to go forward to gain forgiveness for him and his wife; and perhaps later on he used that same coat in coming to God to obtain further forgiveness for others through sacrifice.

### **David**

But the greatest Old Testament example is David after his sin with Bathsheba. Morally disgraced in the eyes of all Israel and even the surrounding nations, not to mention his own family, David didn't have a leg to stand on when it came to telling other people how to live their lives. A lesser man than David would have resigned all connection with any kind of preaching. But throughout the Bathsheba psalms there is constant reference to David's desire to go and share the grace of God which he had experienced with others (Ps. 32 title; 51:13). He titles them 'maschil'- for instruction / teaching. "Have mercy upon me, O Lord...that I may shew forth all thy praise in the gates" (Ps. 9:13,14). He often uses the idea of 'confession', in the double Hebrew sense of both confessing sin and yet also confessing the knowledge of God to others (e.g. Ps. 30:12 AV cp. NEB). Imagine *his* attitude in preaching! There must have been a true humility in his style of speaking, his body language and in his message- coupled with an earnestness and intensity few have since matched. Ps. 39:9,11 seems to describe an illness with which David was afflicted after his sin with Bathsheba. Psalm 40 then seems to be giving thanks for David's cure and receipt of forgiveness; and it is replete with reference to David's desire to spread the word: "He brought me up also out of an horrible pit...he hath put a new song in my mouth...many shall see it, and fear, and turn to the Lord [alluded to in the way the Acts record accounts for the many conversions after the death of Ananias and Sapphira]...blessed is that man [cp. 32:1]...I have preached righteousness [a 'prophetic perfect', meaning 'I will do this...'] in the great congregation: lo, I have not refrained my lips...I have declared (LXX *euangelizesthai*- evangelized) thy faithfulness and thy salvation [unto]...the great congregation" (Ps. 40:2-5,9,10).

Many of the Psalms reflect David's realization that confession of sin is the basis for powerful preaching. The LXX often uses the verb *euangelizesthai* to describe his preaching after the

Bathsheba incident (Ps. 96:2). Because God has mercifully forgive His people and His face shines upon them in renewed fellowship, His way is thereby made known upon earth to all nations (Ps. 67:1,2). He utters forth the mighty acts of God with the preface: "Who can utter the mighty acts of the Lord, who can shew forth all his praise?" (Ps. 106:2)- and then proceeds to do just that. He did so with a clear recognition of his own inadequacy. The Psalms of praise are full of this theme. David exhorts all those who have been redeemed to show forth God's praise (Ps. 107:2,22,32). He wanted all Israel to be a joyful, witnessing people. And even though it seems God's people didn't respond, David went on undeterred. Time and again he fearlessly sets himself up as Israel's example. He speaks of how *he* trusts in the Lord's grace, and then appeals to Israel to do just the same (Ps. 62:7,8). The strength of his appeal was in the fact that his sin and experience of grace was the bridge between him and his audience.

### **Bridge Building**

If we know God in an experiential sense (and not just knowing theological theory about Him), we know that our sins are forgiven. We preach to others "Know the Lord!", exactly because "I will be merciful to their iniquities" (Heb. 8:11,12). It is our knowledge of God's mercy to us which empowers us to confidently seek to share with others our knowledge, our relationship, our experience with God. Forgiveness inspires the preacher; and yet the offer of forgiveness is what inspires the listener to respond. God appeals for Israel to respond by pointing out that in prospect, He has already forgiven them: "I have [already] blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions...[therefore] return unto me; for I have redeemed thee" (Is. 44:22). Likewise Elijah wanted Israel to know that God had already in prospect turned their hearts back to Him (1 Kings 18:37). We preach the cross of Christ, and that through that forgiveness has been enabled for all men; but they need to respond by repentance in order to access it. Hence the tragedy of human lack of response; so much has been enabled, the world has been reconciled, but all this is in vain if they will not respond.

Preaching is all about relationships. The Lord commanded to not go from house to house but rather build up a base in one home (Lk. 10:7). I take this to mean that He saw the importance of relationship building in preaching, rather than a surface level contact with many people of the type achieved in more public addresses. The essence of witness is relationship building. The preacher is seeking to build a bridge across the terrible chasm which lies between him and his audience; between the word of God and the world, between Divine revelation and human experience, relating the two to each other in a credible, relevant way. The way to go across that chasm is surely to bond with the other person's humanity- for we are all human. This is what we have in common. It's actually how God reached us- His word became flesh in the person of Jesus, in all the particularity of a first century Palestinian Jew. Jesus was totally human; He spoke human language. Yet He was the supreme manifestation of God to us. In essence, God did the same thing in the way He chose to write the Bible. He breathed His word into ordinary men, and they wrote it down with all the trappings of human words. It is the word of God, spoken through men. So Luke writes his Gospel packed with the medical terminology we would expect of a doctor; Paul writes to his converts with all the native passion and feeling of a spiritual father, a preacher, a traveller, a Roman citizen, with his own pet phrases and ideas...and yet it is all, undeniably, the very word of God. The word was made flesh. The Bible wasn't written on tables and hidden on the top of a mountain for us to go and find. It was communicated to us through very human people, whose personal humanity is somehow reflected in the form in which it came through to us. In our style of preaching we need to reflect that we know and feel the doubts and fears which there are in

our listeners; that we perceive and appreciate their humanity, because we too are human. Bridge building involves us becoming 'as' our target audience- as Paul was a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles. Thus the Lord tells the disciples to go forth and preach as sheep / lambs (Mt. 10:16); in order to appeal to the lost sheep of Israel (Mt. 10:6). They were to be as sheep to win the sheep.

### **Paul as a Bridge Builder**

Have a read some time through Romans 3:1-6 and notice Paul's style. He perceives in advance the objections which his readers will raise. And we in our preaching ought to be more honest about our own difficulties of understanding. The Gospel records are transcripts of the early preaching of the Gospel by, e.g., Matthew. Yet the records show the disciples' own struggle to really grasp and believe the very basic things of the death and resurrection of Jesus which they were now preaching. Further, it is clear that we are to seek to relate to our audience in a way they can relate to. Using their terms, shewing our common binds with them. Paul did this when he was faced with the rather mocking comment that he was a "setter forth" of a strange God. He replied that he 'set forth' to them the One whom they ignorantly worshipped (Acts 17:18,23 RV). He seized upon something they all knew- the altar to the unknown God- and made his point to them from that. And he picked up the noun they used for him and turned it back to them as a verb. It might seem that it was impossible that Paul, having been beaten and in chains, guarded by soldiers, could make a hand gesture, say a few words in Hebrew, and quell a raging crowd (Acts 21:31-34; 22:22). Yet it was because he spoke to them in Hebrew, in their own language and in their own terms, that somehow the very power and realness of his personality had such an effect. It reminds us of how the Lord could send crowds away, make them sit down...because of His identity with them, His supreme bridge building.

Paul would pay any price in order to identify with his audience, in order to win them to Christ. He was living out the spirit of Jesus, who likewise identified Himself with us to the maximum extent in order to save us. It was a profitable exercise for me to research the background of Paul's statement that five times he received "forty lashes minus one" at the hands of the Jews (2 Cor. 11:24). This was a synagogue punishment, based on Dt. 25:2,3, which could only be administered to members of the synagogue community- and apparently, the members had the right under local Roman law to resign from the synagogue and escape the punishment (1). It would've been far easier for Paul to disown Judaism and insist he was not a member of any synagogue. But he didn't. Why? Surely because this was the extent to which he was willing to be all things to all men, to truly be a Jew in order to save the Jews. And we too can chose daily the extent to which we identify ourselves with those whom we seek to save. It's not simply the case of a Western missionary suffering privations along with the impoverished local population to whom he or she seeks to preach. It's about us each getting involved in the mess of others' lives, at great personal cost, in order to show true solidarity with them, on which basis we can more effectively witness to them. This is surely the way in which we are to 'love the world'; this inhuman world, this enormous collection of desperate, lonely people, into whose mundane experiences we can enter simply through genuine, caring, person-to-person encounter. And by doing this we will find ourselves. For it seems to me that the truly creative and original personalities, the Lord Jesus being the supremest, are those who give of themselves in order to enter into the lives and sufferings of others. And that, by the way, may explain why there are so few truly freethinking minds. Paul didn't just love the Jewish people in theory, he didn't draw a distinction between the Jews as

persons, and their role or status before God. He loved them as persons, and so he suffered for them in order to save them.

(1) See Raymond Westbrook, ‘Punishments and crimes’ in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) Vol. 5 pp. 546-556.

## **The Prophets**

Jeremiah witnessed to Zedekiah on the basis of bridge building. Jeremiah warned him that politically and spiritually, " thy feet are sunk in the mire" - just after he himself had " sunk in the mire" and been miraculously delivered from it (Jer. 38:6,22). It is apparent that our bridge building must relate our doctrines to the real issues which face those with whom we seek to communicate. We must build bridges into the real world in which these people who are our audience live and love, work and play, laugh and weep, struggle and suffer, grow old and die. We need to provoke them to see their life in all its moods from a Godly, Biblical perspective, to challenge them to make the Son of God the Lord of every area of their lives, and thus to demonstrate His immense and crucial relevance. The aim of our preaching must surely be to expound the Bible so faithfully and relevantly that Jesus is perceived in all His adequacy to meet every human need. And as we should repeatedly emphasize, we are merely inspiring people to find God for themselves. Even in pastoral work with those we convert, we are to be gentle shepherds. But shepherds don't actually feed the sheep by pushing food down their mouths. They lead them to where they can feed for themselves. This is the end result of our bridge building. If we are to build bridges into the real world, we must beware of two extremes: to withdraw from the world into dry, abstract, academic exposition; and to on the other hand withdraw from the Bible text and implications in compromising with the world and what it wants to hear.

In Ez. 24:22-24, Ezekiel’s feelings of grief for the loss of his wife were to be understood as representative of two things- Israel’s grief for losing the temple, and God’s grief over losing His people. In this way, Ezekiel was set up as a bridge builder, in that his feelings reflected both those of God and those of his audience- in order that his preaching could come over as God appealing to them. And consciously and unconsciously, this is how God uses us too, today. By opening our hearts to others, they open theirs to us and to the Lord. This was precisely how Paul dealt with Corinth. He opened his mouth and his heart to them, and in return he asks them: “Open you hearts to us” (2 Cor. 6:11; 7:2 RV). Paul received them into his heart (2 Cor. 7:3), and wished to be received into theirs.

## **Peter**

We have spoken of how Peter was so powerful as a preacher, standing only a stone’s throw from where he denied his Lord, to make a speech which is studded with conscious and unconscious reference to his own denials and need for the Lord’s salvation. Yet consider in more detail his preaching to Cornelius: “I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him [Peter alludes here to Old Testament passages such as Dt. 1:17; 10:17; Prov. 24:23; Is. 64:5]. The word which God sent unto the children of Israel...that word, ye know” (Acts 10:34-37). Peter is saying that he only *now* perceives the truth of those well known Old Testament passages. He is admitting that the truth of his Lord’s criticism of him, that he had been so slow of heart to believe what the prophets had spoken. And yet Peter masterfully goes on to show solidarity with his readers- he tells them that they too had already heard “the word” and yet now they

like him needed to believe the word which they already knew. In doing this, Peter is bridge building, between his own humanity and that of his hearers. And the wonder of it all is that it seems this happened quite naturally. He didn't psychologically plan it all out. His own recognition of sinfulness quite naturally lead him into it.

### **Jesus and the Essenes**

The Lord's attitude to the Essenes is a case study in bridge building- developing what we have in common with our target audience, and yet through that commonality addressing the issues over which we differ. The Dead Sea scrolls reveal that the terms ""poor in spirit" and "poor" are technical terms used only by the Essenes to describe themselves" (1). So when the Lord encouraged us to be "poor in spirit" (Mt. 5:3), He was commanding the Essene position. Likewise when He praised those who were eunuchs for God's Kingdom (Mt. 19:10-12), He was alluding to the Essenes, who were the only celibate group in 1st century Israel. And yet lepers were anathema to the Essenes, and the Lord's staying in the home of Simon the leper (Mk. 14:3) was a purposeful affront to Essene thinking. The parable of the Good Samaritan has been seen as another purposeful attack upon them; likewise the Lord's teaching: "You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy" (Mt. 5:43). It was the Essenes in their *Rule Of The Community* who taught that Essenes must yearly chant curses upon their enemies (2). So the Lord even within Matthew 5, and certainly within His teaching as a whole, both commended and challenged the Essenes; His bridge building didn't involve just accepting their position.

(1) J.H. Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 1986) p. 68.

(2) Y. Yadin, *The Temple Scroll* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1985) p. 177.

### **The Flash**

Occasionally there is a 'flash' between two people. It may last only a moment, perhaps a few minutes... when somehow barriers come down, and they relate as persons. Those encounters are powerful, and can cause major redirections in life. Perhaps in those precious moments we have some kind of presentiment of what the Kingdom life will be like, or at least, what human communication really should be. Those moments, that 'flash', is worth almost anything to create. Indeed, so unusual is it, that afterwards one sometimes senses barriers going up, a fear that somehow we've become too personal. Merely quoting Bible verses at a person won't create this 'flash'; strings of quotations themselves don't break the unspoken conspiracy of silence which there so often is between two persons in supposed dialogue. By 'silence' I mean silence of real dialogue and mutual interaction. Yet frustratingly enough, those moments of 'flash' are not far beneath the surface in so many of those 'silent conversations', those 'discussions' which actually go nowhere. Only by risking yourself, showing your humanity, can you break through their barriers. Underneath, people want to relate to other people. Underneath, real discussion of religion, of death, of life, of hope, of Christ... is all a taboo subject which people want to talk about but feel inhibited and embarrassed about. It's like how before the 1970s, sex was once the taboo subject which everyone wanted to talk about. But the barriers and taboos about it are now largely broken through. And it's the same in our age with these religious / spiritual matters. People want to talk about them subconsciously; and we are on the cusp of a new period in which they can and are spoken about more openly.

## Why Aren't We Dynamic Preachers?

So we return to our initial questions. Why aren't we dynamic preachers? In the light of all the above examples, it must be related to the fact that we don't appreciate the seriousness of our sin as we should. We see ourselves as little sinners, just a fraction over the line, we come to the end of the day with no real sense of having offended God, no sense of how deeply sin and indifference *hurts* Him. Perhaps we see God as altogether too human, like us not very shocked at habitual sin, comfortably numb to the fact that sinful thoughts really are as bad as the action. God's words to Israel are so relevant to us, living in a world where sin means nothing, and where God never openly intervenes in judgment: " These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself...but I will set them in order before thine eyes (at the judgment)" (Ps. 50:21,22). And it can be that we also lack the faith, or perhaps the concentration and reflection, to meditate on the actual reality of sin forgiven that we have experienced in Christ.

And yet perhaps too we genuinely think that by not showing any chinks in our armour, we will better persuade people. When, I submit, the very opposite is true. By showing that we are real men and women, who are desperate sinners thankful for the real and true grace we have so wonderfully come across, we will persuade men. The more real, the more credible. Paul described the genius of his preaching thus: "By the manifestation of truth commanding ourselves to every man's conscience" (2 Cor. 4:2). It is our very transparency which strikes a chord in the heart of those who hear us. James warns his converts of the need to restrain our tongue; and yet he admits that "we", himself included, use the tongue to bless God and curse men; whereas in other parts of his letter he addresses his readers as "you" when he criticizes their behaviour. But in this matter of the tongue, he holds himself, their teacher, to be afflicted with the same failures as them (James 3:9 cp. 4:15,16). The preaching of the Kingdom by us is likened to leaven- a symbol for that which is unclean (Mk. 8:15; 1 Cor. 5:6-8). Perhaps the Lord used this symbol to show that it is our witnessing as humans, as the sons of men, which is what will influence the 'lump' of humanity. People are increasingly acting like the personalities they feel they are expected to be, rather than *being* who they *are*. Paul Tournier perceptively notes: "I am sure my readers understand the subtle temptation which assails me: that of trying to be the personage I am expected to be. It slips in disguised as an honest concern for the proper fulfilment of my vocation...they are always disconcerted at first when I speak of my own difficulties, doubts and failings. But they soon come to see that this atmosphere of truth brings us closer and binds us together. My experience of the power of God means more to them than it would if they thought me a quite different sort of person from themselves" <sup>(4)</sup>. Cain as the firstborn was the family priest. He apparently lost credibility when the fire came down and consumed Abel's offering, but not his. Immediately it seemed that Abel was going to usurp Cain as the family priest. Therefore he was told to offer the animal that was 'couching' at the door of the meeting place, and then "unto thee shall be his [Abel's] desire, and thou shalt rule over him" (Gen. 4:7). Surely this means that if Cain had openly recognized his mistake and then done the right thing, he would have risen to even higher levels of spiritual credibility with his younger brother.

The world is tired of slick, well dressed evangelists with ever smiling wives. We tend to feel that we can never sensibly compete with the charismatic preachers of other groups. But amongst the unchurched, "the least stock was placed in whether the leader of the organization is "articulate and charismatic": only 12% said they deem that to be very important". Likewise the size of the church or the travel time to the meeting placed were seen by the unchurched as insignificant <sup>(5)</sup>. We might think that the big evangelical churches are so wonderfully

successful. They aren't. Their own journals point out the way they are no longer making many real converts, rather, that nexus of 'Christian' is merely moving around between churches. Islam is growing, but not 'evangelical Christianity'. People are sick and tired of it. Yet they *are* interested in religion- our church's 'Learn To Read The Bible' seminars prove that- and they *are* interested, at least theoretically, in Bible based Christianity. But they want something and someone who is *real*. Not necessarily a mass murderer who says he has come to Christ in prison; but the guy who works at the desk next to them, who answers the dumb question 'How are you today?' by admitting that he swore at his wife last night, that he hates himself for it, that he feels even worse because he sinned against God, and yet he takes real comfort in a representative Jesus, who had our nature, who wasn't the hocus-pocus Jesus of theological creed, but a real man, a real Saviour, who, thankfully, is at the right hand of God Himself in Heaven to make reconciliation for *me*, in all my desperation with myself... The more real, the more credible.

'How are you today?...Oh fine, I went to church last night...Yes? Oh, that's nice...', these conversations have no meaning, they are merely a passage of words, a kicking time as we both watch the wheels of life go round; whereas in the urgency of our task to convert men and women, we must be stopping them in their tracks, arresting their attention. To hold and present the Truth of God, with all its exclusivity, its implicit criticism of all that isn't true, *in a genuine humility*...this has a drawing power all of its own. The two witnesses of Rev. 11:3 make their witness [and will make it during the latter day tribulation?] "clothed in sackcloth"- a symbol of repentance and recognition of sin (Gen. 37:34; Jer 4:8; Jonah 3:5; Mk. 2:20). Their own personal repentance and acceptance of God's gracious forgiveness was the basis of their appeal to others. And is it going too far to understand that if these "two witnesses" do indeed represent the latter day witness of true Christianity, it will be made on the basis of a genuine repentance by us, brought about by the experiences of the holocaust to come?

Jonah was the great example. How was it that one unknown man could turn up in a huge city and make all of them believe that judgment was really coming, and they really must repent? Why ever listen to this one man? He must surely have told them the story of his own disobedience, experience of judgment, and gracious salvation. There was something about him that proved to that city that this had really happened; that there was and is a God of judgment above. Perhaps the "sign" of the prophet Jonah was in that 3 days in the fish had bleached his hair, made him thin, making him look arrestingly different. Whatever it was, his antotypical experience of fellowship with the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus was enough to arrest a whole city in its tracks. Again, the more real, the more credible.

### **Big Sinners**

If we want spiritual dynamism in our lives, and not least in our preaching, there must be a true recognition of the guilt of our iniquity. Any element of either pride or indifference in our preaching can be traced back to our failure to do this. It is God's mercy, and appreciating it, which leads us to lives of active faithfulness (1 Cor. 7:25). We may look at David, at Paul, and feel we haven't sunk to their level of sin. Of course, that would imply we are better than them... But to hate our brother really is to kill him, and to a man we stand guilty of flashes of hatred. So we *can* know the dynamism of their repentance, of their zeal to share the Good News of God's grace. this must be so, otherwise Paul would not have held up his own conversion and subsequent zeal as an example for us to copy (1 Tim. 1:15,16). We *aren't* little sinners. It was our race who crucified the Lord of glory, and we have some part in their behaviour. Note the pronouns in Is. 53. The "we" who preach the Gospel of the cross are the

“we” who rejected and condemned the Saviour, and the “we” whose sins are forgiven and who are reconciled to God. *These* are the reasons why we preach the crucified Christ in zeal and humility (Is. 53:1,2,3,5,6). Grace is the motive power for witness; we preach the word of His grace as it has been to *us*. “The grace of God, that bringeth salvation to all men...” (Tit. 2:11) is an allusion to the great commission to preach salvation to all men. But here, grace is said to do this. The conclusion seems unavoidable: grace and the preacher are inextricably linked. The experience of grace is the essential motive behind all witness. Thus Paul was “recommended” [Gk. To surrender, yield over to] to the grace of God for the missionary work which he fulfilled (Acts 14:26).

So we don't need to psychologically charge ourselves up to preach. A city set on a hill *cannot* be hid, it's obvious. Our preaching should flow naturally out of our own personal experience of God's grace. The fact that we were reconciled is tied up with the fact that we have been given, as part of this “being reconciled”, the ministry of preaching reconciliation (2 Cor. 5: 18-20). It is the greatness of God's grace which will form the content of our preaching, not our own practical experience of it. Our experience will only motivate us personally, not anyone else. We preach not ourselves, but Christ as Lord and Saviour. Let's really get down to serious self examination, to more finely appreciating the holiness of God and the horror of sin. If we can do this- and only if- our preaching, our speaking, our reasoning, even our very body language, will be stamped with the vital hallmark: humility.

#### **APPENDIX: The Example Of John The Baptist As A Preacher**

If ever a man was hard on himself, it was John the Baptist. His comment on his preaching of Christ was that he was not worthy (RVmg. ‘sufficient’) to bear Christ's sandals (Mt. 3:11). The sandal-bearer was the herald; John knew he was heralding Christ's appearing, but he openly said he was not worthy to do this. He felt his insufficiency, as we ought to ours. Would we had that depth of awareness; for on the brink of the Lord's coming, we are in a remarkably similar position to John. Paul perhaps directs us back to John when he says that we are not “sufficient” to be the savour of God to this world; and yet we are made sufficient to preach by God (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5,6 RV).

Although John preached the excellence of Christ, he didn't even consider himself to be part of the mystic bride of Christ; for he likens himself to only the groom, watching the happiness of the couple, but not having a part in it himself (Jn. 3:29). And note how John appeals for men to be baptized with the twice repeated personal comment: “...and I knew him not”, in the very context of our reading that the [Jewish] world “knew him not” (Jn. 1:10, 31,33). He realises that he had withheld the knowledge of the Son of God, just as others had. When asked who he was, John's reply was simply: “a voice”. Amos, in the same way, was told not to keep on prophesying; but he replies: “I am no prophet...the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy” (Am. 1:14,15 RV). It's almost contradictory: ‘I'm not a prophet...I am a prophet’. He was truly selfless, like, John, just a voice for God. Samuel spoke of himself at a distance from himself when he told Israel: “The Lord sent Jerubbaal...and Samuel...and delivered you” (1 Sam. 12:11). Luke's record of the preaching of the Gospel makes no reference to the deaths of Peter and Paul, even though they were central to his historical account. Clearly he reflected the fact that personalities are not to be important in preaching; there is a selflessness about true preaching and also the recording of it. Matthew's preaching of the Gospel makes reference to himself as if he had no personal awareness of himself as he recounted his part in the Gospel events (Mt. 9:9). There is reason to believe that Matthew was himself a converted Scribe; the way he has access to various versions of Scripture and quotes them as having been

fulfilled in a way reminiscent of the Jewish commentaries (compare Mt. 4:12-17 with Mk. 1:14,15) suggests this(3). The point is that in this case Matthew would be referring to himself when he writes: "Every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old" (Mt. 13:52). Yet he does so in a beautifully oblique and selfless manner.

John's humility is further brought out by the way John fields the question as to whether he is "the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?" (Jn. 1:25). He could have answered: 'I am the Elijah prophet'- for the Lord Himself said of John that "this is Elijah", with perhaps conscious reference back to this question (Mt. 11:14). But John didn't answer that way. His reply was simply to speak of the greatness of Christ and his unworthiness to be His herald (Jn. 1:26,27). John's humility is brought out yet further by reflection on the fact that he clearly baptized huge numbers of people, and yet also had a group of people known as 'the disciples of John'. Clearly he didn't intend to found a sect, and was so taken up with trying to prepare people for the Lord's coming that he simply wished to lead them to some level of repentance and baptize them, without necessarily making them part of 'his disciples'. John's low self-estimation is seen in how he denied that he was "Elijah" or the "prophet" whom the Jews expected to come prior to Messiah (Jn. 1:21). The Lord Himself clearly understood John as the Elijah prophet- "this is Elijah" (Mt. 11:14), He said of John. John wasn't being untruthful, nor did he misunderstand who he was. For he associates his "voice" with the voice of the Elijah prophet crying in the wilderness, and appropriates language from the Elijah prophecy of Mal. 4 to his own preaching. His denial that he was 'that prophet' therefore reflects rather a humility in him, a desire for his message to be heard for what it was, rather than any credibility to be given to it because of his office. There's a powerful challenge for today's preacher of the Gospel.

## The Old Testament Background

The message of Is. 40:3 is that before the final coming of the Lord, there will be a proclamation of this by His people: "Prepare ye [plural] the way of the Lord". As the King's servants went ahead of him to make the path he had to travel smooth and plain [remember there were no motorways then!], so we go ahead of the returning Lord of all the earth, to prepare the way / road for Him. And yet within Isaiah, there is ample evidence that God prepares His own way: "I will do a new thing...I will even make a way in the wilderness" (Is. 43:19). Perhaps the element of unreality here, the 'new thing', is that the King Himself prepares His own way or road. Or again: "I will make all my mountains a way" (Is. 49:11). The connection with Is. 40:3 is that in the work of preparing the Lord's way, in the last great preaching appeal of all time in the lead up to the second coming, the Lord Himself will work with us to make that way plain and clear. In all the challenges of the latter day fulfilment of the great commission, the Lord Himself will work with us.

The Isaiah 40 passage is therefore a command for our latter day witness to all the world, Israel especially, to prepare their way for the Lord's coming. We are to "cry" unto Zion that "her iniquity is pardoned", but we are also to 'cry' for her to repent, to be "made straight", for the rough places to be 'made plain'; to "cry aloud...lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression (Is. 40:2-4; 58:1). It's exactly because we have in prospect been forgiven that we are called to repent. The forgiveness has already been granted; iniquity has been pardoned. We are to 'cry' out this fact; and also to 'cry out' for repentance. But we have to respond to that. It's similar to how Saul/Paul was called 'brother' even before his conversion and baptism. The world's redemption was achieved through the cross; but we

have to appeal to the world to accept it. And in our own lives we must live out what we are preaching to others; exactly because we have already been forgiven, we need to repent of what we've been forgiven of, to as it were claim that forgiveness as our very own. And the same Hebrew word translated ‘cry’ occurs in the same context in Is. 40:26; 43:1; 45:3,4; 48:12; 54:6, where we read that it is God Himself who calls every one of Israel back to Him, just as He calls every star by its own personal name. And so in our personal calling of men and women, in our crying out to them in these last days to be prepared for the Lord’s coming, we are workers together with God. He is crying out to them, through our feeble, shy, embarrassed, uncertain words of witness. Likewise it is God Himself who makes the crooked places straight in Is. 42:16 and 45:2- whereas Is. 40:3, it is we the preachers who are to do this.

### **John's Message**

What then of the message? It is that the valleys are to be lifted up, and the mountains made low, thus creating a plain. I read this as meaning that those with too low a view of themselves are to be lifted up, and the heights of human pride brought down. The over confident and under confident alike are to be levelled so that they can be a path for the Lord’s glory. “Made low” in Is. 40:4 is surely in the spirit of Is. 2:11, which predicts that in the day of judgment, “the lofty looks of man shall be humbled [s.w. ‘made low’], and the haughtiness of man shall be bowed down”. The experience of condemnation in the coming day of the Lord will mean that “the proud and lofty” will be “brought low” (Is. 2:12,17; 5:15). In fact, Isaiah is full of references to the proud being ‘made low’ by judgment- the same Hebrew word is common: Is. 10:33; 13:11; 25:11; 26:5. Perhaps Paul had this in mind when he said that our preaching is a bringing down of every high thing that is exalted against God (2 Cor. 10:5). Our message is basically that we must be humbled one way or the other- either by our repentance and acceptance of the Gospel today, or through the experience of condemnation at the day of judgment. We’re calling people to humility. And we must ask whether the content and style of our preaching really does that. But when John the Baptist quoted and preached this passage, he interpreted it beyond a call to humility. He said that in order to prepare the way of the Lord, to make a level passage for Him, the man with two coats should give to him who had none, and likewise share his food (Lk. 3:11). So the ‘equality’ and levelling was to be one of practical care for others. We have to ask, how often we have shared our food, clothing or money with those who don’t have... for this is all part of preparing for the Lord’s coming. It could even be that when there is more of what Paul calls “an equality” amongst the community of believers, that then the way of the Lord will have been prepared. And He will then return.

The primary reference of the Isaiah 40 passage is to the Jews. But even more specifically, it is to be cried out “to Jerusalem”. I submit that the most specific fulfilment of the prophecy will be in our latter day preaching resulting in a remnant of Jews repenting in Jerusalem, so that the Lord’s return will be to a faithful Jewish remnant in literal Jerusalem. The ‘making straight’ is to be done in “the desert” (:3)- a description elsewhere of Jerusalem (Is. 51:3). “Every [Heb. ‘the whole, complete’] mountain and hill” (:4) which is to respond to the Gospel may refer to people on the temple mount, upon which the Lord shall “come down, to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof” (Is. 31:4; 10:32). The Hebrew words used here for ‘mount’ and ‘hill’ are identical in the passages. The Lord will return to Zion to find a repentant remnant there, converted by our preaching. Mal. 3:1, a clearly related passage, says that when the way has been prepared, then “the Lord... shall suddenly [Heb. ‘immediately’] come to his temple”. It seems that He comes as soon as, almost to the moment, that the way is

prepared. Is it going too far to imagine that when the last Jews are baptized in Jerusalem, perhaps literally on the Temple Mount, then the Lord will immediately return there, “to his temple”? Then the Lord shall “come down to fight for mount Zion and for the hill thereof”.

### **John’s Style of Preaching**

There was an intensity and critical urgency about John and his message. John urged people to make their path “straight”- using a Greek word elsewhere translated “immediately”, “forthwith” (Lk. 3:4 s.w. Mk. 1:12,28 and often). Getting things straight in our lives is a question of immediate response. He warns people to “flee from the wrath to come” (Lk. 3:7). This was what their changed lives and baptisms were to be about- a fleeing from the wrath to come. He speaks as if that “wrath to come” is just about to come, it’s staring them in the face like a wall of forest fire, and they are to flee away from it. And yet Paul (in one of his many allusions to John’s message, which perhaps he had heard himself ‘live’) speaks of “the wrath to come” as being the wrath of the final judgment (1 Thess. 1:10), or possibly that of AD70 (1 Thess. 2:16). But both those events would not have come upon the majority of John’s audience. And the day of ‘wrath to come’ is clearly ultimately to be at the Lord’s return (Rev. 6:17; 11:18). Yet John zooms his hearers forward in time, to perceive that they face condemnation and judgment day right now, as they hear the call of the Gospel. This was a feature of John; he had the faith which sees things which are not as though they already are. Thus he looked at Jesus walking towards him and commented that here was the “Lamb of God”, a phrase the Jews would’ve understood as referring to the lamb which was about to be sacrificed on Passover (Jn. 1:29). John presumably was referencing the description of the crucified Jesus in Is. 53:7; for John, he foresaw it all, it was as if he saw Jesus as already being led out to die, even though that event was over three years distant. And so he could appeal to his audience to face judgment day as if they were standing there already. We need to have the same perspective.

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The ideas of fleeing wrath and preparing a way are surely based upon the Law's command in Dt. 19:3 that a way or road should be prepared to the city of refuge (symbolic of Christ- Heb. 6:18), along which the person under the death sentence for manslaughter could flee for refuge. John was preparing that way or road to Christ, and urging ordinary people to flee along it. They didn't like to think they were under a death sentence for murder. They were just ordinary folk like the soldiers who grumbled about their wages, and the publicans who were a bit less than honest at work. But they had to flee. But they wouldn't be alone in that. If a man prepares his way after God's principles (2 Chron. 27:6; Prov. 4:26), then God will 'prepare' that man's way too (Ps. 37:23; 119:5), confirming him in the way of escape.

Likewise John says that the axe is laid to the root of the trees; his hearers were about to be cut down and thrown into the fire of condemnation. And He says that the Jesus whom he heralds is about to come and divide the wheat from the chaff in judgment, gathering in the wheat, and burning the chaff with "unquenchable fire" (Lk. 3:17). But the 'fire' of condemnation and the division of wheat and chaff is to be done ultimately at the Lord's second coming (Mt. 13:30; Mk. 9:48). But for John, the moment his audience met Jesus, they were standing before the Lord of judgment, the Judge of all the earth. In their response to Him, they were living out the final judgment. And this is just as true of us, both as preachers and hearers of the Gospel.

This intense, urgent presentation of the ultimate issues of life and death, acceptance and rejection, brought forth a massive response. People lined up for baptism. And John was hardly polite. He called his baptismal candidates a "generation of vipers", alluding obviously to the seed of the serpent in Gen. 3:15. Yet his tough line with them, his convicting them of sin, led them to ask what precisely they must do, in order to be baptized. They didn't turn away in offence. They somehow sensed he was for real, and the message he preached couldn't be ignored or shrugged off as the ravings of a fanatic. Time and again we see the same- the very height of the demand of Christ of itself convicts men and women of Him. And it's for this reason that it seems almost 'easier' to convict people of Christ and the need for baptism into Him in societies [e.g. radical Moslem ones] where the price for conversion to Him is death or serious persecution... than in the easy going Western countries where being 'Christian' is the normal cultural thing to do.

The nature of how demanding John was is reflected in his response to the soldiers and publicans. He didn't tell them to quit their jobs, but to live with integrity within those jobs. He told the soldiers to be content with their wages- implying he expected them to not throw in their job. This is juxtaposed with the command for them to do no violence. But not grumbling about wages was as fundamental an issue for John as not doing physical violence to people. To have as Paul put it "Godliness with contentment" [another of his allusions to John's preaching?] is as important as not doing violence. And yet our tendency is to think that moaning about our wages is a perfectly normal and acceptable thing to do, whereas violence is of an altogether different order. It's like Paul hitting the Corinthians for their divisiveness, when if we'd been writing to them we would likely have focused upon their immorality and false doctrine. John would have been far less demanding had he simply told the publicans and soldiers to quit their jobs. By asking them to continue, and yet to live out their lives within those jobs with Godly principles, He was being far more demanding.

### **John's Humility**

But there's another reason why John personally was so compelling as a preacher. His comment on his preaching of Christ was that he was not worthy (RVmg. 'sufficient') to bear

Christ's sandals (Mt. 3:11). The sandal-bearer was the herald; John knew he was heralding Christ's appearing, but he openly said he was not worthy to do this. He felt his insufficiency, as we ought to ours. Would we had that depth of awareness; for on the brink of the Lord's coming, we are in a remarkably similar position to John. To carry the master's sandals (Mt. 3:11) was, according to Vine, the work of the lowest slave. This was how John saw himself; and this is what witnessing for Jesus is all about, being the lowest slave and servant of the Lord of glory. It's interesting in this context to note how the Lord Jesus states that in some sense, John 'was Elijah', whereas he himself denies this (Mt. 11:14; 17:12; Mk. 9:13). Such was his humility. Or consider how John's comment that he came "after" Jesus, and that Jesus was the redeemer rather than he himself (Jn. 1:15) contain a strange allusion to the words of the redeemer-who-was-incapable-of-redeeming in Ruth 4:4- Boaz told him that "I am after thee", but in the end the incapable-redeemer plucked off his shoe as a sign of unworthiness to redeem (Ruth 4:7). And John surely also had this in mind when he commented that he was unworthy to unloose Messiah's shoe (Jn. 1:27). The allusions are surely indicative of the way John felt like the unworthy / incapable redeemer, eclipsed before Boaz / Jesus.

How terribly wrong it is, then, for missionary service to be gloried in and somehow a reason for those who do it to become puffed up in self-importance. Perhaps John's Gospel purposefully inserts the comment that John the Baptist said this whilst he was baptizing so many people (Jn. 1:28)- as if to draw a link between his humility, and the success in preaching which he had. Paul perhaps directs us back to John when he says that we are not "sufficient" to be the savour of God to this world; and yet we are made sufficient to preach by God (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5,6 RV). Although John preached the excellence of Christ, he didn't even consider himself to be part of the mystic bride of Christ; for he likens himself to only the groom, watching the happiness of the couple, but not having a part in it himself (Jn. 3:29). And note how John appeals for men to be baptized with the twice repeated personal comment: "...and I knew him not", in the very context of our reading that the [Jewish] world "knew him not" (Jn. 1:10, 31,33). He realises that he too had withheld the knowledge of the Son of God, just as others had. When asked who he was, John's reply was simply: "a voice". He was nothing; his message about Jesus was everything. In all this there is a far cry from the self-confident, self-projecting speaking off the podium which characterizes so much of our 'preaching' today. So John's appeal to repentance was shot through with a recognition of his own humanity. It wasn't mere moralizing. We likely don't preach as John did because we fear that confronting people with their sins is inappropriate for us to do, because we too are sinners. But with recognition of our own humanity, we build a bridge between our audience and ourselves.

There was another reason behind John's appeal for repentance. It was that he perceived how eager God is to forgive, and how our acceptance of that forgiveness is His glory and His salvation. John says, quoting Is. 40:5, that if men repent and ready themselves for the Lord's coming, then "all flesh shall see the salvation of God". But he is changing the quotation-Isaiah said that all flesh shall see the glory of God. But saving men and women is the thing God glories in. John's father had prophesied that John would "give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, because of the heart of mercy of our God" (Lk. 1:77,78 RVmg.). The fact that God has a "heart of mercy"- a lovely phrase- is His glory. It leads Him to glory in overlooking sin. And on this basis John appealed to people to repent and claim that forgiveness, thus allowing God to glory. In the light of all this, one wonders in what tone of voice John spoke. The cold printed words in our Bibles can lead us to imagine him speaking in a gruff, austere manner. But perhaps even his comment "Generation of vipers" was said with a heart of love and appeal, reflecting the "heart of mercy" which he had

come to know in the Father. He was “the friend of the bridegroom” (Jn. 3:29)- the one who introduced the groom to the bride and arranged the marriage and then the wedding. John’s “Generation of vipers” stuff was all part of his attempt to persuade the bride, Israel, to accept the groom, the Lord Jesus. He wasn’t angrily moralizing, lashing out at society as many a dysfunctional preacher does today, working out his own anger by criticizing and condemning society in the name of God. No, John was appealing. He had an agenda and an aim- to bring Israel and the Son of God together in marriage. John's Gospel features the Lord Jesus confidently stating "I am...". The context is set for this by the way John's Gospel begins by describing how John the Baptist said "I am not..." ("I am not the Messiah", Jn. 1:20; 3:28; "I am not [Elijah]", Jn. 1:21; "I am not worthy", Jn. 1:27. By confessing his own weakness, who he was not, John the Baptist was paving the way for the recognition and acceptance of Jesus. And our self-abnegation will do likewise.

When asked who he was, John's reply was simply: “a voice”. He was nothing; his message about Jesus was everything. In all this there is a far cry from the self-confident, self-projecting speaking off the podium which characterizes so much of our ‘preaching’ today. So John’s appeal to repentance was shot through with a recognition of his own humanity. It wasn’t mere moralizing. We likely don’t preach as John did because we fear that confronting people with their sins is inappropriate for us to do, because we too are sinners. But with recognition of our own humanity, we build a bridge between our audience and ourselves. In this context it's worth reconsidering Lk. 3:7: "Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?". John said these words to those who were coming to him wishing to be baptized by him- exactly because he had warned them of the wrath to come. It's possible that John meant this as a rhetorical reflection, thus enabling us to paraphrase him something like this: 'And what kind of man am I, who am I, just another sinful guy like you, who has warned you to flee? I'm nothing- don't get baptized because of me, but because you repent and are committed to bringing forth the fruits of repentance".

And it's worth meditating that if Israel had responded to his preaching, then the glorious salvation of God might have even then been revealed in the form of the Kingdom coming on earth, even then. But instead of heeding John’s message, Israel in the end crucified their King, necessitating a latter day John the Baptist mission (Mt. 11:13,14; 17:11,12). And it's not going too far to suggest that our latter day witness to Israel and indeed to the world is to be conducted in the spirit of John’s preaching; hence the crucial importance of understanding the spirit and content of his witness. John clearly had a strong sense of mission. Notice how many times he uses the “emphatic I”: “I am not the Christ... I am not [Elijah]... I am the voice... I baptize with water... I am not worthy... he of whom I said... I knew him not... therefore am I come baptizing... I knew him not... I saw... I am not the Christ... I am sent before... I said...” (Jn. 1:20,23,26,27,30,31,33,34; 3:28). This stands out in the Greek text. The same sense of realizing who we are, what our aims and mission are, should characterize our witness. He testified what he ‘saw and heard’ (Jn. 3:32), and we are called to do likewise (1 Jn. 1:1,3). For John’s witness prior to the Lord’s first coming is to be repeated by us prior to His second coming. Four times in the New Testament we read of John ‘preparing the way’ for the Lord’s return; the only other time we meet that phrase is in Rev. 16:12, where in the very last days, the way of the Kings [or, the one great King- the Lord Jesus] is likewise to be prepared.

## **Our Example**

Eph. 6:15 speaks of our each being 'sandalled' with the preparation of the Gospel. Who prepared the way of the Lord by preaching, wearing sandals? John the Baptist. It seems Paul is alluding to John here, setting him up as the preacher's example. The reference to "loins girt" (Eph. 6:14) would also be a John allusion- the record twice (in Mt. 3:4; Mk. 1:6) stresses how John had his 'loins girded'. The Lord spoke of how if we confess Him before men, He will confess knowledge of us before the Father; and if we deny Him, He will deny us (Mt. 10:32). This language is applied by John to John the Baptist- for he comments that John the Baptist "confessed and denied not, but confessed, I am not the Christ" (Jn. 1:20). In this sense, John Baptist is being set up as our example in preaching- and again, John comments that we too are to confess the Son and not deny Him (1 Jn. 2:23), after the pattern of John the Baptist. And yet note what John's 'confession' was- it was a profession of his unworthiness, that although he was the herald of the Christ, he was not Jesus. Again, we see here a pattern for our witness to the Lord.

### Notes

- (1) W.F. Barling, *Jesus: Healer And Teacher* (notes of the Central London Study Class, 1952) p.1.
- (2) Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 205.
- (3) For more evidence on this see K. Stendahl, *The School Of Matthew And Its Use Of The Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968).
- (4) Paul Tournier, *The Meaning Of Persons* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 36,37.
- (5) George Barna, *Grow Your Church From The Outside* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2002) p. 60.

## 4.2 Bent Knees, Wet Eyes, Broken Hearts: Emotion In Preaching

Imagine, if you can, the judgment seat of Jesus which is to come. Think carefully about the implications of the parable of the sheep and goats. Before Him are gathered men and women in two groups, His right hand and His left. He will say to those on His right hand, enter the Kingdom. And He will condemn those on His left hand. Think about it. Those who come before Jesus and place themselves on the right hand [i.e. acceptance] are placing themselves on *his* left hand [i.e. condemnation]. And those who condemn themselves, putting themselves to His left hand, are placing themselves on *His* right hand. Those who "are first" in their own eyes, those who think for sure they will be in the Kingdom, will seek to enter the Kingdom at the day of judgment, but be unable. Those who strive to enter the Kingdom *now* are "last" in their own spiritual assessment; and the first will be made last in the sense that they won't be in the Kingdom. Thus when those who will enter the Kingdom are described as thinking of themselves as "last", this must mean that they think of themselves now as being unworthy of the Kingdom, but as "striving" to be there now, in their minds (Lk. 13:23,24). The likes of Samson died with a confession of unworthiness on their lips- in his case, that he deserved to die the death of a Philistine (Jud. 16:30)- but he will actually be in the Kingdom (Heb. 11:32).

### Response to the Cross

Before the cross, we have elicited within us this paradox at its keenest. We are convicted there of our sinfulness. And yet we are assured there of our ultimate salvation. Isaiah 53 predicted that there, "He was oppressed"- Heb. 'exaction was made' (s.w. Is. 58:3). He bore

our punishment / condemnation on the cross <sup>(1)</sup>. We each ought to be crucified to death- this is the exaction for sin. And yet, Jesus died for us. The exaction was made from Him. The rejected will have to bear their own sin, and therefore their feelings will be akin to His in the time of crucifixion. Yet we are to bear the cross with Him. We must either crucify ourselves now, or go through it in rejection. This is a gripping logic. The rejected will be as a woman who seeks to pluck off her own breasts in desperation (Ez. 23:34). We must condemn ourselves in self-examination, living out the essence of the cross in that the cross *is* the condemnation of sin. And yet knowing that because we share that cross, because we do condemn ourselves, thereby we will not be condemned. And in this we have such reason to be glad, to rejoice, to share this good news of certain salvation with others. This isn't merely 'learn to read the Bible effectively', or passing on our latest theories about prophecy. It is the good news of certain salvation in Christ.

### **The Breaking of Bread**

This is why such paradoxical emotions are generated within us by the experience of breaking bread. If we break bread unworthily, they "come together unto condemnation" (11:34). Yet we must judge ourselves at these meetings, to the extent of truly realising we deserve condemnation (1 Cor. 11:31). If we feel we are worthy, then, we are unworthy. If we feel unworthy, then, we are worthy. We must examine ourselves and conclude that at the end of the day we are "unprofitable servants" (Lk. 18:10), i.e. worthy of condemnation (the same phrase is used about the rejected, Mt. 25:30). This is after the pattern of the brethren at the first breaking of bread asking "Is it I?" in response to the Lord's statement that one of them would betray Him (Mt. 26:22). They didn't immediately assume they wouldn't do. And so we have a telling paradox: those who condemn themselves at the memorial meeting will not be condemned. Those who are sure they won't be condemned, taking the emblems with self-assurance, come together unto condemnation. Job knew this when he said that if he justifies himself, he will be condemned out of his own mouth (Job 9:20- he understood the idea of self-condemnation and judgment now). Isaiah also foresaw this, when he besought men (in the present tense): "Enter *into the rock*, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty", and then goes on to say that in the day of God's final judgment, "[the rejected] shall go *into the holes of the rock...for fear of the Lord and for the glory of His majesty* when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth" (Is. 2:10,11,19-21). We must find a true, self-condemning humility now, unless it will be forced upon us at the judgment. And thus Paul can say that "we be *as* reprobates" (2 Cor. 13:7), using a Greek word elsewhere translated "castaway", "rejected", in the context of being rejected at the judgment seat (1 Cor. 9:27; Heb. 6:8). Yet he says in the preceding verse that he is most definitely *not* reprobate (2 Cor. 13:6). Here we have the paradox: knowing that we are not and by grace will not be rejected, and yet feeling and reasoning as if we are.

### **The Paradox of the Parables**

There is a highly repeated theme in the Lord's parables. It is that he saw his people as falling into one of two categories: the sinners / spiritually weak, and the self-righteous. This isn't just the possible implication of one or two parables:

*The sinners / weak*

The prodigal son (each of us) who genuinely thought he had lost his relationship with his father (cp. God) for ever (Lk. 15:11-32).

The sinner who hasn't got the faith to lift up his eyes to God, weighed down with the weight of his seemingly irreversible sins (Lk. 18:1-8).

The weak labourer (no employer wanted to hire him) who works one hour but is given a day's pay for it. We are left to imagine him walking away in disbelief clutching his penny (cp. the faithful with salvation at the judgment) (Mt. 20:1-16).

The builder whose progress appeared slow, building on a rock, symbolising the difficulty he has in really hearing the word of the Lord Jesus.

The (spiritually) sick who need a doctor, represented by the stray animal who falls down a well and desperately bleats for pity (Lk. 14:5 RSV).

Those with a splinter in their eye, from God's viewpoint, who are seen as in need of spiritual correction by other believers (Mt. 7:3-5).

Those who guard the house and give food to the other servants (Mt. 24:45-51).

The man who owed 100 pence to his brother (Mt. 18:23-35), but

*The self-righteous*

The elder son who said he'd never disobeyed his father (cp. God), and who in the end walks away from his father.

The man who looks up to God with what he thinks is a good conscience and thanks Him that he is better than others, feeling that the sinful brother praying next to him is somehow too far gone.

The strong labourer who works all day and complains at the end that the weak labourer has been given a penny. " Go thy way..." (Mt. 20:14) could imply he is fired from the Master's service because of this attitude. This would fit in with the way the other parables describe the second man as the rejected one.

The builder who appeared to make fast progress (Mt. 7:24-27), who apparently finds response to the word very easy.

Those who don't think they need a doctor aren't helped by Christ (Mt. 9:12)

Those with a plank of wood in their eye, from God's perspective, but who think they have unimpaired vision to see the faults in their brethren.

Those who are materialistic and beat their fellow servants.

The man who owed 10,000 talents to his Lord, but would not be

nothing to his Lord (because the Lord counts him as justified).

The man who takes the lowest, most obscure seat at a feast is (at the judgment) told to go up to the best seat. We are left to imagine that the kind of humble man who takes the lowest seat would be embarrassed to go up to the highest seat, and would probably need encouragement to do so. This will be exactly the position of all those who enter the Kingdom. Those who are moved out of the highest seats are characterised by "shame", which is the hallmark of the rejected. Therefore all the righteous are symbolised by the humble man who has to be encouraged (at the judgment) to go up higher.

The spiritually despised Samaritan who helped the (spiritually) wounded man.

The men who traded and developed what they had (Lk. 19:15-27).

The son who rudely refuses to do the father's work, but then does it with his tail between his legs (Mt. 21:28-32).

The king who realises he cannot defeat the approaching army (cp.

patient with his brother who owed him 100 pence. He had the opportunity to show much love in return for his Lord's forgiveness, on the principle that he who is forgiven much loves much (Lk. 7:41-43).

The man who assumes he should have a respectable seat at the feast (Lk. 14:8-11). Remember that the taking of places at the feast represents the attitude we adopt within the ecclesia now. It is *directly* proportionate to Christ's judgment of us.

The apparently righteous Levite and Priest who did nothing to help (Lk. 10:25-37).

The man who did nothing with what he had, not even lending his talent to Gentiles on usury; and then thought Christ's rejection of him unreasonable.

The son who immediately and publicly agrees to do his father's work but actually does nothing. The Father's work is saving men. Note how in this and the above two cases, the self-righteous are rejected for their lack of interest in saving others (both in and out of the ecclesia).

The king who refuses to realize his own weakness and is therefore, by

Christ and his Angels coming in judgment) because he is too weak, and surrenders. implication, destroyed by the oncoming army (Lk. 14:31,32).

Those who think their oil (cp. our spirituality) will probably run out before the second coming (Mt. 25:1-10).

Those who think their oil (spirituality) will never fail them and will keep burning until the Lord's return.

It makes a good exercise to read down just the left hand column. These are the characteristics of the acceptable, in God's eyes. Reading just the right hand column above (go on, do it) reveals all too many similarities with established Christianity.

Those who enter the Kingdom will genuinely, from the very depth of their being, feel that they shouldn't be there. They will cast their crowns before the enthroned Lord, as if to resign their reward as inappropriate for them (Rev. 4:10). Indeed, they shouldn't be in the Kingdom. The righteous are " scarcely saved" (1 Pet. 4:18). The righteous remnant who spoke often to one another about Yahweh will only be " spared" by God's grace (Mal. 3:17). The accepted will feel so certain of this that they will almost argue with the Lord Jesus at the day of judgment that he hasn't made the right decision concerning them (Mt. 25:37-40). It's only a highly convicted man who would dare do that. Thus the Father will have to comfort the faithful in the aftermath of the judgment, wiping away the tears which will *then* (see context) be in our eyes, and give us special help to realize that our sinful past has now finally been overcome (Rev. 21:4). We will be like the labourers in the parable who walk away from judgment clutching their penny, thinking " I really shouldn't have this. I didn't work for a day, and this is a day's pay" . Therefore if we honestly, genuinely feel that we won't be in the Kingdom, well, this is how in some ways the faithful will all feel.

### **Grace and Works**

The paradox deepens when we consider how we must perceive ourselves both as desperate sinners, and yet also as transformed people, as men and women who are really and truly changing. We at times go too far along the path of considering ourselves inevitable sinners; and at others, too far down the way of self-assurance and smug contentment with who we are spiritually. The recent emphasis upon grace in our community is indeed necessary. But at the same time, the need and possibility for real and meaningful change in those who are in Christ needs to be spelt out:

It is God's will that we should be sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3)

Leave the life of sin (Jn. 8:11)

The man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16)

It is written, Be holy, because I am holy (1 Pet. 1:16)

And as the adverts say, there's so much more inside... "The grace of God that brings salvation...teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for...the glorious appearing of our...Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Tit. 2:11-14). Without this holiness, no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14), for

nothing impure will enter the New Jerusalem, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful (Rev. 21:27). We are not to become or remain mere victims of our temperament. Hour by hour, we are faced with the choice of the easier way as opposed to the harder way. This is the reality of the Christian life. Exactly because we are not saved by works but by God's mercy, *therefore* Paul wished to "affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works" (Tit. 3:5,8). In this sense, as Paul says in Romans, grace reigns as a King. It has power over every department of human life and thinking.

It leads us too, on the other side of the paradox, to realize that it is God who will work in us, through our regular inbreathing of His word, to produce the new creation which we of ourselves are simply too weak willed to effect. It is by Jesus working out His new creation and new birth in us that we can be renewed at the very core of our personhood (Jn. 3:3-8; 2 Cor. 5:17; Tit. 3:4-7). We, who are sinners, who are so shamefully weak willed, are being made new people. It is hard to believe this, as we stumble 3 steps backwards and 4 steps forward through life. But it is actually so. And it is the witness of our transformed and reconstructed selves which is so powerful before the eyes of the disordered, searching, spiritually unhappy men and women with whom we live. We have a life quest of an order which they do not have in the flesh. It is quite simply, to be like Jesus; to achieve an actual and real holiness of life like His, a life which is real and not just ideas, and which seeks to be ready to meet Him at any moment. Although we will recognize that we are still who we were, we will also without doubt reflect the realization that in another sense, we are now not who we once were. Inwardly, we are different people altogether (Rom. 6:2-4; 7:4-6). We will accept that it is really so that our heart's deepest desire, the dominant passion that now rules and drives us, is a copy (faint but real) of the desire that drove our Lord Jesus. And all this is motivated by the utter purity of the grace that is saving us. We must "grow in grace"- our sense of sin becomes deeper, and yet our faith becomes stronger, our hope brighter, our love more extensive, our spiritual mindedness more marked.

### **The Need For Today**

This is a soft age, an age in which ease and comfort are seen by the world [especially the poorer world] as life's supreme values. Affluence and medical resources have brought secular people to the point of feeling that they have a right to long life, and a right to be free of poverty and pain for the whole of that life. Many even cherish a grudge against God and society if these hopes do not materialize. But nothing could be further from the true, tough, hard-won holiness which is slowly developed by the cross-carrying, regularly self-denying Christian. There is a beauty and a self-perpetuating upward spiral in the living of the clean, straight life before God. And yet we each have skeletons in our cupboards, secrets with which every man dies, some sort of darkness on the edge of our finest spiritual endeavour. This is what highlights the need for repentance. Especially must we be aware that the West has spread a tidal wave of hedonism and a random approach to living that is swamping the entire world. Thoughtless self-indulgence coupled with a lazy passivity has become the leading feature of our global village. We are all caught up in this to some extent, and we need to daily turn away from it, and to feel passionately again towards the Lord and the grace that has saved us.

The grace of God, the pure grace, by which we have been saved must elicit within us the disciplines of meditation, prayer, Bible study, fasting, witness, sacrificial living, working for the Lord... not because by these things we shall be saved, but because we have been saved by

grace, and are gratefully responding. The love of Christ (and this phrase is almost always used in the NT of the cross) must *constrain us* (2 Cor. 5:14); we must reflect upon it until with Paul we pray with bowed knees to know the length, and the breadth and the height, of that love of Christ (on Calvary) that passes our unaided human knowledge (Eph. 3:19). For this alone is what will drive our passivity from us; here at last is something to respond to with all our heart and soul. The idea of a disciplined life is the very opposite to the random approach to life which is found in the world around us. They live chaotically, always being taken by surprise and tyrannized by the immediate, the urgent and the unexpected-experiencing life as a series of emergencies that one is never ready to meet. The life of joy and peace through believing (Rom. 15:13) is not like this. Fired by the greatness of Divine grace, we should be living ordered lives, which “confess the beauty of Thy peace”. Planning and praying, we should work towards what brother Islip Collyer called “the limited objective”, setting ourselves spiritual goals no matter how small. Not that the achievement of them ensures our salvation- for no works can save us. But in order to experience meaningful growth towards the image of Jesus.

### **Repentance**

The fact that the ecclesia is a hospital for sinners and not a club for the righteous, and that salvation is by pure grace and not works, must not be allowed to blur the cutting edge of these demands for change of which we have spoken. Only in realizing how far we fall short of them are we led to a more thorough humility and a more radical repentance. Regular repentance is absolutely necessary for each of us- for sin both of omission and commission, in motive, aim, thought, desire, wish and fantasy is sadly a daily reality in our lives. Yet grace, and the forgiveness it brings, reigns as a King (Rom. 5:21), in the sense that the real belief that by grace we are and will be saved, will bring forth a changed life (Tit. 2:11,12). The wonder of grace will mean that our lives become focused upon Jesus, the one who enabled that grace. Grace will be the leading and guiding principle in our lives, comprised as they are of a long string of thoughts and actions. And as with every truly focused life, literally *all* other things become therefore and thereby of secondary value. The pathway of persistent, focused prayer, the power of the hope of glory in the Kingdom, regular repentance...day by day our desires are redirected towards the things of God.

### **Tears**

The Biblical record contains a large number of references to the frequent tears of God’s people, both in bleeding hearts for other people, and in recognition of their own sin. And as we have seen, these things are related. Consider:

- “My eye pours out tears to God” [i.e. in repentance?] (Job 16:20)
- Isaiah drenches Moab with tears (Is. 16:9)
- Jeremiah is a fountain of tears for his people (Jer. 9:1; Lam. 2:8)
- David’s eyes shed streams of tears for his sins (Ps. 119:136; 6:6; 42:3)
- Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37)
- Blessed are those who weep (Lk. 6:21)
- Mary washed the Lord’s feet with her tears (Lk. 7:36-50)
- Paul wept for the Ephesians daily (Acts 20:19,31).

We have to ask whether there are any tears, indeed any true emotion, in our walk with our Lord. Those who go through life with dry eyes are surely to be pitied. Surely, in the light of

the above testimony, we are merely hiding behind a smokescreen if we excuse ourselves by thinking that we're not the emotional type. Nobody can truly go through life humming to themselves "I am a rock, I am an island...and an island never cries". The very emotional centre of our lives must be touched. The tragedy of our sin, the urgency of the world's salvation, the amazing potential provided and secured in the cross of Christ...surely we cannot be passive to these things. We live in a world where emotion and passion are decreasing. Being politically correct, looking right to others... these things are becoming of paramount importance in all levels of society. The passionless, postmodernist life can't be for us, who have been moved and touched at our very core by the work and call and love of Christ to us. For us there must still be what Walter Brueggemann called "the gift of amazement", that ability to feel and say "Wow!" to God's grace and plan of salvation for us.

### **Getting Real**

These things make us more urgently seek for the strength to overcome, and we find it in the steady, patient contemplation of Jesus as He was in the fullness and simplicity of His human life. There, in Him, there was actually lived out the life we've always wanted, the life that is the pattern for us. It is here that the true Christian understanding of Jesus as having human nature, of being our representative in every way, becomes so empowering in practice. Here we at last have someone real, who went hungry and thirsty, who sneezed and wanted to scratch, who saw the funny side of situations, who cried real tears and felt even more keenly the tragedy of human situations...it is this realness of Jesus which makes Him so compelling, and makes the pages of the Gospels come alive with challenge, comfort and inspiration to "walk as he walked"...because He was so real, so like us, so much one of us. It is His realness and relevance to us which can shake us from the mediocrity of our lives, from the grip of quiet desperation which holds us, to rise up to a realistic imitation of Him. But I must ask: How much do we think about *Him*? It is quite possible to become Bible-centred rather than Jesus-centred. But we are in a personality cult behind this man, this more than man. We become like what and whom we love. Israel loved their idols, and thus "they became abominable like that [abomination] which they loved" (Hos. 9:10 RV). If we are transfixed by the gracious salvation that is in Him, we will become like Him in thought and deed.

What the world hungers for today is the discovery of what it means to be truly human. They admire those they see as "real". It is through the person of Jesus Christ alone that true humanity, or realness, can be found. Ecc. 12: speaks of "the whole man" as the one who is totally obedient to God; and here we have a prophecy of the wholeness, the realness, of the Lord Jesus. The record of the life of the early church is characterized by realness, by humanity. Tremendous sacrifices, preaching in the face of persecution, speedy development of commitment, side by side with almost unbelievable moral and doctrinal weakness (like getting drunk at the breaking of bread), and an amazing slowness to comprehend (e.g. the implications of the commission to take the Gospel literally world-wide). Likewise the great saints of the Old Testament, such as David and Jeremiah, are not characterized by haloes and an aura of distant unapproachability (and here I particularly take issue with the Catholic and Orthodox way of presenting those men), but rather by their sheer humanity, and the spirituality seen articulated within that humanity.

### **Bent Knees, Wet Eyes, Broken Hearts**

The essence of powerful personal witness is contained, I suggest, in the mixture of these two elements within the personality of the preacher. It's the paradox of Ps. 2:11: "Rejoice with

trembling / contrition". The sense that 'we have the truth...yes, by God's grace I will truly be there, and so can you be'; and yet the awful, worrying sense of our own inadequacy as women and men, which should grip and haunt every sensitive spiritual soul. Paul explains his own attitude to preaching in 1 Cor. 2:3: "I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling". It could be that this is a reference to his physical weakness at the time he preached to the Corinthians. But William Barclay understands the Greek words to more imply "the trembling anxiety to perform a duty", and I tend to run with this. The words are a reflection of the heart that bled within Paul. The man who has no fear, no hesitancy, no nervousness, no tension in the task of preaching...may give an efficient and competent performance from a platform. But it is the man who has this trembling anxiety, that intensity which comes from a heart that bleeds for ones hearers, who will produce an effect which artistry alone can never achieve. He is the man who will convert another. It has truly been said that "the need is the call". To perceive the needs of others is what calls us and compels us to witness, coupled with our own disappointment with ourselves, our race, our nature. Bent knees, wet eyes, a broken heart...I don't mean on the platform nor necessarily in our actual presentation of the Truth, but beforehand. As part of our beings. This is what is so essential to credible witness. If fused within the very texture of our human personality there is this earnest desire for others' salvation, for their sharing in Israel's Hope, coupled with a very real sense of our own inadequacy and sense of awkwardness with ourselves...this, it seems to me, is what converts. It's the simple explanation of why the most powerful preachers I have known are very ordinary, human people, whose realness has made them so credible to others. Virtually none of them were or are great platform speakers. They are ordinary, struggling folk who know whom they have believed, and the power of His resurrection life.

Eloquence, expositional skill, Biblical knowledge alone...are not enough. Anguish, pain, engagement, sweat and blood punctuate the truths to which men will listen. This is how Paul could only tell the Philippians "with tears" that some brethren were living as enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18). And for three years in Ephesus, Paul besought men and women night and day with tears (Acts 20:31 cp. 19,37). The Lord wept over Jerusalem- this was what His care about their lostness resulted in (Mt. 23:37; Lk. 19:41,42). The tears of Jesus and Paul reveal a stunning combination of mind and heart, the rational and the emotional...the might intellect within those men was all part of the same personality which could weep over men and women. Exposition and exhortation were thus fused together within the style of these wonderful examples. Preaching is therefore in that sense logic on fire, theology on fire. This is why a man of Paul's intellectual genius could at times break fairly elemental rules of grammar- because of the fire within him. It's why he breaks off from his own argument with passionate interruptions. He breaks the rules of style and grammar, despite his culture and intellectual finesse, because of the evident fire within him. In his preaching there were married together truth and eloquence, reason and passion, light and fire. Some of us seem to have excellent doctrine, but little warmth, glow or fire. Others have plenty of fire with little doctrinal underpinning. The two aspects really must be fused together within us as persons, and thereby within our preaching.

### **Biblical Examples**

Scripture abounds with examples of powerful preachers whose witness was motivated by a deep recognition of their desperation before God.

- John the Baptist said that he was the herald of Jesus, but he was not worthy ("sufficient", RVmg, Mt. 3:17) to even undo the Lord's shoe latchet (Jn. 1:27). He was saying that he *did*

undo the Lord's shoe, using an idiom which meant 'to announce beforehand'- but he did it unworthily, with a deep sense of his own deep insufficiency. In saying this he was alluding back to the Law's statement that the man who was unable to bring redemption to his dead brother's family must undo a shoe latchet (Dt. 25:9). John deeply felt this, hence his use of the figure- and in this spirit he preached the redemption that is alone in Jesus.

- Isaiah realized his unworthiness: " Woe is me! For I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips" . He felt he was going to be condemned. But then the Angel comforted him: " Thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" . And then immediately he offered to go on a preaching mission to Israel: " Here am I, send me" (Is. 6:5-8).
- The women went to preach the news of the resurrection with "fear and great joy". But putting meaning into words, what were they fearful about? Surely they now realized that they had so failed to believe the Lord's clear words about His resurrection; and they knew now that since He was alive, they must meet Him and explain. So their fear related to their own sense of unworthiness; and yet it was paradoxically mixed with the "great joy" of knowing His resurrection. And there is reason to understand that those women are typical of all those who are to fulfill the great commission.
- Capturing the spirit of Isaiah, Peter fell down at Christ's feet: " Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord" . But the Lord responded: " Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men" (Lk. 5:8-10). So Peter's deep recognition of his sinfulness resulted in him being given a preaching commission. And in similar vein, Peter was given another commission to teach the word the first time he met Christ after his denials (Jn. 21:15-17). In response to this he stood up and preached that forgiveness of sins was possible to all those that are afar off from God (Acts 2:39). As he did so, consciously or unconsciously, part of his mind must have been back in the way that on that shameful night he followed the Lord "afar off", and far off from Him, denied Him (Mk. 14:54). And remember that Peter preached a hundred meters or so from the very place where he denied the Lord.
- The even greater commission to go into all the world with the Gospel followed straight on from Christ upbraiding the eleven " with their unbelief and hardness of heart" (Mk. 16:14,15). That 'upbraiding' must have left them wallowing in their weakness. It would have been quite something. The Son of God upbraiding His friends. But straight on from that: " Go ye...go ye into all the world" (Mt. cp. Mk. shows "go ye" was said twice). And He told them to preach that those who believed not would be damned- after having just told them that they were men who believed not. Mark's record stresses three times in the lead up to this that they "believed not"; and then, he records how they were told to go and preach condemnation on those who believed not (Mk. 16:11,13,14,16). They were humbled men who did that.
- Paul likewise was made deeply conscious of his sin before being given his commission. But " straightway" after his baptism, Paul begin a zealous campaign of personal witness in Damascus, even before he was told by Christ to preach (Acts 9:20 cp. 22:17-21). Years later he commented: " Unto me , who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles" (Eph. 3:8). Therefore he did so " with all humility of mind" (Acts 20:19). He recounts in Acts 22:19-21 how first of all he felt so ashamed of his past that he gently resisted this command to preach: " I said, Lord...I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed...and he said unto me, Depart...unto the Gentiles" . The stress on "every synagogue" (Acts 22:19; 26:11) must be connected with the fact that he chose to preach *in the synagogues*. He was sent to persecute every synagogue in Damascus,

and yet he purposefully preached in every synagogue there (Acts 9:2,20). His motivation was rooted in his deep recognition of sinfulness. It seems that the change of name from Saul to Paul ('the little one') was at the time of his first missionary journey (Acts 13:9), as if in recognition of his own humiliation.

Paul was "well pleased to impart unto you not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were become very dear to us". So says the RV of 1 Thess. 2:8. It is one thing to impart the Gospel to someone. It is another to give your soul to them, because you truly love them. I suspect we have all been guilty of merely imparting the gospel, without the heart that bled within Paul. They are two quite different things. Imparting knowledge, inviting to meetings, distributing books...is not the same as giving your soul. The AV of this passage says that Paul was "*willing* to have imparted unto you...our own souls". There may be a connection back to Rom. 9:3, where in the spirit of Moses, Paul says that he is theoretically willing to give his eternal place in the Kingdom for the sake of his hearers' conversion- even though he had learnt from Moses' example that God will not accept such a substitutionary offer. To give your life, to impart a Gospel...is one thing. But to so feel for others that you would let them go to the Kingdom rather than you... this is love. No wonder Paul was so compelling a converter. There was such an upwelling of thankful love and reflected grace behind his words of preaching. Acts 28:20 describes Paul in action: "Therefore did I *intreat* you to *see* and to *speak* with you". He wanted personal contact with them, eyeball to eyeball, to personally intreat. And in all this, he was motivated by the great paradox- that he, the unworthy, the condemned and rejected sinner, was going to be in the Kingdom. And it can be just as real and motivating for us too.

### Notes

(1) In passing, note that if the cross was the Lord bearing the condemnation of sinful humanity, then condemnation is death, not burning in an orthodox hell. Otherwise He would have had to burn in hell, if He bore our condemnation.

## 4-3 The More Real, the More Credible

As we have said, the paradox of which we have spoken is articulated in our preaching of the Gospel. On the one hand, we appeal to men and women to repent, bringing forth fruits appropriate to that repentance, be baptized and live a life in Christ worthy of the high calling. Yet on the other, we plead with them, with the lines showing in our foreheads, one eye slightly squinting, to accept the same pure grace which we have come to know...our whole body language pleading with them, that all you gotta do is say yes... I know, of course, that this is not *all* we say in preaching the Gospel. But my phrase is there to strike a spark, to make a point. For on one hand, the Gospel of grace does simply need to be accepted for what it is- that for those who can believe it, God will for nothing grant us salvation in Christ. And yet it is here that I part company with the Pentecostal idea that preaching is all about trumpeting from the rooftops ones own confident certainty of a simplistic personal salvation. Yes, in some forms we must do this; but it must ever be underpinned by a genuine realization and showing forth of our own total reliance upon grace, and our unpretended sense of unworthiness to the point that proclamation of our salvation can only be made with hung head. And it is in this that it seems to me our witness has real power and credibility. For the more real, the more credible.

I have often had the feeling that spiritually I am slipping, that my faith and living is not what it once was, and especially at the breakings of bread I have realized that I must urgently do something about it, to take hold, to grip the more firmly once again. And yet somehow, I feel ever more strongly that somehow in the very very end, I will be there. I confessed this feeling to an old brother in his 80s. He replied that he had had this same sense of slipping for most of his life, and that he still felt that same paradoxical confidence in his place in the Kingdom. I suppose that this is how it must be, this side of the judgment seat. It can really be no other way. We walk a tightrope, teetering between gloom, or the loss of faith due to such a low self-image, on the one hand...and a temptation towards self-congratulation on the other. Both extremes lead us to fall. Here in its most acute form we see our potentiality towards destruction or redemption. If one arranges Paul's letters chronologically, it is apparent that there is within them a progressive growth in awareness of his own sinfulness. He starts off telling the Corinthians that he is the least of the apostles; and then later writes to the Ephesians that he is "less than the least of all saints"; and finally writes to Timothy at the end that he is "chief of sinners". And yet in his very last words in 2 Timothy, he is absolutely certain that there is a crown of righteousness laid up for him (2 Tim. 4:8). The paradox of these two strands of thought can only be brought together in the heart and feelings and self-perception of the individual believer. Which means, in each of you, my beloved readers.

Having spoken of how we are bidden by God to the 'feast' of the Kingdom, lived out by us in prospect and symbol at the breaking of bread, the Lord goes on to say: "When *thou* makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection" (Lk. 14:13,14). This inevitably is to be connected with how the Lord went on to say that *we* are the poor, blind, lame etc. who have been invited to the feast (Lk. 14:21). The point being, that if we perceive our own desperation and inappropriacy to be called to the Kingdom feast, then we will likewise invite others who are perceived *by us* as the lowest of the low, and otherwise unsuitable for a king's banquet table. So we are to reflect God's calling of us, the desperate, the down and outs, in our calling of others. A person who feels they are somehow a nice guy and worthy of invitation will be the one who tends to consider others as unworthy of invitation to the Kingdom. He or she who perceives their own desperation will eagerly invite even those they consider to be in the very pits of human society. The lame, blind etc. were not allowed to serve God under the law (Lev. 21:18), nor be offered as sacrifices (Dt. 15:21), nor come within the holy city (2 Sam. 5:6-8). The Lord purposefully healed multitudes of lame and blind (Mt. 15:30), and allowed them to come to Him in the temple (Mt. 21:14). His acted out message was clearly that those who were despised as unfit for God's service were now being welcomed by Him into that service. The lame and blind were despised because they couldn't work. They had to rely on the grace of others. Here again is a crucial teaching: those called are those who can't do the works, but depend upon grace. We need to appreciate too that in Palestine, to refuse an invitation to a feast was a major insult to the person who gave it. That the majority of people refused it would've been so hurtful to the host. And in this we see a picture of the pain of God, that the majority refuse His invitation. Therefore He is so happy when anyone *does* respond, even if they're down and out. And we should hold in our heart the tragedy of God, the pain of God, that so many have refused Him; and therefore never judge anyone as unsuitable who may respond to the invitation. We're making the invitations for *His* sake, not our own. And on this basis we 'bring in' those desperate types to the Lord's feast (Lk. 14:21). The same word is used about Barnabas 'bringing' the unlikely convert Paul to the apostles (Acts 9:27), and later 'bringing' or introducing him to the Antioch ecclesia (Acts 11:26), the "other sheep" being 'brought' into the fold (Jn. 10:16), the blind man whom people thought was no good for Jesus being 'brought' unto Him (Lk. 18:40), the Samaritan 'bringing' the good-as-dead wounded man to the inn / the ecclesia (Lk. 10:34), all reflecting how the goodness of God leads / brings [s.w.]

desperate sinners to repentance (Rom. 2:4). In our ‘bringing in’ of desperate people to the Lord’s feast, we are vehicles for that grace of God which ‘brings in’ men and women to Him. Notice in passing that we invite people to the Kingdom feast without seeking a recompense from them- i.e. we should not expect anything from them, be it personal loyalty, money, respect etc. And if we don’t get it from them, only then will we be rewarded / recompensed for our preaching at the last day. So it should be no surprise to us if as with Paul our converts turn against us and in no form ‘recompense’ us for calling them. Actually we should take comfort from this, as it is an encouragement that we will have our recompense at the last day.

## 4-4 Preaching In The Workplace: Sample Dialogues

*Appendix: Sample dialogue for group practice and discussion. Do it in pairs and then discuss the questions.*

**W= worker**

**C = Christian preacher.**

Both these men have some kind of problem in their marriage- a commonality the preacher could capitalise on.

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### **Dialogue 1**

W: How are things today?

C: Well, want an honest answer? Not good.

W: Oh....? Really? {surprised- expecting ‘Fine!’}

C: Yeah. You know I’m a Christian, really into the Bible and all that, but last night I swore at my wife, and I really just can’t forgive myself. I feel...so awful about it.

W: {Surprised}: Oh....err...well, we all do it, hey.

C: Yeah, you know, but for me...I mean, do you mind me talking to you?

W: Sure sure sure sure, yeah, I mean...

C: Well I dunno, it’s just that, you know, I really believe that Jesus was of our nature, OK, it means He was tempted like us, He must have got tempted to swear at people but He didn’t, He was just, so, patient. I was telling a guy the other day how Jesus isn’t God and that’s important because it means He was like us and can therefore feel for us, He knows just what we feel like, and so, He can forgive us. So, you know, I believe all this, I was baptized, that means I got immersed, dipped, into the death and resurrection of Jesus, so, like, I’m forgiven, I really believe I’m forgiven for swearing at her, but, you know, it’s just so hard to believe and feel it and to just get on with life. You know...well, maybe you don’t

W: Hey, I do kinda know what you mean, I'm not the church type, but I tell you, although I'd never admit it to my wife, when we have a row, I really feel bad about it afterwards. I try to forget it but I can't.

C: Yeah. It's JUST how I'm feeling now. Feeling bad about it afterwards. And yeah, you never like to admit it to her. Right. But then, I feel in a worse position, because I'm baptized, it means, I'm one with Jesus Christ, I ought to act like He does all the time, I should be Christ to her, I should believe that because Jesus was like me and died for me as a representative of me, that I'm really forgiven.

W: Hey I don't get all that stuff, *representative*...?

C: Yeah OK I'm going too fast, anyway, we'd better get to work hey. Forgive me.

W: No, no worries, I feel good I could do someone a bit of good by listening. But you know, that was...well, an unusual conversation...I'll be thinking about that a lot.

C: Yeah? Thanks, it did do me some good. Well I guess the real Christianity is unusual. Truth's stranger than fiction. Our guys actually call it "the truth". Well I was helped in understanding it by reading a book, I'll give you a copy tomorrow. Ha, don't worry, I'm not a religious nut- swearing at Jean I can't be, hey- but, you know, you can chew on it at your own pace.

W: Yeah? Sure, gimme a copy, I'll browse it. I had a look into the Bible once, all I can remember was something about "beggars can't be choosers", pathetic, huh.

C: Sure. I feel like that. Beggars can't be choosers. That's how I feel a bit. Begging for mercy, and getting it. Anyway, let's get back to the grindstone hey.

W {gently pats C on the back}. Yup.

## ***Dialogue 2***

W: How are things today?

C: Fine! We had a great meeting at our ecclesia last night, about the death of Christ

W: Oh. Well, glad it put you in a good mood. What are we doing at work today?

C: Err, getting those reports done I guess. Anyway, the speaker we had was bringing out about how most churches have got it wrong, Jesus died as our *representative* not our substitute, and He wasn't God, you know, that trinity idea is so wrong and blasphemous yet millions believe it?

W: Well you know me I'm not into all that church stuff, I've got to try to keep my marriage together, man, you should've heard my wife rowing with me last night! I don't suppose a bit of theology would ever put her straight!

C: Well the Truth's a wonderful thing you know, this brother xxxxx who was speaking, wow, he was just such a speaker, I went home just thrilled. I could've faced anything after that!

And it's such a blessing when your partner's in the Truth, like my wife is, you know, we're so united on everything!

W: Yup, guess it's good when someone finds something that helps them through life, but, I dunno, I had a lot of relationships, and this is my 3rd marriage and I really don't reckon two people agree on everything. Ever. Especially when the wife's a Catholic and you aren't! But then, you know, you've gotta have relationships, I mean "beggars can't be choosers" ha. That's about what I learnt from the Bible when I looked at it once- you know, Matthew 98 verse....672! Or whatever. Yeah. "Beggars can't be choosers", I liked that bit!

C: Come on you're being blasphemous, I'm a Christian and I can't stand that sort of language. The Bible says nothing of the sort. Please, be considerate to me. And I also have to say: the Catholic church is the most evil bunch of people ever. I suspect *that's* the root of the problem in your marriage.

W: Man, it was just a joke! No, I'm not blasphemous, I'm a religious kinda guy underneath, just, all that church stuff and reading out bits from this and that prayer book, no pal, not for me. Catholics, no, I don't reckon it's a bad idea, not for me, but no, hey, anyway, you never met my wife! I can tell you, it makes no difference what religion we both are, that's not our problem. I'd join the Catholics tomorrow if that would make my marriage easier! Actually, I wonder if it might not help, in all seriousness.

C {turning away in disgust}: Well anyway I think we ought to get to work and not just waste our employer's time chatting like this.

- Both introduce the ideas of:
  - truth
  - Jesus as our representative
  - Jesus of our nature
  - The danger of false doctrine and false churches
- How does each Christian do it, for each of these things?
- Both use the phrase "the truth", but note the different ways they present the phrase.
- The second dialogue includes several in-house phrases. How do you think they would be interpreted by the listener?
- Both speak from personal experience; but of what?
- Who is the more credible and why? Who ends up confirming the other man in his position, and who opens up the possibility of changing him? Why?
- There is a rapport in the 1st conversation. How is it developed? How does C reflect the language of W? How does he win his confidence? How is the conversation mutual? Where does it lead?
- Can you imagine the body language of each speaker during each part of the conversation? How much eye contact would there be and at what times and places in the sentences? Was there any chance of body contact at all in the 2nd dialogue? When could the 'C' in the 1st dialogue have used body contact, like, touching the arm of W? And when might W have touched his arm or shoulder?

## 4-5 Guilt and Grace

### 4-5-1 The Extent of Grace

I want to talk about grace and the absolute nature of our salvation by grace. But I sense within us all there is a fear that somehow, we can cheapen our salvation, make it too simple. There is no such thing as cheap grace- the sheer cost of the blood of Jesus means that this phrase is a contradiction in terms. But we can cheapen our understanding of grace by failing to see that it has another side, another aspect which must be appreciated in order to throw it into such stark relief. Until we perceive that our sins do indeed stand ‘against us’, we can’t appreciate the wonder of how powerful is our advocate and how extraordinary our judge. The extent of grace is reflected in the Lord’s teaching about being born again in Jn. 3:3-5. A person neither begets nor bears himself; but the Lord says that this must happen. The born again person has to receive a new origin- evidently something we can’t give ourselves. The new birth is therefore only possible through an acceptance of grace. Thus in Jn. 1:12,13 a parallel is drawn between “all who receive him” and those “who were born... of God”. Going even further, 1 Jn. 5:1 and 1 Jn. 4:8 [noting the tenses and context] suggest that faith and love are the evidence of this new birth rather than the cause of it. It is in the end the Father who draws men and women to Him (Jn. 6:44)- He draws them, not passively beckons or advises them. The extent of grace explains countless apparent contradictions and paradoxes throughout God’s relationships with men- e.g. God repeatedly said that He would leave David with “one tribe” (1 Kings 11:13). But actually by grace He gave David and Judah two and a half tribes.

There are times when I've woken in the morning and been moved to pray about something- e.g. a specific person. Later in the day, that person has horrendous problems, and I have found it so odd that I prayed for them that very morning. What made me pray for them? Surely God's direction. In this we see grace- that God even moves us to pray, so that He can answer the prayers. We're wrong to think that God passionlessly waits for us to repent or pray to Him, and then He will forgive or act for us. He loves us, simply so; and with all love's manipulation of circumstances, seeks to pour out His love upon us. Thus repentance itself is a gift which God gives and is not totally upon human initiative (Dt. 4:29-31; 30:1-10; 1 Kings 8:58). The book of Judges reflects this grace of God- showing, incidentally, that grace isn't only a New Testament theme. We are so wrong if we imagine that Judges is all about a cycle of sin, judgment, repentance, raising up a judge-saviour, salvation and restoration to God. For one thing, the cycles are never the same- for God is in passionate relationship with His people, and passionate love doesn't work to the 'same ole same ole' plan every time. Time and again we find that Israel sin, do not repent (Jud. 2:19)- and yet all the same God sends them a Saviour. They are saved without repentance, simply because God pities them (Jud. 2:15,16). They do the very things which God predicted in Deuteronomy would result in Him breaking the covenant with them- and yet He does *not* break His side of the covenant (Jud. 3:1). In all this we see an altogether profound grace, arising out of God's passionate love for His people. We simply don't 'get' how passionate is God's love for us! At times the realization may begin to break through to us... but the clouds soon return. Yet prolonged, sensitive reflection upon God's history with Israel brings us back to the same wonderful reality. Biblical history isn't history in that sense- it's the story of God's almost obsessive love for His people, which can make Him *appear to others* as therefore relatively ignorant of *them*. The miserable critics ponder why the Biblical narratives are so selective, ignoring, e.g., any mention of the huge

battle of Qarqar in 853 BC between Israel and Assyria, even though this is well attested in other history (1). The answer is surely that God's love for His people is in a sense obsessive, *so great*, that He *appears* to ignore anything not directly relevant to that love affair.

### The Response To Grace

Such grace can't be passively read about, heard about, reflected upon. It demands not only action but an abiding sense of responsibility. "Grace reigns...", Paul said. It is as a King, a master, that requires our response. When David sinned with Bathsheba, God didn't read him the act about adultery, lust, murder. He reminded David instead how He had delivered David by grace from his enemies, and how He had by grace given him many wives- when this was hardly God's ideal standard. God made concessions to David's weakness- and even gave him the wives of Saul. Seeing David was married to Saul's daughter, this was actually contrary to the spirit of God's own law. But God had showed David great grace in this. And it was *exactly this* which God reminded David of- it was this amazing grace against which David had sinned (2 Sam. 12:7,8). And perhaps David appreciated this when he commented: "I have sinned against the Lord", rather than saying 'Yes, I've broken commandments'. This is the awfulness of sin- any sin. That we who have known such grace could so ignore it and act like we never knew. The response to grace is seen throughout the Old Testament. Israel stood at Sinai and were told that if they were obedient, then they would be God's people. But then they were told that actually, God accepted them anyway as His people. And only *then* was the Law given to Moses- with the message that it was to be kept out of gratitude for what God had *already* done by grace in saving them just "simply so", because he loved them and had chosen their ancestors by grace (Dt. 4:34-40). Likewise it was *because* God sanctified Israel that they were to keep the Sabbath (Ex. 31:13,14; Dt. 5:15). It wasn't that any human obedience made them holy- the laws were simply an opportunity to respond to the grace shown them. For God's salvation of them from Egypt, like ours from this world, was nothing but grace. Pharaoh was condemned and Egypt overthrown because of his hard heart- but the very word is used to describe the hardness of Israel's heart at the time (Ex. 32:9; 33:3-5; 34:9). Israel were really no better than Egypt- just as Egypt was plagued "so that they could not drink the water" (Ex. 7:24), so we find Israel in the same situation right after leaving Egypt (Ex. 15:23). As the Egyptians were stripped of their jewellery, so Israel stripped themselves of it before the golden calf (Ex. 12:36; 33:6). Indeed, a case can be made that the majority of Israel didn't bother keeping the Passover even; it was by Moses' faith rather than their obedience that they were saved, according to Hebrews 11 (see <http://www.aletheiacollege.net/mm/4-10-2Did Israel Eat The Passover.htm>). Because God saved them from Egypt by grace [cp. baptism- 1 Cor. 10:1,2], with they themselves so spiritually weak at the time, still taking idols of Egypt through the Red Sea with them- *therefore* they were to keep the law (Dt. 11:7,8). Because God gave them the land of Canaan, a land for which they did not labour, didn't do any 'work' to receive, but were given because "You did a favour unto them" (Ps. 44:3)- *therefore* they were to keep the law (Dt. 26:15,16; 29:8,9; Josh. 23:5,6). David said that he loved keeping the law *because* God's testimony to him was so miraculous (Ps. 119:129 Heb.). There is an awesomeness to God's grace in all this. Hence the paradox of Ex. 20:20: "Fear not... that the fear of God may be before your faces". We are not to fear Him, for such perfect love casts out fear... yet it is exactly because of the wonder of all this that we live life in some fear / awe of misusing and abusing that grace.

### Romans 7 and 8

Romans 7 and 8 are so opposed to each on surface level reading. At the end of Romans 7, Paul is lamenting ‘Oh wretched man that I am!’. At the end of Romans 8, he is rejoicing in the utter certainty of salvation, apparently lost for words [even under inspiration] to gasp out the wonder of it all. So huge is the difference of spirit that expositor after expositor has concluded that this must all be read biographically- as if in Romans 7 Paul is speaking of his life before conversion, and goes on in Romans 8 to describe his life afterwards. But Greek tenses [unlike Hebrew ones] are precise. The tenses in Romans 7 make that a very strained reading. Paul is saying that he *right now* feels utterly frustrated by his constant doing that which he doesn’t want to do, his apparent inability to do good, and his wretchedness.

I submit that the two chapters dovetail together. It was only through the appreciation of personal sin which we meet in Romans 7 that Paul could reason through to the paen of praise and confidence which he reaches by the end of Romans 8.

There are so many breathtaking insights into the extent of grace in Romans 8.

Nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ, as revealed in the cross (Rom. 8:39). The idea of the love of Christ nearly always refers to the cross<sup>(2)</sup>.

And yet the same word occurs in Heb. 7:26, to remind us that the Son of God is “separate from sinners”. Here again is the paradox. We are sinners. And yet we cannot be separated from He who is personally separate from sinners. Again, the conviction of guilt is required so that we can know His saving grace. But it’s possible to understand this contradiction as just that- a contradiction. The Lord Jesus is separate from sinners; but nothing shall separate *us* from Him, although we are sinners. This can be seen as yet another of the many irreconcilable paradoxes which express the purity of God’s grace. We have elsewhere commented upon the way that God angrily speaks of permanently rejecting His people, and yet says in the same breath almost that He has not and will never reject them, because of His tender love for them.

God ‘spared not’ His own son (Rom. 8:32). The Greek phrase is elsewhere used about God not sparing people when He assigns them to condemnation (Rom. 11:21; 2 Cor. 13:2; 2 Pet. 2:4,5). The Lord Jesus knows how not only sinners feel but how the rejected will feel- for He ‘bore condemnation’ in this sense. We should be condemned. But He as our representative was condemned, although not personally guilty. He so empathized with us through the experience of the cross that He came to *feel* like a sinner, although He was not one. And thus He has freed us from condemnation. When Paul asks in Rom. 8:33,34 ‘Who can accuse us? Where are those people? Who can condemn us, if God justifies us?’, he is alluding to the woman taken in adultery. For the Lord asked the very same rhetorical questions on that occasion. Paul’s point is that we each one are that woman. We are under accusations which we can’t refute. The Lord never denied her guilt; but He took it away. The Lord comforted her that no *man* has nor can condemned her, and He who alone could do so, instead pronounces her free from condemnation.

We are right now more than conquerors through Christ (Rom. 8:37); and yet to he who overcomes [s.w. conquers] the Kingdom shall be given (Rev. 3:21). This doesn’t mean we can sit back and do nothing. And so Paul goes on to exhort us not to be overcome [s.w. conquered] of evil, but to overcome evil with good (Rom. 13:21).

The wonderful certainty of salvation and freedom from condemnation is brought out by the wonderful figure of the courtroom. God is the prosecutor- yet He is the one who shall search for Israel's sin, and admit that it cannot be found (Jer. 50:20). God is both judge, advocate for the defence, and prosecutor- and this is God *is for us*, the guilty! Rom. 8:33,34 develops the figure at length. The person bringing the complaint of sin against us is God alone- for there is no personal devil to do so. And the judge who can alone condemn us is the Lord Jesus alone. And yet we find the one ‘brings the charge’ instead being the very one who justifies us, or as the Greek means, renders us guiltless. The one who brings the charge becomes this strange judge who is so eager to declare us guiltless. And the judge who can alone condemn, or render guilty, is the very one who makes intercession to the judge for us- and moreover, the One who died for us, so passionate is His love. The logic is breathtaking, literally so. The figures are taken from an earthly courtroom, but the roles are mixed. Truly “if God be for us [another courtroom analogy], who can be against us” (Rom. 8:31). This advocate / intercessor is matchless. With Him on our side, ‘for us’, we cannot possibly be condemned. Whatever is ‘against us’- our sins- cannot now be against us, in the face of this mighty advocate. Let’s face it, the thing we fear more than death is our sin which is ‘against us’. But the assurance is clear, for those who will believe it. With an attorney for the defence such as we have, who is also our passionate judge so desperate to justify us- even they cannot stand ‘against us’. Rom. 8:38,39 says that neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God. In what sense could *life* separate us from God's love? Surely only in the sense of sins committed in human life. Yet even these cannot separate us from the love of God which is so ready and eager to forgive us. This is the extent of grace; that not even sin, which on one hand separate from God, can actually separate us from the love of God in Christ. We are often plagued by a desire to separate out the things for which we are justly suffering, and things in which we are innocent victims. We struggle over whether our cancer or her depression is our fault, or whether we only got into unhealthy behaviours as a result of others' stressing us... etc. This struggle to understand the balance between personal guilt and being a victim of circumstance or other people makes it hard for some people to free themselves from guilt. Seeking to understand is especially acute when we face death, suffering, tragedy, or experience broken relationships. How much was I to blame? In how much was I merely a victim? My determined conclusion is that it is impossible, at least by any intellectual process, to separate out that suffering for which we are personally guilty, and that suffering which we are merely victims of. The cross of Jesus was not only to remove personal guilt through forgiveness; all our human sufferings and sicknesses were laid upon Him there. Our burdens, both of our own guilt and those which are laid upon us by life or other people, are and were carried by Him who is our total saviour.

## Notes

- (1) Terrence Fretheim, *Deuteronomistic History* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989) p. 28.
- (2) “*When Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end*” (Jn. 13:1)

“*For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.*” (2 Cor. 5:14,15)

“*He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?..... Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*” (Rom. 8:32,34,35)

*“And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour” (Eph. 5:2)*

*“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph 5:25)*

*“the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20)*

*“Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood” (Rev. 1:5)*

*“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10)*

## **Appendix: The Tragedy Of Hosea: The Extent of grace**

The extent of God's grace is powerfully reflected through the life of Hosea. Hosea was asked to manifest the love of God towards Israel, with all the emotional pain that this involved. The unfaithfulness of Gomer to Hosea represented Israel's idolatry and unfaithfulness to God. The ten commandments taught that adultery was to be paralleled with idolatry. The two tablets each contained five commandments, and each of them were related to the other- thus the second commandment "You shall have no other gods" corresponds to the seventh, "You shall not commit adultery".

The first time the word of the Lord came to Hosea, he was told to marry "a wife of whoredoms". Note that this was "the beginning of the word of the Lord" to him (Hos. 1:2). He'd have been tempted to just ignore it, to think he'd been dreaming something, to run away from it. But to his credit, he obeyed. According to the Mosaic Law, a whore should be burnt. She shouldn't be married. Hosea was told to break the letter of the Law, and marry a prostitute. And he was told to be a father to her "children of whoredoms". And so he began what was to be quite a theme in both his life and his prophecy- that in the face of sin, God shows His grace. We've likely all seen this in our own lives- at our very weakest moments, the kindness and care of God for us is revealed. Humanly, when someone does something wrong to us, we respond in anger and dissociation from them. The grace of God is quite the other way. In the very depths of Israel's unfaithfulness, God reminds them through the prophets of His love for them, and His plan to ultimately save them. But God's grace can't be abused endlessly. Hosea has to name the subsequent children Jezreel, speaking of God's plan to avenge Himself and "to cause to cease the kingdom of the house of Israel", Lo-ruhamah ("for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel") and Lo-ammi ("for ye are not my people") (Hos. 1:4,6,9). Hosea isn't the only example of a person being taught by personal experience how God Himself feels. The whole parenting experience is another example. Or take Amos' message to Amaziah: "Your wife shall be a harlot in the city [Bethel- the house of God], and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land [i.e. Amaziah's personal family plot] shall be parcelled out by line" (Am. 7:17 RSV). It was God's wife who acted as a harlot in the house of God, it was God's children who fell by the sword, it was God's land which was divided to others. But He wanted Amaziah to know how it feels, to some extent, to be God. And in our lives there are multiple examples [if we perceive them] of Him doing likewise, in seeking to explain to us how He, our Father, really feels.

## **Children Of Adultery**

The usual Biblical rubric for describing conception and birth is to say that a man goes in to a woman, she conceives, and bears a child. Hos. 1:3 says that Gomer conceives and bears a son to Hosea; there

is no mention that he ‘went in’ to her, and in Hos. 1:6,8 we are told simply that Gomer conceived. The way the final child is called Lo-ammi was because “ye are not my people” (Hos. 1:9). This suggests that although Hosea did presumably have sexual relations with Gomer, these children were not actually conceived from him- i.e. she was continuing her relations with other men. This suggestion is confirmed by the way that Hosea asks the children when they are older to plead with their mother to stop her adultery (Hos. 2:2). Hosea explains further: “Their mother hath played the harlot: she that conceived them hath done shamefully: for she said, I will go after my lovers...” (Hos. 2:5). Notice how her conception of the children is said to have been “shameful”. And in addressing the children, Hosea never calls them ‘his’ children. In Hos. 2:4, Hosea appears to have been speaking about the children on his own account, whilst also thereby manifesting the spirit, feelings and words of Yahweh about His people Israel: “I will not have mercy upon her children; for they be the children of whoredoms”. Hosea had initially been told to marry Gomer and also take on her “children of whoredoms” into his family (1:2), so it would seem unlikely that his rejection of Gomer’s children because “they be the children of whoredoms” refers to them. Surely he refers to what appeared to be ‘his’ children, whom she had borne after her marriage to him. Note how he calls them “*her* children”. The children are described by Hosea as “her children” rather than “my children” (Hos. 2:6,7)- as if they were not his, although she bore them whilst newly married to him. Indeed, Gomer appears to reason in Hos. 2:14 that the children were her lovers’ payment to her for her sexual services. And in the parallel relationship between God and Israel, Israel were unfaithful to Yahweh and “engendered foreign children” (Hos. 5:7). We can learn much about the nature of Gomer’s behaviour with Hosea by seeing how Israel are described subsequently in Hosea’s prophecy. So often they are spoken of in terms of an unfaithful woman, and we are surely intended to understand that they were epitomized by the woman Gomer. So we can ‘read back’ from what is said about Israel in the prophecy to Gomer personally. God made the accusation that “[Israel] have dealt treacherously against the Lord: for they have begotten strange children”, whilst at the same time claiming to keep the sacrifices and Sabbaths of the Law (Hos. 5:6,7; 2:11). This would confirm that Gomer acted as Hosea’s wife, assuring him of her faithfulness, in the same way as the sacrifices and Sabbaths were intended to reflect Israel’s exclusive faithfulness to Yahweh.

But when Lo-ammi was born and named “ye are not my people”, *immediately* the prophet is inspired to make a tender prophecy of Israel’s final glory: “Ye are not my people, and I will not be your God. Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea...it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God” (Hos. 1:9,10; another example is in 12:8,9; 13:8,9). The word to circle in our Bibles is “yet”. In the face of all Israel’s sin, in the face of the inevitable judgment which this attracted, in the very moment when it is declared, God goes on to speak of His loving salvation. This is so hard for humans to take on board, called as we are to manifest this same grace of God. In the heat of the moment of others’ sin against us, we rarely find it in us to think let alone speak of their ultimate hope of salvation by grace. But this is the challenge of Hosea.

In an attempt to bring about Gomer’s repentance, Hosea once addresses his children as “Ammi” and “Ruhamah” (2:1), i.e. ‘my people’ and ‘I will have mercy’- purposefully changing the names God had given them. On this basis he appealed for Gomer’s repentance: “Let her *therefore* put away her whoredoms” (Hos. 2:2). As Paul was to later say in so many words, the mercy and grace of God is intended to lead us to repentance. Rather than that grace leading to a laissez-faire indifference and continuance in sin, the very reality of His grace to us in our weak moments should of itself inspire our repentance. But there is of course a limit, if we continually refuse: “Lest I strip her naked...and slay her” (2:3). This was the punishment for a prostitute, a punishment which she should’ve had right back at the start. But instead of this punishment, Hosea had married her. We are perhaps nervous to equate

our sinfulness, our rebellion, our unfaithfulness, with Gomer's prostitution. But this, surely, is what we are intended to do, and to thereby perceive the extent of God's patient love toward us, to the end that that grace and goodness might lead us to repentance. Because Hosea had loved this woman, he had feelings of anger- he desired to strip her naked and slay her, to "discover her lewdness in the sight of all her lovers, and none shall deliver her out of my hand" (2:10). These feelings were quite natural. Hosea was the wounded lover, the betrayed man. And these are exactly the feelings of God over the unfaithfulness of His people. "She is not my wife and I am not her husband" (Hos. 2:4) is a verbatim quotation from various Babylonian divorce formulas, and was later incorporated into the Talmud as a divorce formula (1). Likewise the threat to strip her naked (Hos. 2:3) was what was done in the case of divorce for adultery; Hosea's threat to withdraw her clothing, her "wool and flax [linen]" in Hos. 2:9 likely refers to the same thing. Yet Hosea keeps wanting Gomer to return to him; he wishes to divorce her, and yet in his heart keeps coming back to her. This was an exact reflection of God's feelings for His people.

### A Wounded Lover

Hosea did everything for this worthless woman. He gave her "corn, wine, oil, and multiplied her silver and gold, which they [her lovers] prepared for Baal" (2:8). He was presumably a wealthy man, and yet gave it all to his wife, who in turn blew it all with her boyfriends on Baal worship. It's like the millionaire marrying a worthless woman who manipulates him into giving her his money, which she blows down at the casino day by day, and sleeps with the guys she hangs out with down there. But "she did not know that I gave her..." all these things (2:8)- i.e. she didn't appreciate it one bit. And so Hosea decides that he will withdraw this generosity from her, and then, he surmises, "she shall say, I will go and return to my first husband" (2:7). This was Hosea's hope, and in his own mind, he put these words in her mouth. The hopefulness of Hosea was a reflection of the love he had for her. And all this speaks eloquently of the hopefulness of the Almighty Father who thought "*surely* they will reverence my Son" when He sends Him. And the purposeful anti-climax of the parable is that no, they don't and won't reverence His Son, and even worse, they kill Him. In the same way as Hosea had this plan to get Gomer to "return" to him, so God likewise planned that "afterward shall the children of Israel return, and seek the Lord their God" (3:5). Both God and Hosea thought that "I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence... in their affliction they will seek me early" (5:15). But it didn't work out like this. Both God with Israel and Hosea with Gomer ended up *pleading* with her to return (14:1); "and they do not return to the Lord their God, nor seek him for all this" (7:10). It was and is a tragedy. In our preaching to Israel, indeed to mankind generally, we are pleading with them to accept this most unusual love. The pain of God, the way He is left as it were standing there as a tragic figure, like Hosea was, of itself inspires us to plead with people all the more passionately. Notice in all this that 'return' is probably an idiom; neither Hosea nor Gomer appear to have physically split up, but both of them had 'left' the other one, as in so many marriages today.

Gomer received vines, fig trees and forests from her lovers (2:12). She even became "rich" because of this (12:8). All of this was done whilst married to Hosea. His patience and love for her must have been amazing. And even that was and is a poor reflection of the depth of God's love and grace for Israel, and for us too. It's more than sobering, to be in a relationship where we are loved so much more deeply than we love back. It's worrying and challenging, to the point that every fibre in our being should be crying out to love this wonderful God far, far more than we do. Gomer must have lied to Hosea *so* much. And Israel are criticized throughout his prophecy for just the same. "Ephraim compasseth me about with lies, and the house of Israel with deceit... they have spoken lies" (11:12; 7:13). In fact, the untruthfulness became compulsive and obsessive: "He daily increaseth lies" (12:1).

Gomer would've lied about where she was going, about how she spent Hosea's money, about whose the children were... And the key proof of our spiritual sincerity is whether we are in the core of our beings *truthful*, both with our God and with ourselves.

### **Gomer: An Observant Jewess**

Hosea was prophesying in the context of the reforms of Jeroboam II, which had appeared on the surface to root out Baal worship- but in reality, the people remained deeply committed to it. All this was reflected in the surface level commitment of Gomer to him whilst committing adultery with multiple partners. God through Hosea said that He despised Gomer and Israel's keeping of the Sabbaths, sacrifices and solemn feasts (2:11). Gomer and Israel offered sacrifices with flocks and herds (5:6). Gomer was an observant Jewess- all part of her deceptive life with Hosea. Gomer called Yahweh 'Baal' (2:16)- in other words, she thought that by worshipping Baal she was in fact worshipping Yahweh. This was how Israel justified their Baal worship, reasoning that actually they had never left Yahweh, they still kept His feasts and sacrifices, but they worshipped Him through their Baal worship. But in reality, Israel and Gomer had "forgotten the law of thy God... my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge... for I desired mercy and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (6:6). Yet they cried out that "My God, we [do] know thee" (8:2). Israel's attitude to the Law can so easily be our attitude to the first principles of the Gospel, the New Covenant, in which we stand. We can 'know' it all, and externally keep it... but in reality not know it at all, focusing on the external sacrifices whilst knowing nothing of the God we supposedly worship. All this was exemplified by Gomer being an observant Jewess, whilst worshipping Baal and living a shameful life. She broke the marriage covenant as Israel like Adam "transgressed the covenant" (6:7 RV; 8:1). Israel / Gomer knew the Law on one level, but "the great things of my law... were counted as a strange thing" (8:12). They called upon the Most High, but refused to exalt Him in their hearts (11:7). The very experience and fact of 'knowing' God's law on a surface level can mask the fact that to 'know' Him in practice is quite a different thing. The simple possession of the right knowledge can of itself deceive us. This ought to provoke constant self-examination.

Through it all, Hosea was hopeful. He looked and hoped for a day when he could say to Gomer's children: "I will say to them which were not my people [a reference to Lo-Ammi], Thou art my people" (2:23). If Gomer came back to him truly, then he longed to call those children of adultery *his* very own children. Note that 4:6-14 imply that those children also grew up to live highly immoral lives. Bearing in mind that the punishment for such whoredom was death, we see how God's grace in Hosea's lovely character actually contradicts the letter of the law, and certainly contradicts all natural human desire for judgment and expiation against those who have wronged us. Here was grace, pure and wonderful. God then tells Hosea: "Go yet [i.e. still, carry on...], love a woman beloved of her friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the Lord toward the children of Israel, who look to other gods" (3:1). I take this to mean that God was telling Hosea to as it were re-marry Gomer, to try to start the marital relationship over again, just as some couples desire to have a 're-marriage' after a period of difficulty between them. Notice how Hosea was commanded to "love" her. We may think that love is something spontaneous, that can't be 'commanded'. But the essence of love, even the love that binds a marriage together, is the love that is an act of the will rather than pure emotion. Hosea's offer to Gomer to start over and as it were re-marry was made when she was "yet an adulteress". He didn't say 'If you stop whoring around, then we can maybe have some sort of re-marriage'. His very offer of the re-marriage was made whilst she was still doing it, such was his love and hope for her, according to the principle that the grace of God leads to repentance. And God does the very same with us, day by day, if only we will perceive it. He reveals His amazing love and grace when we are

furthest from Him, in order to bring us back to Him. And this must set the pattern for the way in which we deal with those who sin against us, in things great or small, in family life, in church life, in the workplace... Often in Hosea, God appeals to Israel to let Him be their ‘king’ (13:10). But there is a Hebraism whereby a husband is called the ‘king’ of his wife. God’s appeal was reflected in Hosea’s desire for Gomer to as it were re-marry him, to let him truly be her king / husband. And yet she felt like Israel: “What then should a king do [for] us?” (10:3). She was so selfish that she didn’t see anything in it for her... when so much love was being offered to her.

## **Sexual Addiction**

The reality was that Gomer was sexually addicted. She was a prostitute before her marriage, after her marriage she was an adulteress. Consider the language used about her / Israel: “committed whoredom continually” (4:18), “the spirit of whoredoms is in the midst of them” (5:4), “adulterers as an oven... hot as an oven” (7:4,7), a woman even paying lovers to sleep with her, using Hosea’s money (8:9 cp. 2:8), although she had other lovers who gave her gifts to sleep with them (2:12), “they sin more and more” (13:2). This is the language of addiction. Gomer was a sex addict. Like Israel, she didn’t consider in her heart that Hosea / God remembered / felt all her wickedness (7:2). She thought, as addicts do, that others are as insensitive as they are. Like addicts, she came to hate Hosea, the very one who enabled her as a person, who alone had loved her truly (9:7,8). And yet Hosea loved her to the end. All this is of course a simple warning against sexual addiction, which is one of the most untabulated and significant addictions in our society. But for a man to *love* a woman like this is a marvellous picture of God’s love for His Israel, both then and now. Indeed, 9:10 seems to imply that in the same way as God fell in love with Israel in the wilderness, even though they were worshipping idols even then, so Hosea did actually find Gomer attractive initially. God’s lament through Hosea, “but me she forgot” (Hos. 2:15) is an insight into His broken heart. And how many hours of our days slip by with no conscious thought of Him... does He feel the same?

And it was because of this love for her, that Hosea came to feel the passionate anger with her which he did at times: “I hated them... I will love them no more” (9:15). But this has to be balanced against his later profession that “I will love them freely” (14:4). In the end, because he loved her, as God loved Israel, finally giving up this terrible woman proved impossible: “How shall I give thee up?... mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger...” (11:8,9). And this God is our God, this God who was represented by Hosea, the man who kept loving that woman to the end, who dreamed of re-establishing the relationship with her. According to 9:12-15, Gomer’s children were killed during one of the invasions, and she became infertile, with “a miscarrying woman and dry breasts”. In Jewish terms of those days, to marry such a woman was pointless and absurd. But still, Hosea dreamt of the way when she would return to him in her heart and they could re-establish their relationship. She had nothing at all to offer him. Just like us with God. But such is His senseless love... “O Israel thou hast destroyed thyself: but in me is thine help” (13:9). Gomer’s sexual addiction was a reflection of the way she was crying out for love. The crying tragedy was that the love of Hosea, reflective as it was of God’s love, was just surpassing. And yet she didn’t perceive it, didn’t want it... and so her mad search for love led her to the chronic sexual addiction which destroyed her.

Gomer’s sexual addiction is testified to by the way Hosea orders that even after their re-marriage, she would “wait” for him, and “not belong to a man” (Hos. 3:3), i.e. they would not have intercourse. Hos. 4:18 speaks of how “they have made love continually... her lustful spirit”. The judgment of removing the signs of adultery from Gomer’s face and from between her breasts (Hos. 2:4) also give a

window into the level of her sexual addiction. Song 1:13 speaks of myrrh between the breasts being used as an aphrodisiac; and prostitutes paint their faces in Jer. 4:30 and Ez. 23:40. She wore a nose ring and pendant in order to ‘go after’ her lovers (Hos. 2:15). And yet these things would’ve been understood as wedding gifts, akin to a woman today wearing a wedding ring. The awful thing is that she used the very things Hosea had given her as an expression of his unique commitment to her- as a means for adultery. Likewise the silver and gold of her dowry, she used in Baal worship (Hos. 2:10). She wasn’t doing it for money or because she was in need; the implication is that she was using the aphrodisiac to excite and sexually stimulate herself rather than her lovers, and was *therefore* going in search of them. We have to ask what wilful stimulations to sin, to unfaithfulness to our Master, we allow into our lives.

### **Hosea’s Fantasy**

"I shall speak to her heart" (Hos. 2:16) is an idiom elsewhere used about seeking to win the heart of a woman by persuasive words (Gen. 34:3; Ruth 2:13; Jud. 19:3); Hosea dreamt of winning Gomer back to him by his words. This has a direct equivalent in the restoration context- for the same term is used in Is. 40:2, where God through the prophets seeks to speak to the heart of Zion and persuade her to return from Babylon to Him in Jerusalem and enjoy the married life of His Kingdom. And yet like Gomer, they either didn't want to hear, or responded on a merely surface level.

Hosea’s prophecy ends with God protesting His eternal love for Israel, and a description of them in the Kingdom, when they will have ‘returned’ to Him: “I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely... His beauty shall be as the olive tree... they... shall return... Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols?” (14:4-7). Remember that the God / Israel relationship was a reflection of the Hosea / Gomer situation. I take this final, majestic section to be a reflection of Hosea’s fantasy, his day dream, that one day Gomer would return to him and blossom as a person. For fantasies are all a part of true love. “From me is thy fruit found [Heb. ‘acquired’]” (14:8) is perhaps his fantasy that *somewhat*, this worn out woman with dry breasts and a miscarrying womb (9:14) would *someday* still bear him children of their own, and that in him “the fatherless [a reference to Gomer’s illegitimate children] findeth mercy” (14:3). This fantasy of Hosea’s, rooted in his amazing love for Gomer, love that was partly in pure and amazing obedience to God’s *command* that he love her (3:1), is a reflection of God’s dream for Israel. Hosea died with his dream unfulfilled. We are left with the question as to whether this similar loving intention of God for Israel will in fact be fulfilled, or whether it was what was potentially possible for Israel; or whether His fantasy for them will be fulfilled through a new Israel. If the latter, and we are that new Israel, then we can imagine what passionate joy the Father finds in our bumbling attempts to respond to Him and be His loyal and faithful wife. Whatever, the simple fact is that it all reflects an amazing grace, an ineffable love... and this God is our God, and Hosea who reflected all this is truly a pattern for ourselves in daily life. The very existence of such passionate love for us, love beyond reason, carries with it an inevitable warning as to our responsibilities: “Who is wise, that he may understand these things? prudent, that he may know them? for the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them; but transgressors shall fall therein” (Hos. 14:9). Faced as we are by a love like this, we simply can’t be passive to it.

### **Notes**

(1) Umberto Cassuto, *Biblical And Oriental Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973) Vol. 1 p. 122.

## 4-5-2 Grace and Guilt

And yet. It's not that there's a catch to grace. But it's wonder has to be underpinned by something to give it reality and credibility, to the extent it's something deeply felt, rather than merely an abstract idea. Throughout God's revelation there are commands, there's a concept of obedience and disobedience, of acceptance and rejection by a holy Father. All these things inevitably give rise to guilt in its true form. To speak solely of grace just as grace whilst ignoring these obvious things robs grace of its' power and meaning. The assurance of Romans 8 is built upon the conviction of sin in Romans 7. 2 Cor. 12:10 states that it is in our very weakness, the weakness of the man made to realize the weight of his own mediocrity and failure to achieve as described above, that *the power of God breaks forth*.

### God Works Through Sin

Here we have the answer to those who cannot forgive themselves for past sins. God works out His plan of salvation actually through man's disobedience rather than his obedience. As Paul puts it again, we are concluded in unbelief, that God may have mercy (Rom. 11:32). It was and is the spirit of Joseph, when he comforted his brothers: "Now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5). And again, speaking about the sin of Israel in rejecting Christ: "Their trespass means riches for the [Gentile] world" (Rom. 11:12). Or yet again, think of how Abraham's lie about Sarah and unfaithfulness to his marriage covenant with her became a source of God's blessing and the curing of Abimelech's wife from infertility (Gen. 20:17- I read her infertility as a state that existed prior to the incident with Abraham). The righteousness of God becomes available to us exactly because we have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23,24). If we lie, then through our lie the truth and glory of God is revealed (Rom. 3:7). The light comes into the world- the light of hope of salvation, forgiveness, of God in Christ- but this light reveals to us our verdict of 'guilty' (Jn. 3:18,36).

David was aware that God didn't really want sacrifice, or else he would so eagerly have offered it (Ps. 51:16,17). Instead, David perceived that what God wanted in essence was a broken and contrite spirit. The Bathsheba incident was programmatic for David's understanding of God, and his prayers and psalms subsequently can be expected to have constant allusion back to it. We meet the same idea of God not ultimately wanting sacrifice in Ps. 40:6-9: "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire [but instead] mine ears hast thou opened [Heb. 'digged'- a reference to a servant being permanently committed as a slave to his master]: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. Then said I, Lo, I come... to do thy will... thy law is within my heart". In Ps. 51:17, David had reasoned that instead of sacrifice, God wanted a heart that was broken and contrite. Here he reflects that instead of sacrifice, God wants a heart that has the law of God within it. This ultimately is the effect of God's law being in our heart- it creates a broken and contrite heart. But how? In the experience of most of us, the law does this through convicting us of our inability to keep it. And so we see how guilt and grace work so seamlessly together. David's broken heart was a heart which knew he had sinned, sinned irreversibly, and condemned himself. But this, he perceived, was the result of God's law being within his heart. But the words of Ps. 40:6-9 are applied in the New Testament to the Lord's death upon the cross. What's the connection, and

what's the lesson? In essence, through David's experience of sin, and the work of God's law upon his heart, he came through that sin to have the very mind of the Lord Jesus as He hung upon the cross, matchless and spotless in His perfection, as the Lamb for sinners slain. Again and again we see the lesson taught- that God works through human sin, in this case, in order to bring us to know the very mind of Christ in His finest hour of glory and spiritual conquest. We must not only let God's word work its way in us; but we need to recognize when dealing with other sinners that God likewise is working with them. He doesn't shrug and walk away from sin; He earnestly seeks to use our experience of it to bring us closer unto Himself.

This was the whole reason for the Law of Moses. It was "so that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (Rom. 3:19). Paul is quoting here from Ps. 63:11: "the mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped". He's reasoning that because we're all sinners, we're all liars- for untruth is the essence of sin. We are not being true to ourselves, to God, to His word, to our brethren... we profess covenant relationship with God, to be His people, and yet we fail to keep the terms of that covenant. And the Law of Moses convicted all God's people of this, and in this way led them to the need for Christ. Yet Is. 52:15 prophesied that the crucified Jesus would result in men shutting their mouths. The righteousness and perfection displayed there in one Man, the very human Lord Jesus, has the same effect upon us as the Law of Moses- we shut our mouths, convicted of sin.

On one level, the Mosaic Law was a set of such intricate regulations that was almost impossible to keep. And yet it led men to Christ as a gentle slave leading the children to the teacher. I don't think that the Law of Moses led people to Christ in the sense that they cracked the various types and worked it all out. There's not one example that I can think of where an Old Testament character did this. Indeed it could appear from Gal. 3:23 and other New Testament passages that until Christ actually came, the Old Testament believers were "shut up unto the faith which should afterward be revealed". Therefore the types etc. of the Law of Moses couldn't have been perceived by them in the same way as we understand them. Hence the Lord's comment that many righteous men had longed to understand the things of Jesus which the disciples saw and heard in reality. "In other ages" those things of Christ were not made known to men as they were revealed in the New Testament by the preaching of the apostles and New Testament prophets (Eph. 3:5). The Old Testament prophets even seemed to understand that the things they saw and wrote were not so much for themselves as for us (1 Pet. 1:12). Or reflect on the implications of Gal. 3:23: "Before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith [in Jesus] which should afterwards be revealed". The Law was a shadow created as it were by the concrete reality of Christ. We can look back and see it all now, but I don't think the types predicted anything to the people of the time. So how then did the Law lead people to Christ? Was it not that they were convicted of guilt, and cried out for a Saviour? "The law entered , that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that... grace might reign... unto eternal life by Jesus" (Rom. 5:20,21). This was the purpose of the Law. And thus Paul quotes David's rejoicing in the righteousness imputed to him when he had sinned and had no works left to do- and changes the pronoun from "he" to "they" (Rom. 4:6-8). David's personal experience became typical of that of each of us. It was *through* the experience of that wretched and hopeless position that David and all believers come to know the true 'blessedness' of imputed righteousness and sin forgiven by grace. Perhaps Gal. 3:22 sums up what we have been saying: "The Scripture [in the context, this refers to the Mosaic Law] hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe". And Paul goes on to say in this very context that the law brings us unto Christ (Gal. 3:24). It brings us- not those

who lived under the law. How does it do that? By convicting us of sin, ‘concluding’ us as being under the control of sin.

When Paul laments that he cannot find “how to perform that which is good”, he is speaking about the Law of Moses. For the context of Romans 7 repeatedly defines the Mosaic Law as that which is “holy, just and good...the law is [the] good [thing]”, the law of God in which Paul delighted (Rom. 7:12,16,22). The “no good thing” which dwelt within Paul was therefore a description of his inability to keep the Mosaic Law, rather than any reference to human nature- for the “good thing” has just been defined as the Mosaic Law (Rom. 7:18). But all this was to create the lead in to the realization that now in Christ, there is now no condemnation. The suffering and groaning of which Paul speaks in Rom. 8:17, 22-26 is in my view a reference to the ‘groaning’ he has just been making about his inability to keep the Mosaic Law. Our helplessness to be obedient, our frustration with ourselves, is a groaning against sin which is actually a groaning in harmony with that of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, who makes intercession for us with the same groanings right now (Rom. 8:26). Indeed, those groanings are those spoken of in Heb. 5:7 as the groanings of strong crying and tears which the Lord made in His final passion. In this sense, the Spirit, the Lord the Spirit, bears witness with our spirit / mind, that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16). This clinches all I am trying to say. Our inability to keep the Law of God leads to a groaning against sin and because of sin, which puts us into a unity with the Lord Jesus as our Heavenly intercessor in the court of Heaven. Because of this, we are declared justified, there are no credible accusers, and the passionate intercessor / advocate turns out to be the judge Himself. Thus through our frustration at our own failure, we are led not only to Christ but to the certainty of an assured salvation. But that wondrous realization of grace which is expressed so finely in Romans 8 would just be impossible were it not for the conviction of sin which there is through our experience of our inability to keep the Law of God. Our failure and groaning because of it becomes in the end the very witness that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16). God thereby makes sin His servant, in that the experience of it glorifies Him. How God works through sin is revealed in the way that although God always provided food for Israel in the wilderness, He ‘suffered them to hunger’ for 40 years, in order to try to teach them that man lives not by bread alone, but by God’s word (Dt. 8:2,3). The Jews in the wilderness despised the food God gave them as worthless (Num. 21:3); they went hungry not literally, but in the sense that they despised the manna of God’s provision. And He allowed them to have that hunger, in order that He might [try to] teach them about the value of His word. He didn’t simply punish them for their ingratitude. He sought to work through it in order to teach them something. Even the process of rejection results in the victims coming to ‘know the Lord’.

I have argued elsewhere that the book of Job was written by Moses as a preface to his Law. Job was driven by his own confused guilt over his illness to realize his sinfulness, and to desperately wish for the ‘daysman betwixt’ God and man, lamenting that there was no such mediator. It was through the torment of guilt which God allowed to come upon him that he came to triumph that he knows that his redeemer lived, or ‘will live’, and would resurrect him at the last day. Think too about the Mosaic legislation about lepers and menstruating women. Were those people really morally unclean before God because of bodily situations over which they had no control? Or was this not a legislation which had the intent of convicting *all* people of their guilty state before God, and in the end, their need for salvation by grace alone? For the leper had to offer a *guilt offering* for being cleansed (Lev. 14). Was it not that the legislation was to convict of guilt regarding the human condition, rather than stating that some individual was more guilty than the one next to him simply because of a condition over which he had totally no control? Likewise, how could offering a sacrifice or paying a penalty

in cash or goods really take away sin? Was the whole exercise not to convict us of guilt in order to prepare us for the way of escape through grace? A price must be paid for sin and for our guilt; we have to come to personally realize that. But that great price *has been paid* by the Lord, it's not for us to pay the price, but to respond in faith to the fact it has been paid. In passing, this approach to the Law would explain why at times forgiveness and reconciliation was possible during the Mosaic period by means other than the Mosaic legislation, or when it was imperfectly applied.

The Lord's manifesto as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount was structured and set up by Him in some ways as a 'new law' as opposed to the old law of Moses. And yet His law likewise proves impossible to keep. We cannot be perfect as our Father is. To a man and to a woman, we would admit that we cannot fully forgive our enemies from our hearts. And so, according to the Lord's law, we each stand unforgiven. We are to sell all that we have and give to the poor, or risk forfeiting the Kingdom because of our love of this world's goods (Mk. 10:17-22). An angry thought is murder, a passing lustful look becomes adultery- all mortal sins, which catch each of us within their net. Why was this? Surely yet again, the Lord wished to convict us of our guilt before Him, our inabilitys, our desperation... so that we could come to appreciate the wonder of His character and His saving grace. For He was the one and only emodiment of His own teaching, to the point that the person who fulfilled all His teaching was in fact He Himself- and no other man. In knowing Him, we thus know our own desperation, and yet we likewise know- because we know Him- the certainty of our salvation by grace. Further, it becomes apparent that the Lord accepted with open arms those who were so very far from the ideals He laid down in the Sermon on the Mount. He convicted them of their guilt in such a way that with joy and peace they ran to His grace.

God's dialogue with Cain was the Divine attempt at the same process. The questions 'Where is Abel your brother... what have you done?' were clearly intended to induce guilt in Cain, but the purpose was to lead him to the grace of salvation found in the sacrificial lamb provided by God, then crouching at his door as a sin offering. And yet, tragically, Cain would not allow himself to enter the grace-guilt-grace process. Like so many, he turned away in bitter rebellion and self-justification. And thus he came to prefigure the rejected, whose punishment will be to simply exist for a time with the pain of their own undealt with guilt. And if we chose to live like that in this life, we are living out our own condemnation.

Israel's prophets likewise sought to awaken guilt in those of God's people who were repressing it. This is different to mere moralising. They were appealing for an awakening of true conscience and guilt. Isaiah exemplified his message in his own life. He was convicted of his sin, saying "Woe is me", in order to prepare him for the great truth that "your guilt is taken away" (Is. 6:1-7).

These thoughts explain to me why believers like David, Paul, you and me, can be both joyous and depressed, tormented by guilt and yet confident of the grace of God... all as part of the same wondrous process which God is working out. Perhaps we could say that, according to Romans 8, it is not guilt that is removed but condemnation. The guilt remains. But there is no condemnation for it. We will be saved. We will be in God's Kingdom.

### Guilt and Truth

Firstly, some words about guilt. Guilt is part of the downward spiral in spiritual life. Unconfessed sin carries a double burden- the guilt over the failure itself, and the guilt of its

concealment. Secrecy and guilt are related. The sense that God's gifts can be received only by our works and achievements lead towards exaggeration. And again, untruthfulness and guilt become related.

'Living the truth' involves an openness with not only God but ourselves and others too. This is the power of doctrinal truth- it ought to lead to a truth-full attitude to life. The openly lived life, with no secret sin, and open confession of past sins, leads to a life not dominated by guilt. Indeed, there's something contagious about confession. My dream is for our community to become one that is free of the fear of human judgment, ever growing in this contagious openness and confession, free of false guilt and growing in grace...

I can say that I have seen this wonderfully outworked in my own life. From being a zealous believer who committed the kinds of sins which I know are common to all flesh, but not feeling that bad about them nor the need to confess them before men, I was led by a chain of circumstances to having all my sins, and many other speculations and false allegations, aired literally before the world. I am so grateful for that experience, because it led me to a wonderful sense of 'truth', of openness, to freedom from the guilt that is related to knowing we have secret sins, things which others would be shocked if they knew. And I was able to throw myself even further into my Christian service with a joy and focus I never had before. I know, and I can deeply underline that word 'know', that there will be no surprises for any of you when I come before the Lord at the last day. The freedom I enjoy with you my readers and hearers is that which you can all enjoy. I have learnt that there is only *one* judge; as Paul said, it now means very little to me to be judged by man's judgment. I too can no longer judge others- for again, there is only One judge. If only as a community we would not judge, our mutual openness would lead to far deeper relationships with each other.

This isn't to say that one has no secrets at all. Having 'secrets' is part of a child's growth to individuality- a secret drawer, a secret we only reveal to those whom we chose to be our special friends. And yet the Gospel is described as the ultimate 'secret'; our personalities before God are the 'hidden man' which we know we have and yet are likewise aware that others can't enter into.

## Conclusions

Thus there's nothing wrong with a Christian experiencing both joy and sorrow at the same time. The Lord's description of His 'joy' at the time of His being the ultimate 'man of sorrows' is an obvious example. But consider too Paul's language to the Philippians. On one hand he speaks insistently of his joy: "I pray always with joy... Christ is being preached, and I am glad... I will also continue to be happy... I am glad, and I share my joy... it made me very happy (Phil. 1:4,18; 2:17; 4:10). And yet on the other hand, he speaks of his sorrows at that very same time: "...that I may receive news about you that will cheer me up... keep me from having one sorrow after another" (Phil. 2:19,27).

Pierre Janet and the 'psychoanalytical school' explain how guilt transfers itself when it is left undealt with. These psychologists observed the cases of people with moral ideals, who then go through strong tendencies and actual behaviours [i.e., sin] which oppose those moral ideals. They noticed that the memory of those guilty feelings and acts "is driven out of the field of consciousness. Later these repressed tendencies and memories reappear, disguised in the form of mental pictures, dreams, bungled actions, or else as neurotic symptoms, paralyses, functional disorders, obsessions, and so on"<sup>(1)</sup>. Now these shrinks are only figuring what the Bible itself tells us plainly- that sin, the 'devil', is

a deceiver. We conveniently forget our sins. *But-* the guilt resurfaces in other forms. It's my own extensive observation that obsessions and other neuroses are particularly common amongst legalistic believers who are burdened by both real and false guilt. Both the real and even the false guilt are only dealt with [from the sufferer's perspective] by God's forgiveness through Christ, which involves confession of the sin. If it isn't, that guilt [whether true or false guilt] only resurfaces in some other form in our lives and personalities, and will come to the surface again at the day of judgment. *Now* is the time to deal with it. In fact, right *now* is the *only* time to truly deal with it through Christ... today is the day of salvation.

#### Notes

(1) Summarized in Paul Tournier, *The Healing Of Persons* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) p. 54.

### 4-5-3 True and False Guilt

- Many feel guilty because of the 'better' [as they see it] behaviour or achievements of others. Again, this is rooted in a works / achievement centred view of life. The uniqueness of the Lord Jesus was that He as the perfect man was the sinners friend, never arousing feelings of guilt in a destructive sense in anyone. Rather His perfection was and is a challenge, a challenge which is felt deeply, but in a way that provokes realistic improvement rather than the downward spiral of hopeless guilt. And the even more wonderful thing about the Lord is that that very same personality which shows up our weaker areas and failures inspires at one and the same time an assurance of His forgiveness and grace. And such is the manner of this Man, this more than Man, that we know that *His* forgiveness and acceptance are the only things worth having. With them, all else is calmly and blissfully OK in the ultimate sense.

- Fear of the judgment of others is another and related source of false guilt. It is this which militates against the true and free life of which the Lord speaks so enthusiastically. We fear showing ourselves for who we really are, because we fear others' judgments. This fear makes us uncreative, not bearing the unique spiritual fruits which the Lord so eagerly seeks from us and in us. The Lord said this plainly, when He characterized the man who did nothing with his talents as lamely but truthfully saying: "I was afraid" (Mt. 25:25). Think about this: What or whom was he afraid of? His fear was not so much of his Lord's judgment, but rather perhaps of the judgments of others, that he might do something wrong, wrongly invest, look stupid, mess it all up... And thus John writes that it is fear that leads to torment of soul now and final condemnation. The Lord's words in the parable are almost exactly those of Adam. The rejected one talent man says 'I was afraid, and so I hid *my* talent'. Adam said: 'I was afraid, and I hid *myself*'. The talent God gave that man was therefore himself, his real self. To not use our talent, to not blossom from the experience of God's love and grace, is to not use ourselves, is to not be ourselves, the *real* self as God intended.

- Various forms of the prosperity Gospel lead to false guilt. People feel guilty that they are sick or not prosperous; and they feel extra guilty because it appears to them that their prayers for a better situation aren't heard.

- The justification by works mentality leads a believer to become increasingly frustrated with him or herself over time. When we're young, we deceive ourselves that one day we will fulfil our dreams of works. But as time goes by, we see that we'll never successfully end the balance-sheet of works. We may blame our environment, our partner, background, origins,

the regime we live under. But in the end, the person has to blame themselves, be disappointed in their achievement, even realizing that their dreams and aims were misplaced in the first place, weighed down by the thought of his own mediocrity, ... and so all this builds up into an unbearable weight of suppressed guilt, guilt at the unfinished or never begun or badly done, finding vent in anger masked as ‘upholding the faith’, rigorous casuistry on irrelevant issues, with all the associated separation between a man and his gracious Father. I went through all this from a different angle to many- for by 32 I had fulfilled the spiritual dreams I had at 18, to discover that they were misplaced and irrelevant works-centred fantasies. And yet the new birth in Christ ought to free us from all this, releasing the creative power of the Father into our lives, to serve Him in our own unique ways and callings, knowing the reality of the peace and freedom of which the Gospel speaks. And we have to ask, whatever form of deformed Christianity is it which has resulted in people being crushed instead of freed like this...?

- Inferiority feelings are often taken by us to be guilt feelings, especially in this increasingly competitive and hierarchical world.

There are Biblical examples of refusing to take guilt when others feel that it should be taken. Recall how the Lord’s own parents blamed Him for ‘making them anxious’ by ‘irresponsibly’ remaining behind in the temple. The Lord refused to take any guilt, didn’t apologize, and even gently rebuked them (Lk. 2:42-51). In similar vein, Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Even if I made you sorry with a letter, I do not regret it” (2 Cor. 7:8). He would not take guilt for their being upset with him. Likewise Absalom comforted his raped sister not to ‘take it to heart’, not to feel guilty about it, as it seems she was feeling that way, taking false guilt upon her (2 Sam. 13:20).

False guilt is played upon by the ever greater fear of the spirit of judgment which progressively fills our world. Novels, movies, soap operas... all increasingly deal with this theme- judging who is guilty, to what extent, in what way, what judgment is necessary or warranted. Everyone feels under constant criticism, innocent words are increasingly misread, litigation opened against truly unintentional slips of wording or action. In one form or another, earth’s population is living in fear of judgment. Recriminations and reproach fly around our own community. None of us are indifferent to it all, all are hurt by the critical email, SMS, word, look or unspoken opinion of others. It leads to the fear between parents and children, wives and husbands, pastors and flock, which is breaking down society and our own community. This fear of criticism / judgment kills spontaneity, it precludes formulating independent thought and truly original ideas and programmes of action; it is the fear of this, rather than of *God’s* judgment, which lead people to leave their talent buried in the earth. And in the end, it leads to an empty conformism to what is perceived to be the ‘safe’ position, a bourgeois, spiritually middle class formalism. And so we all tend to live in fear of others’ judgment, with all the taking of false guilt which this creates.

But we’re overlooking a fundamental of our faith- that there truly is one judge. Hence Paul could say to his critics within the brotherhood that it mattered so little to him how he was judged by them, for he had *only* One who would judge him (1 Cor. 4:3). Indeed, Paul’s thought here is building on what he had earlier reasoned in 1 Cor. 2:15, that the spiritual man “himself is judged of no man”. There was only One judge, and the believer is now not condemned if he is in Christ (Rom. 8:1). He that truly believes in Christ is not condemned, but has passed from death to life (Jn. 3:18; 5:24). So however men may claim to judge and condemn us, the ultimate truth is that no man *can* judge / condemn us, and we who are

spiritual should live life like that, not fearing the pathetic judgments of men, knowing that effectively we are *not* being judged by them. How radically different is Paul's attitude to so many of us. The fear of criticism and human judgment leads us to respond as animals do to fear- the instinct of self-defence and self-preservation is aroused. We defend ourselves as we would against hunger or impending death. Yet here the radical implications of grace burst through. *We* are not our best defence. We have an advocate who is also the judge, the almighty Lord Jesus; we have a preserver and saviour, the same omnipotent Lord, so that we need not and must not trust in ourselves. By not trusting in this grace of salvation, we end up desperately trusting ourselves for justification and preservation and salvation, becoming ever more guilty at our abysmal and pathetic failures to save and defend ourselves.

When a person is surrounded by true love and acceptance, they blossom. The tongue-tied young woman suddenly blossoms into another person when she realizes she's loved to bits by a man. As we face the love of God in the gift and death of His Son, we face a love that should radically liberate us. As Romans 8 so powerfully reasons, if God loves us, if He accepts us and justifies us, then nothing, nothing else matters. And we can blossom, as Paul did. We step out of this world of stifled people, people who always put the brakes on when true creativity and genuine feelings arise within them. Unless we can remove the spirit of judgment and the fear of judgment from our community, we will go the way of so many marriages, relationships and churches. We will ossify into mere conformism, the dynamism of the new life will dry up, our love will go cold, and we will lose the faith of Christ.

Further, when a man is under accusation, his conscience usually dies. He is so bent on self-defence and seeking his own innocence and liberation from accusation. And we see this in so many around us. But for us, we have been delivered from accusation, judged innocent, granted the all powerful and all authoritative heavenly advocate. Rom. 8:33 states that there is now *nobody* who can accuse us, because none less than God Himself, the judge of all, is our justifier in Christ! And so whatever is said about us, don't let this register with us as if it is God accusing us. Not for us the addiction of internet chat groups, wanting to know what is said about us or feeling defensive under accusation. For all our sins, truly or falsely accused of, *God* is our justifier, and not ourselves. And thus our consciences can still blossom when under man's false accusation, genuinely aware of our failures for what they are, not being made to feel more guilty than we should, or to take false guilt. This is all a wonderful and awesome outworking of God's plan of salvation by grace.

### **Escaping False Guilt**

Trying to escape this kind of guilt can become obsessive. Yet the Scriptures signpost the way to a free conscience- simply through faith in God's grace as outworked in the death of His Son. Instead of this, people try to buy a way out with their payments- money in collection boxes, yet more works... and yet more guilt that not enough was given or done. Qualms of conscience about 'wasting time' can so often be part of this guilty fear of not having 'done' enough. The Lord Jesus was not beset by guilt, and a sensitive reading of the Gospels reflects the way that this ultimately zealous servant of the Lord never appeared to be in hurry. He had ample time to speak to the woman He met at the well (Jn. 4:1-26), to take time out with the disciples (Mk. 8:27), He had the leisure time to admire wild flowers (Mt. 6:28), comment upon a sunset (Mt. 16:2), to go through the lengthy process of washing the feet of His men (Jn. 13:5) and to be able to answer their naieve questions without the slightest hint of impatience (Jn. 14:5-10)... and of course to walk some distance to find a place conducive to prayer (Lk. 5:16).

Jacob is an example of the hurrying man beset with unvoiced inner conflicts trying to buy off his guilt. Struggling with an awful conscience, he sent huge gifts ahead of him to try to appease his offended brother Esau (Gen. 32:13-32). But he wasn't thereby freed from his bad conscience. He had to wrestle it out with God, with an Angel who at times appeared in the form of both Jacob's father and brother, and come to know his own desperation and God's utter grace and love towards him.

Another way of dealing with guilt is of course to repress it, by hardening the heart, reducing spiritual life to a series of religious duties- perhaps this is the most common path taken. "A wicked man puts on a bold face" (Prov. 21:29); the adulteress "Wipes her mouth and says, I have done no wrong" (Prov. 30:20); "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes" (Prov. 21:2).

Yet another method is to attempt to discharge our guilt, often our false guilt, by projecting it onto someone else, making someone else the scapegoat for our sins. Thus the sister guilty of a lifetime of adultery, the brother guilty of paedophilia, may make [e.g.] a loving young couple who 'go too far' before their marriage the objects of untold wrath and judgment, as they seek to transfer their own feelings of guilt and judgment onto someone else, vicariously punishing them as they feel they ought to be. Indeed the psychological basis for gossip and slander would appear to be a desire by guilty people to make themselves feel less isolated and to emphasize the guilt of others to escape their own guilt feelings. And it's the basis for anti-Semitism too- loading the Jews with the guilt of the Gentiles. The simple fact is that the Lord Jesus died as the antitype of the guilt offering. He died to take away guilt... and he or she who truly believes that has no need to transfer or discharge their guilt in these ways. The guilt of our iniquity was laid upon the Lord Jesus upon the cross, He there was the expiation of our sins (1 Jn. 2:2)... we don't have to vainly try to transfer it onto anyone else, or use any other way of dealing with that guilt, e.g. through repressing it deep within ourselves.

### **True Guilt**

The guilt which God seeks to engender in us in order to prepare us for His grace is very different from the false guilt which we often take. In many of the parables, there are elements of unreality- something within the otherwise imaginable story which sticks out as unreal and unusual, and which signposts the way to the point the Lord intends us to grasp. In Mt. 25:31-46 we have a parable depicting the last judgment, where the Lord sits as judge and we come before Him. Usually, a person comes before a judge regarding things which they have committed wrongly. But our expectations, which are set up by the story of a judge and people coming before him in judgment, are shattered. The issues the people are judged about aren't acts of commission. It's all about what they *omitted* to do. And yet we're all so freaked out about our committed sins, rather than realizing the tremendous importance the Lord attaches to our *omissions* of acts of kindness and thoughtful love, and perceiving the image of Christ in our brethren. It's rather like how Paul starts writing to the Corinthians. He doesn't start as we might have done with their gross immorality, false doctrine, perversion of the Lord's supper into a drunken orgy [although he comes to those things]... rather, he begins with and spends most time discussing their lack of love, their divisiveness etc. Or reflect on 1 Pet. 4:15- we shouldn't suffer as murderers or thieves... nor as meddlers in others' matters. Meddling in others' matters is put on the same level as murder and theft! Time and again, we expect there to be a dichotomy made by the Lord between the sinners and the righteous, the good guys and the bad guys. But before Him, we are all sinners. Thus to the prostitute kneeling before Him, He assures her that her sins are forgiven; but He turns to the 'righteous'

Simon and severely rebukes him for a lack of love and for being too judgmental (Lk. 7:36-50).

Now of course the justification by works mentality leads to a paranoia about sins of omission too, but in a different way. Believers feel guilty that they vowed to *do* something and didn't; that they enthusiastically decided on some great project in an evening of dynamic discussion with others, or made a promise in the mystical impetus of a short-lived moment... and never *did* it. But the *omissions* the Lord focuses on are omissions of simple acts and attitudes of love, and perceiving ones brethren as truly part of the image and person of He Himself.

Lk. 17:10 is a challenge. When we have *done* all our works, we are to say that we are unprofitable servants- and this connects with the Lord's teaching elsewhere that the 'unprofitable servant' is the one who is to be condemned and cast into outer judgment (Mt. 25:30). The 'guilt' that the Lord seeks to inculcate here is that our works mean nothing, and that we really deserve condemnation. And this is to prepare us for the wonder of salvation by pure grace.

The face and presence of the Lord Jesus and the Father whom He represents should convict us of our failure to live up to the image we are so evidently intended to bear. We must be convicted of true guilt by this, rather than of false guilt by the expectations of the societies in which we live. Whenever we perceive that we have been moulded by this world rather than transformed by the renewing of our minds, fashioned by our environment, sterilized by conformity, petrified by routine... *this* is when we should feel true guilt.

Realizing one aspect of true guilt leads us to realize other aspects. David's sin with Bathsheba led him, according to the Psalms of penitence, to realize so many others too. Paul regrets that he couldn't 'do' what he wanted to, but it led him to exclaim: 'O wretched man that I am!'. His feeling of guilt for failure in specific actions led on to a wider sense of guilt regarding his whole being (Rom. 7:24). Likewise Peter on the shore doesn't say to the Lord that he had 'made a mistake' or cast the net on the wrong side etc.- he confesses that he is a "sinful man" altogether (Lk. 5:11). No longer, in these cases, was sin seen as a list of specific actions which must be avoided in order to have a good conscience before God. The conviction of sin as God intends is far deeper than this. As the Lord makes clear, it's all about motives, what is inside the cup rather than what appears on the outside (Lk. 11:39). No longer does the Lord allow us to take shelter behind a literalistic, legalistic 'doing' of some right things on a Divine list. In fact, as Paul shows in Phil. 1:17, even 'good' things like preaching the Gospel can be done from bad motives. True guilt as God intends is therefore not merely the transgression of legal points concerning forbidden actions; it is the outcome of a recognition that our motives are often not what they should be, that we are so often Simon rather than the woman in the city who was a sinner...

If this true guilt is not faced up to, there will be anger, the anger that comes from refusing to acknowledge subconscious guilt. Balaam's angry striking of his donkey is an obvious Biblical example, and we are surrounded by so many others. Another classic example would be Asa's "rage" with Hanani the prophet when he rebuked Asa for trusting in the Syrian army rather than in Yahweh. And Asa's anger was then taken out upon the people- for "Asa oppressed some of the people at the same time" (2 Chron. 16:10).

## 4-5-4 Barriers Against Grace

All that is within us seems to struggle against grace. Twice Jacob pleads with his brothers not to be angry, after he had so graciously accepted them (Gen. 45:5, 24 Heb.). He imagines that they will be tempted to become angry as they travelled the long way home, reflecting inevitably upon the grace of Joseph (Gen. 45:24- ‘fall out by the way’ is a poor translation). Joseph understood that having received such grace, the brothers were actually likely to become angry with each other, who had received it. The Lord foresaw this in His parable about the workers who become angry at His grace to those who worked little; and also in His matchless story about the elder brother who became angry at his younger brother’s acceptance. In many families, the child grows up with the feeling that enjoyment is only legitimate if it is somehow merited, and is a reward for some form of ‘work’. And the child within, in the person of the convert to Christ in later life, then tends to view the Kingdom as a ‘reward’ which likewise somehow has to be merited. And yet we cry out with Paul, that the good which we would do, we somehow can’t achieve. And so faith in being in the Kingdom becomes weak. And so instead we must try to recall our response as children, or view the response in children around us, to the receipt of unearned pleasures or gifts. These are the ones most joyfully received and appreciated and remembered. And this is how it is with salvation, the only thing which in our hearts any of us is truly worried about in any ultimate sense. A salvation that is so great, so free, given by a loving Father who rejoices in His children’s happiness and squeals of delight. It seems to me that for all his errors, Freud was right to observe that babies and children grow up often fearing the loss of their parents’ love, cowed into fear and submission because of this, ever seeking to impress others so as not to lose their love. The result of this is an almost disbelief that the love of God, so great and so free, will not be withdrawn; that His grace is indeed real. David marvelled of the Father that ‘He has not withheld His love from me’. Perhaps he perceived something of this psychology. We need never fear losing the love of God. We are exhorted to abide in His love, with the implication that we can withdraw ourselves from His love, but He will never, ever, withdraw His love and forgiveness from us.

Tragically, because so many take false guilt onto themselves and fail to see God as any different to their experience of human love, it can happen that “a Christian has lost the sense of forgiveness whilst retaining his sense of sin”<sup>(1)</sup>. This, it seems to me, is the mess so many Christians are trapped within. Belief in the love of God as unconditional is simply too hard, too out of this world, too challenging. But this is why it takes a *lot* of hard faith to be a true Christian. It takes so very much faith to believe in the description of the Father in the parable of the prodigal, watching and waiting for the prodigal to return having already forgiven him even before he comes out with the words of penitence... and the real lesson is that it is the elder brother who places himself, by his choice, outside of the range of the Father’s love by his pride and his refusal to fellowship his brother. The love of God for us is simply because He first loved us, He took the initiative (1 Jn. 4:19). If we are faithless, yet He abides faithful to us (2 Tim. 2:13). We have met human love which is truly very great. But the love of God in which we believe, in which we *must* believe if all the wonderful promises of Scripture which we have reviewed are to come true... this is unconditional, and of an altogether higher and different nature to human love. Once we appreciate something of the infinite height of the love of God, it becomes scary- for we decide whether or not we will abide within it, or chose to remain outside, in the darkness of our own unresolved guilt, anger with our brother in whom is the face of Jesus, of guilt repressed by our petty pride... The choice to remain within the love of God is ours; God will always remain faithful from His side. It’s somewhat

like having a choice as to whether or not to receive one billion dollars, to have access to some immense power... all if we flick a switch. We almost don't want to do it. But this is how deceptively simple it is, and yet in that is the demanding nature of it. That by believing, by doing nothing physical, not even flicking a switch, we have access to this grace wherein we stand, having hope of the glory of God.

This is the unconditional love which underlies grace, the grace by which we have been saved, which salvation is not of our working but a pure gift (Eph. 2:8), the gift of grace which is not merited or part of a payment God in any way owes us (Rom. 4:4), the justification by grace which is ultimately real and credible as it is pronounced upon us by the One and Only judge of all (Rom. 3:23,24). As we face the purity of this grace, we want to apply the brakes. That it's too good to be true, that the theology, the Bible interpretation here isn't quite right, that there's a catch somewhere, that it can't be that simple, that look, son, you get nothing for free round here, the cost always catches up, you gotta pay some time, some way. When we get to that point, that's when we have to really release the brakes, not being bound in any longer by the experience of ungrace which has filled our experience in this world. We can even become angry at the idea- I've seen those who preach grace become the victims of the most angry protests and slander from their brethren, and Biblically we have the example of Jonah, who became angry with God for by grace reneging on His own promise to destroy Nineveh within 40 days. But surely we are not of those who draw back, who fall away from the reality and biting import of this grace; but we are surely of those who, convicted by grace and the Lord Jesus who embodied it, believe it, unto the saving of our soul.

### **The Psychology of Works**

The greatest barrier against grace is our own psychology of works; our belief that even what is good about us, in our character and in our deeds, is a result of our own unaided effort. Not for nothing does Paul contrast the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. 5:19,23). As William Barclay noted: "A work is something which a man produces for himself; a fruit is something which is produced by a power which he does not possess. Man cannot make a fruit"(2). It's because of this that works are so glorified in society; it's why the elderly and weak are somehow despised because they're not 'productive' of 'works'. Grace therefore cuts right across the way our rationalistic society, whether Marxist or capitalist, worships productivity.

Our tendency to value, indeed to worship, human works leads to great frustration with ourselves. Only by realizing the extent of grace can we become free from this. So many struggle with accepting unfulfilment- coping with loss, with the fact we didn't make as good a job of something as we wanted, be it raising our kids or the website we work on or the book we write or the room we decorated... And as death approaches, this sense becomes stronger and more urgent. Young people tend to think that it's only a matter of time before they sort it out and achieve. But that time never comes. It's only by surrendering to grace, abandoning the trust in and glorying in our own works, that we can come to accept the uncompleted and unfulfilled in our lives, and to smile at those things and know that of course, I can never 'do' or achieve enough.

Realizing that we are in the grace of God, justified by Him through our being in Christ, leads us to a far greater and happier acceptance of ourselves as persons. So many people are unhappy with themselves. It's why we look in mirrors in a certain way when nobody else is watching; why we're so concerned to see how we turned out in a photograph. Increasingly,

this graceless world can't accept itself. People aren't happy or acceptant of their age [they want to look and be younger or older], their body, their family situation, even their gender and their own basic personality. I found that when I truly accepted my salvation by grace, when the wonder of who I am in God's sight, as a man in Christ, really dawned on me... I became far happier with myself, far more acceptant. Now of course in another sense, we are called to radical transformation, to change, to rise above the narrow limits of our own backgrounds. This is indeed the call of Christ. But I refer to our acceptance of who we are, and the situations we are in, as basic human beings.

### Notes

- (1) Paul Ricouer, *Morale Sans Péché* (Paris: Esprit, 1954).
- (2) William Barclay, *Flesh And Spirit* (London: SCM, 1962) p. 21.

## 5-1 "Into all the world"

In the ages before the death and resurrection of His Son, God "suffered all the nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16), but from then on, He wished all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). The implication is surely that from the Lord's resurrection onwards, God was eager and willing to bless every effort to spread the Gospel of His Son worldwide. Yet the early church were very slow to make use of this potential blessing; and the Gospel never got to the majority of the planet for many centuries. But it could have done- the potential empowering and will of God was there for this to have happened. But the body of Christ didn't make use of it. Perhaps God created the internet and the transport revolution in order to push His people to take the message with even less effort for them. We each need to take seriously the fact that God has potentially enabled us to spread the Gospel; it's not something we should assume is for some other part of the body of Christ to get on with. It's possible that 2 Tim. 4:1,2 is appealing for us to preach the Gospel *because* of the reality of future judgment- i.e. because our witness to others will be a factor in the final determination of our eternal destiny.

The great commission was radical stuff to its initial hearers. Instruction about religious matters in those days was usually restricted to a privileged group of initiates. But the Lord Jesus invited His followers to proactively take the message to absolutely everybody. And the essentially radical nature of that request echoes down to our days too. If the command to preach the Gospel had not been understood at face value, the majority of recently baptized brethren and sisters outside the Anglo-Saxon world simply would not exist. If we are only to preach to our own local community, there is no way the Gospel would have been spread to the many nations to which it has gone in the last few years. It would have remained in the white skinned, English speaking world. Or to throw the question a stage further back, it would never have gone outside the Middle Eastern, Jewish world of the first century. As all involved frequently testify, God's blessing has powerfully rested on those who have sought to spread the Gospel world-wide. Ways have been opened, resources provided, which would have been humanly impossible. God does not seem to have been watching the Gospel extension activities of recent years with indifference, feeling that we've got the wrong end of the stick in our efforts to fulfil the command to "go into all the world".

Jesus sent out the 70 preachers to every place where He Himself was to come; they went showing His "face" to the people, and showing them that the Kingdom of God had come near

to them (Lk. 10:1,9). Perhaps this principle is to be seen in the great commission; Luke's version of which builds on the more limited commission to the 70. Christ will only come, it seems, when His presence has been declared by us to the entire planet; when the essence of His Kingdom, as taught in His parables, has been displayed to the whole world by His people ahead of His personal presence. Therefore the important thing is that a *witness* is made to all the world; not merely of theological truths, but of the face and person of Jesus lived out in practice by us His people.

Even if some preaching work appears not to bear fruit, this shouldn't discourage us from the essentially outgoing spirit we should have in spreading the word far and wide. Many of the parables have an element of unreality about them, designed to focus our attention on a vital aspect of teaching. The sower parable has 75% of the seed sowed on bad ground, due to the almost fanatic way the sower throws the seed so far and wide, evidently without too much attention to whether it lands on responsive soil or not. His emphasis was clearly on broadcasting the seed far and wide. We should desire to see the spread of God's ways, His Truth, His will, the knowledge of the real Christ, to as many as possible. The Kingdom of God refers to that over which God reigns. We are "a colony of Heaven" in our response to His principles (Phil. 3:20 Moffat). We are to pray for His Kingdom to come, so that His will may be done on earth (Mt. 6:10). The Kingdom and the doing of His will are therefore paralleled. His Kingdom reigns over all in Heaven, for there, all the Angels are obedient to Him (Ps. 103:19-21). By praying for the Kingdom to come on earth we are not only praying for the Lord's second coming, but for the progress of the Gospel world-wide right now. Not only that more men and women will hear it and respond, but that those who have accepted it might work God's will rather than their own to an ever greater extent. Whether or not we can physically spread the Gospel is in this sense irrelevant; our prayer should be, first and foremost if the pattern of the Lord's prayer is to be taken exactly, for the triumph of the Gospel world-wide. There's a growing idea in many churches that you can only preach if you are 'authorized' to do so by some committee or group of elders. The personal relevance and reference of the great commission means we can rightly ignore this. In fact, such an attitude is really a preservation of Roman Catholicism. In 1184 at the Council of Verona, Pope Lucius III declared that the list of heretics should be extended to include those who "preach without permission". And the same is being said today in essence; ironically, by those who are the most condemnatory of the Catholic church.

## 5-2 The Great Commission

The words of Mk. 16:15,16 are clear enough to the open, child-like mind: " Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" . Commands to repent, all men, the Lord's resurrection...these ideas all recur in Acts 17:30; God now commands all men to repent, through our words. These words clearly don't apply to the first century only, for they are intended to be linked with Mt 24:14, which uses the same language about the preaching work of the very last days (even though the context may imply that as a community we will only be obedient to this command once egged on by major persecution). If we say that we are *not* commanded to obey the command to go into all nations, then we must also conclude that we are not commanded to baptize people. And if these words about baptism don't apply to us today, then there is no command of the Lord Jesus to be baptized. The connection between the command to preach and the command to baptize is made clearer by the parallel record: " Go ye therefore, and teach (make disciples of,

AVmg.) all nations, baptising them...and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Mt. 28:19,20), i.e. Christ will be with us in our preaching right to the ends of the world. The special closeness of the Lord in preaching work has been widely commented upon by preachers. The commission of Mt. 28:19,20 is alluded to in Acts 14:21 AVmg. concerning the work of Paul and Barnabas, neither of whom were among the twelve: " And when they had preached the Gospel to that city, and had made many disciples..." . This in itself disproves the idea that the great commission was intended only for the twelve. It is difficult to read 1 Thess. 1:6-8 in the RSV without seeing an allusion to the great preaching commission: as if Paul is saying: 'Well done for realising that the great commission which some of us received specifically, does in fact apply to you too!': " You became imitators of us...*for* not only has the word of the Lord *sounded forth* from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has *gone forth everywhere*" . And he again seems to have the commission in mind, when he wrote to the Corinthians that to all of us has been committed the ministry of reconciliation [a reference to the great commission?], and in discharging it we are 'workers together' with God (2 Cor. 6:1)- the very same word used in Mk. 16:20 concerning how the Lord Jesus 'worked with' His men as they fulfilled the commission.

The great commission comes in the context of the Gospel records labouring how the various believers all 'went' or were told to 'go' with the message to others. This 'go-to-them' spirit is what should energize us; and yet in so many church discussions, preaching is pictured as making the church attractive to the outsider, e.g. by making the Sunday morning service more attractive. This 'come-to-us' mentality stands in stark contrast to the 'go-to-them' spirit of the great commission and the early church.

### **"Go ye therefore..."**

The Lord gave a reason for His command: " Go ye *therefore* " . " *Therefore* " . Because of what? Mt. 28:18 provides the answer: " All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye *therefore* " . Because of this, we must spread the Gospel of Christ to the whole planet, because His authority is over the whole earth. He has that power just as much now as He did in the first century; and *therefore* the command to spread the Gospel world-wide still stands today. Indeed, His words here in Mt. 28 have evident reference to Dan. 7:14, where the Son of Man is given authority and power over all *so that* people of all nations, races and languages should serve Him. We must remind ourselves that out of the 5,000 or so languages in the world, the vast majority have no true Christian representatives; and only about half of them have the Bible in their own language. And as of the year 2000, only 12% of the world have English as a first or second language; yet the majority of those holding true Bible teaching, so far as we know, are English speaking. If, as indeed we believe, we alone preach the True Gospel...then we have a long way to go in fulfilling this. Either that, or the scope of God's acceptance of men from all these languages and nations over time and over space today is far wider than we as a community have thought. Both of these possible conclusions arise from meditation upon the fact that the authority of the Lord must be extended over every nation and language group. Both of them are intensely challenging to our community. Rev. 5:9 presents us with the picture of men and women redeemed from *every* kindred [tribe / clan], tongue [*glossa-* language], people [a group of people not necessarily of the same ethnicity] and nation [*ethnos-* ethnic group, lit. 'those of the same customs']. This means that not only redeemed 'Yugoslavs' will stand before the throne in the end; but Macedonians, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrans, Bosnians...every ethnic group, with every custom, will have representatives who will have believed the Truth and been saved. This idea is confirmed by considering how 70 bullocks had to be sacrificed at the feast of ingathering

(Num. 29), prophetic as it was of the final ingathering of the redeemed. But 70 is the number of all Gentile nations found in Gen. 10. And it is written: “When he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel” (Dt. 32:8). A total of 70 went down with Jacob into Egypt; and thus 70 seems an appropriate number to connect with the entire Gentile world. And representatives of *all* of them will be finally ingathered.

It seems highly doubtful to me that over the past 2,000 years, the Truth has been taken to every *ethnos*, tribe, clan, custom and language, especially in Africa and Asia. So it follows that only once we have done it in our generation will this come true. The brethren in those parts especially have work to do yet, it seems to me. And we should all support them as best we can. I have a real belief that given the current rate of progress in preaching, the current generation *could* witness literally world-wide representation by those who understand true Christian doctrine- if we *all* do our bit. It is very difficult for me to reproduce in writing the kind of picture I have in my mind. But it is a thrilling and all consuming, all-demanding vision.

The same connection between the universal authority of the Lord and the need to preach it is made in Jn. 17:2,3: “Thou hast given him power over all flesh, *that* he should give eternal life to [men]...and this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent”. The great commission says that because He has power over all flesh, therefore we must preach Him. Jn. 17:2 says that because He has this power, He can give men eternal life through the knowledge of Him. The extent of our obedience to the preaching commission- and who can argue that we don’t have freewill as to the extent to which we fulfil any command- this is the extent to which eternal life is given to men. Their eternal destiny is placed in our hands. The authority to save all men and women has been given to the Lord, but the extent to which this becomes reality depends upon our preaching it [this is further developed in *Christians Unlimited*].

### **Reluctance**

There has always been opposition to spreading the Gospel outside our own environment. Jonah was unwilling to take it to Nineveh, Israel failed miserably in their intended role as a missionary nation, and the apostles showed remarkable reluctance to obey the command to take Christ into all the world in the first century. The women were told to go tell the disciples of the resurrection, but they went away and told nobody, Mark records (Mk. 16:7,8). The other records say that they did tell the disciples. There is no contradiction here; Mark’s point is surely that they were reluctant to obey the great commission initially.

It seems that once human beings enter into covenant relationship with God, they are tempted to become spiritually selfish; to forget that they only have that relationship with God because someone else spread it to them. We must be careful not to justify our own weakness in this area by saying that actually it is supported by Scripture. It seems that the early brethren chose to understand the Lord’s universal commission as meaning going out to preach to Jews of all nations, and they saw the response of Acts 2 as proof of this. And yet “all nations” is used about the Gentiles in all its other occurrences in Matthew (4:15; 6:32; 10:5,18; 12:18,21; 20:19,25). Such intellectual failure had a moral basis- they subconsciously couldn’t hack the idea of converting Gentiles into the Hope of Israel. They allowed themselves to assume they understood what the Lord meant, to assume they had their interpretation confirmed by the

events of Acts 2...instead of baring themselves to the immense and personal import of the Lord's commission to take Him to literally all.

Ezekiel was prepared for his ministry by being told to eat and absorb the roll containing the words he was to preach. He was then picked up the spirit-wind, and transported to his audience (Ez. 3:12,13). The noise of the wind in the wings of the cherubim is elsewhere interpreted as the sound of God's word (Ez. 10:5). Yet Ezekiel 3 goes on to warn Ezekiel that if he doesn't preach the word to his audience, their blood will be upon his head (Ez. 3:17-21). This warning was given after Ezekiel had been transported to the people but sat silent with them for 7 days (Ez. 3:16). I understand from all this was that God's intention was that His message was not to be merely parroted out by Ezekiel, but that it was to be fundamentally part of him; and the message of God's word, symbolized by the awesome wind-spirit generated by the movement of the cherubim's wings, was to propel him forward to make his witness to hard faced men and women. This is the ideal. And yet Ezekiel even when he failed to live up to it, was still propelled forward in the mission. And many a missionary knows the truth of this. I take the way that Ezekiel was told to go preach to the captives, and yet was then taken up and transported there, to suggest a reluctance on his part. Perhaps being struck dumb until the fulfilment of the prophecies (Ez. 3:26; 24:27) suggests this was a punishment of Ezekiel for a lack of faith- for this is exactly the judgment upon Zacharias for faithlessness (Lk. 1:20).

### **" How shall they hear...?"**

It is sometimes implied by those who oppose world-wide preaching that people will find the true Gospel anyway if they have access to a Bible. Taken to its logical conclusion, this argument would mean that we should not preach at all. Yet, as any fresh convert will testify, " how then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). This clearly states that (as a general rule) it is impossible to believe in Christ without a preacher (this theme is expanded upon in *Christians Unlimited*). The Ethiopian eunuch was the classic case of this. Bible in hand, his exasperation boiled over: " How can I (understand), *except* some man shall guide me?" (Acts 8:31). It is perfectly possible that Rom. 10:4 alludes to this, implying that this man's case was typical [and notice the connections between Acts 8:37 and Rom. 10:9]. Likewise the Lord Jesus spoke of " them also which shall believe on me through *their* (the preachers') word" (Jn. 17:20)- not through their unguided Bible reading. If all we had been given was a Bible, most of us would simply not be where we are today, spiritually. If I had started reading from Genesis, I don't think I'd have got much beyond Leviticus before giving up on the Bible. Yet there are some who have made it through, from Genesis to Revelation. And their testimony is even more emphatic: " Without doubt I needed someone to guide me, I was just crying out for all the pieces to be put into place", in the words of one such recent convert.

Paul continues his theme of preaching in Rom. 10. Having spoken of the vital need for preachers, he quotes Old Testament prophecies concerning the preaching of the Gospel: " Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:18). Paul is doubtless alluding to the great commission here. But he says that it is fulfilled by the preachers spoken of in Ps. 19:1-4, which he quotes. This speaks of the " heavens" declaring God's gospel world-wide. In the same way as the sun 'goes forth' all over the world, so will the " heavens" go forth to declare the Gospel. The 'heavens' do not just refer to the twelve in the first century; the New Testament says that all in Christ

are the "heavenlies"; we are all part of the "sun of righteousness". The arising of Christ as the sun at His second coming (Mal. 4:2) will be heralded by the church witnessing the Gospel of His coming beforehand. The enthusiast will note a number of other preaching allusions in Ps. 19: "The firmament sheweth his handiwork" (v.1) uses a word (in the Septuagint) which occurs in Lk. 9:60 concerning the publishing of the Gospel. "Their *line* is gone out through all the earth" (v.4) is picked up by Paul in describing his preaching (2 Cor. 10:13-16 AVmg.). The idea of 'going out' throughout the earth was clearly at the root of Christ's great commission (Mk. 16:15). Yet, as we have said, the "heavens" to which this refers in Ps. 19 are interpreted by the New Testament as referring to *all* believers in Christ.

## 5-3 The Light Of The World

We are the light of the world, Jesus said. And it was no accident that He used exactly the same phrase with which He described Himself: "I am the light of the world". He is the light of the world here and now, not just in the first century. The fact that both He and us have the same title would imply that He is the light of the world through His manifestation in us. Thus Christ would meditate concerning us: "As thou (God) hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world" (Jn. 17:18; v.20 implies that Christ's prayer here was not just for the twelve, but for all believers). He was not just the light of Israel, and He is not just the light of the Anglo-Saxon peoples. Yet we can darken that light, if we do not properly reflect it. God complained that Job had darkened His word (Job 38:2 NIV); the truths which Job should have taught to his friends he relayed very imperfectly, through the prism and distortion of clinging on to his own traditions and preconceptions of God.

Christ means 'Messiah', the anointed one. He was anointed in order "to preach the Gospel" (Lk. 4:18); and we too have been anointed insofar as we are in Christ, the anointed one (2 Cor. 1:21). Therefore as He was ordained a preacher of the Gospel to the world, we too share that honour (as we do all His honours, to some extent). He was anointed ('oiled') by God in order to give the oil of joy to His people; He shared His experience of anointing with us, and we must go out and do likewise (Is. 61:1,2 cp. Lk. 4:18). Isaiah's description of the beauty of Christ's preaching in Is. 52:7 is quoted by Paul concerning every preacher of the Gospel (Rom. 10:15); the "he" of Is. 52 is changed to "them" in Rom. 10. And Paul is quoting this Old Testament prophecy about Jesus to prove that we are all "sent" to preach the Gospel. The validity of our commission to preach is quite simply that Jesus Himself preached; in this way we are all personally "sent" to preach, simply because He was sent to preach. As the Father sent Him, so He sends us.

The Lord Jesus quoted a prophecy about Himself, as the light of the Gentiles, as being relevant to those who preach Him (Acts 13:47). All those who preach Him are like a city that cannot be hidden (Mt. 5:14); just as He likewise "could not be hid" in His preaching (Lk. 7:24). When the Ephesians learnt their first principles from the mouth of Paul and other preachers, they "heard Him (Christ), and (were) taught by Him" (Eph. 4:20,21); the preacher of Christ closely manifests his Lord. This is all neatly summarised by Christ's instruction to His recent converts not to spread the Gospel in an unseemly way, because it was written about *Him personally that* "he shall not strive nor cry; neither shall any man hear *his* voice in the streets" (Mt. 12:16,19). In other words, the true preacher of Christ is solidly identified with Him by the very act of preaching. Truly "we are ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20) in our witnessing. As Christ appeals to all nations, so should we. The prophecies which Christ interpreted as referring to the church spreading the Gospel world-wide are specifically

described as prophecies about Christ personally (Lk. 24:44,47: " All things which were written in the prophets and in the psalms, concerning *me* ... that repentance and remission of sins should be preached..."). Thus the preachers of the Gospel would personally manifest Christ; which accounts for the special sense of His presence which they experience as they do this work (Mt. 28:20). Paul preached to the men of Iconium; but he made the point that "through this man (the risen Lord) is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13:38). Paul saw his work of preaching as directly uniting him with the Lord whose ambassador he was.

" God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself...and hath committed unto us the word (Gospel) of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech (men) by us...we then, as workers together with Him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted...behold, now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 5:19-6:2). We are the means by which God is appealing to mankind; and we must do this while there is the opportunity for salvation. As Moses delivered God's people "with the hand of the angel", we likewise are working in co-operation with huge Angelic forces (Acts 7:35 RV). According to 2 Cor.5, in prospect, God reconciled the whole world to Himself on the cross, the devil was destroyed, *all* sin was overcome then, in prospect. In this sense Christ is the propitiation for our sins as much as He is for those of the whole world (1 Jn. 2:2). On the cross, He bore away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). So now we must spread this good news to the whole world, for *all* men's sins were conquered on the cross. It can be inferred from Jn. 12:23 that the Lord perceived that His hour had come to lay down His life when He was told that there were Gentiles who wanted to "see" [Johanne language for 'believe'] Him. It was as if this were the cue for Him to voluntarily lay down His life. The conversion of the whole world was a major reason for the Lord's death; and thus there is the inevitable connection between His death, and the need to take the knowledge and power of that death to the whole planet.

God is eager that none should perish, but all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:8); and seeing that we preach "the Gospel of God" (1 Thess. 2:2), the God who is "the saviour of all men", we likewise must offer this Gospel to as many as possible. Again, the motivation for world-wide preaching did not change at the end of the first century. To limit our preaching is to limit God; and limit Him we can, seeing that His purpose works in harmony with human freewill decisions. The urgency which shines through Paul's thinking here is just as true today, if not more so. " The day of salvation" was not just in the first century; it is now as well. God Himself has an urgency for human salvation; the Lord drew a parallel between the man who rushed out to save his animal on the Sabbath, and His waiving of the Sabbath in order to save others. Indeed, the way He did His miracles on the Sabbath rather than waiting shows His sense of urgency; not a day could be wasted for the sake of human scruples.

"With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation" (Is. 12:3) is applied by the Lord to the present experience of the believer in Him (Jn. 4:14; 7:38). But Isaiah 12 continues to explain how the joy of that experience will lead to men saying: "The Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation [as He was for Israel at the Red Sea, cp. our baptism experience]...Praise the Lord, proclaim his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted". As noted in *The Imperative Of The Gospel*, the exaltation of the Yahweh Name, the wonder of it, the sheer height of who Yahweh is, these things and our personal part in them is an unending imperative to witness these things world-wide. Men did not confess Jesus to others, despite nominally believing in

Him, because they did not love the concept of the glory of God (Jn. 12:43 RV). To perceive His glory, the wonder of it all, leads to inevitable witness to others.

### **" Go out quickly "**

The parable of the great supper chronicles the preaching of the Gospel over time. There were three stages of appeal: " To them that were bidden" (the Jews in Israel), to those in the streets and lanes of the city (the Jewish Diaspora), and finally, in a spirit of urgency, the preachers are commanded: " Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled" (Lk. 14:16-23; the same spirit of urgency in witness is to be found in the Lord's command to His preachers to cut the courtesy of prolonged greetings). Once the required number are in God's spiritual house, the feast will begin- and that feast represents eating bread in the Kingdom, at the second coming (Lk. 14:15). The language of 'going out' should be connected to the command to 'go and teach all nations'. The parable concerns the master of the house (God) commanding His servant (Christ); yet the connection with the preaching commission indicates that the commission given to Christ He fulfils through us, as demonstrated earlier in this study. The ever increasing sense of urgency in the appeal to 'come in' ought to be reflected in our preaching in these last days.

### **" All nations"**

Clearly enough, God's ideal intention even in Old Testament times was for the Gentiles to respond to the Hope of Israel. The aim of God's judgments upon Moab were so that they might be ashamed of their idols, and that their "flavour" might be changed to be more pleasing to Israel's God; they were intended to hide themselves in the rocks in repentance (Jer. 48:11,13,28 cp. Is. 2:19-21). And the way the King of Syria found his servants returning to him their master with stories of the amazing grace of the God of their enemy Israel was surely to try to bring him to conversion too (2 Kings 6:23; 5:1). Israel were to be the light to the Gentile world around them, the righteous servant who showed light to the Gentiles. But they sadly failed. Note too how the prophets pointed out to Gentile nations their sins and failed responsibilities before the God of Israel (Am. 2; 9:7; Is. 10:5; Jer. 46; Ez. 27,29). As always, closer analysis reveals God's will even more powerfully. The parallel record to the preaching commissions of Mk. 16 and Mt. 28 is found in Lk. 24:45-47. There we read how Christ explained to the disciples that their preaching of the Gospel " among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" was foretold in the Psalms and prophets. So the Bible student asks: *Where* in the Psalms and prophets? The Lord spoke as if the prophecies about this were copious. There do not seem to be any specific prophecies which speak of the twelve spreading the Gospel from Jerusalem in the first century. Instead we read of the Gospel being spread from Jerusalem *in the Kingdom*, and often the phrase " all nations" occurs in a Kingdom context, describing how " all nations" will come to worship Christ at Jerusalem (Ps. 22:27; 67:2; 72:11,17; 82:8; 86:9; 117:1; Is. 2:2; 66:18,20; Jer. 3:17; Dan. 7:14; Hag. 2:7; Zech. 8:23). This selection of " Psalms and prophets" is impressive. Yet the Lord Jesus clearly interpreted these future Kingdom passages as having relevance to the world-wide spreading of the Gospel. " All nations" also occurs in many passages exhorting us to praise Yahweh among all the nations of this world. The reason for this is that God's glory is so great it should be declared as far as possible by us. 1 Chron. 16:24,25 is typical of many such verses: " Declare his glory among the heathen; his marvellous works among all nations. *For* great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised...for all the gods of the people are idols" . Worldwide preaching is therefore an aspect of our praise of Yahweh, and as such it is a spiritual work which is timeless.

Because the Kingdom is to spread world-wide, we should therefore spread the Good News of this coming Kingdom world-wide. In prospect- and no more than that, let it be noted- the Kingdom has been established in that Christ has all power in Heaven and earth (Mt. 28:18). This is the language of Dan. 7:14 concerning the future Kingdom. The believer must live the Kingdom life now, as far as possible (Rom. 13:12,13). In the Kingdom, we will be spreading the Gospel throughout this planet. In this life too we should live in the spirit of the Kingdom in this regard.

The preaching of the Gospel was prophesied as *beginning* at Jerusalem, Jesus said. If this world-wide preaching abruptly finished at the end of the first century, to begin again at Jerusalem in the Kingdom, surely this would be prophesied in the Old Testament? The impression one gets from the Old Testament passages listed above is that the Gospel would begin to spread from Jerusalem, and would *go on spreading* until the full establishment of the Kingdom. This explains why Christ's command to get up and go world-wide with the Gospel stands for all time. The command to preach to "all nations" would ring bells in Jewish minds with the promises to Abraham, concerning the blessing of forgiveness to come upon "all nations" through Messiah (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). Therefore God's people are to preach the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ to "all nations". The offer of sharing in that blessing did not close at the end of the first century. Putting the "all nations" of the Abrahamic promises together with Christ's preaching commission leads to a simple conclusion: The Hope of Israel now applies to all nations; so go and tell this good news to all nations.

## 5-4 Preaching “To every creature”

As so often with reading the Gospels, it is profitable to imagine the tone of voice in which the Lord spoke the words which are recorded. "Go ye *into all the world* and preach the gospel to *every creature*". If only we could sense the intensity of desire, the deepness of spiritual meaning, which His voice would have conveyed. We *must* have the spiritual ambition to take the Gospel to the whole world- no matter how small our world may be. The world of our street, of our town, nation- and as far as we are able, the whole planet. Paul had this ambition, quite apart from any personal commission he received. His desire to go to Spain (Rom. 15:24) indicates a commitment to taking the Gospel to the very ends of the world he then knew. He may well have been motivated in this by wishing to fulfil in spirit the Kingdom prophecy of Is. 66:18,19, which describes how Tarshish (which he would have understood as Spain) and other places which "have not heard my fame, neither have seen my glory" will be witnessed to by those who *have* seen His glory and have "escaped" from God's just condemnation by grace. Paul sees this as referring to himself. For he speaks in Rom. 15:19 of his ambition to take the Gospel to Spain; and in that same context, of how he will bring the Gentile brethren's offering up to Jerusalem. This is precisely the context of Is. 66- the offerings of the Gentiles are to be brought up to Jerusalem, as a result of how the Lord's glory will be spoken of to all nations. So Paul read Isaiah 66 and did something about his Old Testament Bible study; he dedicated his life to taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, and he encouraged them to send their offerings to Jerusalem. He was no mere theologian, no academic missiologist. His study and exposition of Old Testament Scripture led to a life lived out in practice, to hardship, risk of life, persecution, loneliness, even rejection by his brethren. It is also significant in passing to note that Is. 66:19 speaks of nations which occur in the list of nations we have in Genesis 10, in the context of the effect of Babel. It is as if Paul sees the spreading of the Gospel as an undoing of the curse of Babel and the establishment of the

Kingdom conditions described in Is. 66. By his preaching of God's Kingdom and the reign of Christ, he brought about a foretaste of the future Kingdom in the lives of his converts. And we can do likewise. Note how once again, the preacher preaches from his personal experience; Paul takes the vision of glory which he has beheld to those who have not seen nor heard. Paul speaks of how he had preached the Gospel from Jerusalem "as far round as Illyricum" (Rom. 15:19). This was a Latin-speaking province. Was he not implying that he had preached throughout the Greek speaking world, and now wanted to take it into the Latin-speaking world? He wanted to preach to the regions beyond his previous limits (2 Cor. 10:15); his aim was to spend some time in Rome and then preach in Spain.

The experience of preaching is in itself a foretaste of the future world-wide Kingdom. The harvest is both at the end of the age, according to the parables of Mt. 13, but also is ongoing right now (Jn. 4:36) as we gather in the harvest of converts. The Lord in Jn. 4:35,36 took this figure far further, by saying that the harvest is such that the interval between sowing and harvesting is in some sense collapsed for those who engage in preaching. The reaper was already collecting his wages; the harvest was already there, even though it was four months away (Jn. 4:35). This clearly alludes to the promises that in the Messianic Kingdom there would also be no interval between sowing and harvest, so abundant would be the harvest (Lev. 26:5; Am. 9:13). And hence, we are impelled to spread the foretaste of the Kingdom world-wide by our witness right now.

William Barclay comments: "Paul never saw a boat riding at anchor or moored at a quay but he wanted to board her and to preach the gospel to the lands beyond. He never saw a range of hills in the distance but he wanted to cross them and to preach the gospel to the lands beyond" <sup>(1)</sup>. When Paul was in Pamphylia, he decided to go on to Galatia, where on account of infirmity of the flesh he preached to the Galatians (Gal. 4:13). The suggestion has been made that the low-lying Pamphylia was a source of malaria, which may have been Paul's "thorn in the flesh", and he therefore sought the uplands of Galatia. And yet he could easily have returned to Antioch. But instead, he went on, up into the highlands, to spread the Gospel yet further. The way there led up precipitous roads to the plateau; the roads were cut by mountain streams, prone to flash floods which often carried travellers to their death. And these roads were the haunt of bandits, who would murder a man just for a copper coin. No wonder Mark went back. But as William Barclay observes, "the wonder is not so much that Mark went back as that Paul went on". Although a sick man, he was driven by that desire to spread the Gospel further. Surely this is why his Lord was so pleased to open the hearts of the Galatians to the Gospel. Consider too how Paul was stoned and dragged out of Lystra as dead- presumably they didn't want him to die within the city limits as they were under Roman jurisdiction. Yet, hobbling and bleeding, he returned into the city to witness (Acts 14:20). And it was here in Lystra that he made one of his greatest converts, Timothy (Acts 16:1). And when Paul asks us to follow him, he is speaking in the context of his life's work and preaching. He is our pattern, to be lived out in spirit within the confines within which God has placed us.

Even in Old Testament times, the basic idea of spreading God's ways was implicit in God's commands, although each time it seems to have met with resistance. Adam and Eve were to multiply and fill the earth, but it seems they didn't even have intercourse , or at least Eve wasn't pregnant, before they sinned. Noah was given the same command after the flood, but the next we know he is lying there dead drunk. And the incident at Babel shows that effectively, his children had not taken seriously the command to spread throughout the earth. Israel were to be a missionary nation, but they so evidently failed in this. The law given to

Israel was intended to be a “testimony”, a witness, as the Hebrew word implies. By living out that law, Israel were to have been a witness to the world, a light to the Gentiles (Ps. 78:5). The prophets are full of invitations for the whole ends of the earth to turn to Israel’s God, yet the nation produced few real missionaries. Jonah perhaps epitomizes the resistance to the idea of sharing Israel’s relationship with God with the Gentiles. The need to spread the word has therefore always met up with opposition and indifference from those who ought to be doing it. Our own reservations about preaching are all a manifestation of that same basic human tendency. The way that Israel were intended to be a missionary nation is brought out very beautifully by the way that God speaks of carrying Israel on eagles' wings out of Egypt (Dt. 32:11). Apparently, the type of eagle throws one of its young into the air and catches it, bearing it on its wings, until it learns to fly freely, and then the others learn from this how to fly (2). If this is the right track of interpretation, then we are left with the conclusion that it was God's intention that all the Gentile world were intended to be God's ultimate children, and that they would learn from the example of Israel. But Israel failed to fly as God intended, and thus they were not the intended example for others. Note in passing how God's intention is that we should fly freely- not merely be His initiative-less servants for the sake of it.

The above paragraphs provide evidence which demands some kind of verdict. Should we make special effort to spread the Gospel, or not? There is an unmistakable connection with the great preaching commission in Mt. 24:14: " This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" . It cannot be sensibly denied that Mt. 24 is a prophecy of the last days, before the coming of Christ. Isn't the Lord saying 'My great command to preach world-wide will be mightily fulfilled in the last days, and then I will return in glory'? And it is marvellously appropriate that our latter twentieth century has so many facilities, linguistically, politically and technologically, for the spreading of the Gospel to literally all nations. If the above reasoning is sound, then we need to wake up to our responsibilities; in terms of money, time, resources of all kinds, and above all in fervent prayer and spiritual effort to fulfil our Lord's earnest desire: that all men might see the light of the Father's love which He reflected. We each have our specific area, either of people or the world, in which God intends us to make a witness. Paul thus spoke of how both he and other brethren had their specific " line" or sphere in which they were intended to witness (2 Cor. 10:16 cp. Ps. 19:4 AVmg.; Am. 7:17). We each have ours, whether it be the people who live in our block of flats, an area of our own country or city; or another part of the world. " Go ye into all the world..." , obey the command, catch the vision- " for his name's sake" (3 Jn. 7), for the surpassing excellence of the knowledge and experience of all that is in Him. And hence Paul urged Timothy to fulfil, fully, the ministry of preaching which he had been given, just as he could say that he had (2 Tim. 4:5, 17 Gk). We each have a potential to live up to.

There is one final point which clinches the personal urgency of the great commission as relevant to every one of us. 1 Tim. 3:16 speaks of how Christ was:

1. God manifest in the flesh [on the cross]
2. justified in the Spirit [in the resurrection- Rom. 1:4]
3. seen of angels [at the resurrection]
4. preached unto the Gentiles
5. believed on in the world
6. received up into glory [the ascension].

It must have occurred to many expositors that this would be nicely chronological- were it not for stages 4 and 5. “Preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world” seems a clear reference to the great commission- to preach the Gospel of the resurrection to all the world, and whoever believes it will be saved. But the tenses are definitely past tense, not future. Indeed, the whole passage seems to have Mark’s record of the resurrection, preaching commission and ascension specifically in mind [not surprising if tradition is right in saying that this Gospel was learnt by heart by candidates for baptism in the early church] <sup>(3)</sup>. I would suggest that Paul is using a Hebraism although writing in Greek (and E.W. Bullinger provides scores of other examples of where Paul does this, in *Figures Of Speech Used In The Bible*). Paul is thinking in the Hebrew ‘prophetic perfect’ tense, to describe something yet future as already past, so sure is it of fulfilment. He *is* referring to the great commission when he speaks of Christ as “preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world”; and he *is* giving a chronological account of the Lord’s resurrection, with reference to Mark’s Gospel record. But he sees the command to go and preach to the Gentiles, to make them believe, as so sure of being obeyed that he speaks of it in the past tense. The fact the Lord asked us to do this, for all the many reasons outlined in this study...this of itself is such a strong imperative to do it that Paul sees it as *already done*. And so the Lord’s bidding should weigh as heavily with us. In fact, He had just the same idea when in Luke’s record of the commission He says: “Beginning at Jerusalem you *are* witnesses” (Lk. 24:48 RVmg., cp. Acts 1:8). What He meant, according to Mark’s version, is that ‘You are to go world-wide and be witnesses’. But He speaks as if they have already done this, as if He were saying: ‘Go and be world-wide witnesses, you are witnesses, it’s axiomatic to your experience of my resurrection that you will witness, so I see it as if its already being done, even as you stand here before me’.

### Notes

- (1) William Barclay, *Ambassador for Christ* (Edinburgh, Saint Andrew Press, 1973), p. 25
- (2) Martin Buber, 'The election of Israel' in *On The Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982) p. 90.
- (3) L.G. Sargent, quoting C. Spicq, tabulates the following parallels in *The Gospel Of The Son Of God* p. 210 (Birmingham: CMPA):

<b>Mark 16:9-19</b>	<b>1 Tim. 3:16</b>
:12 appeared (i.e. was manifested) in another form	manifest in flesh
:15 preach the gospel	preached unto the Gentiles
:15 into all the world...:16 he that believeth	believed on in the world
:19 was received up into heaven	received up, into glory

## **5-5 Latter Day Fulfilment Of The Great Commission**

The great commission bids us go into all the world with Gospel; and we have pointed out the evident connection with Mt. 24:14: " This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" . This definitely suggests

that the great commission will be mightily obeyed in the last days. When the Lord sent out His disciples upon their preaching tour during His ministry, He envisaged them being brought before Gentile "governors and kings... for a testimony to them and to the Gentiles" (Mt. 10:18). But they didn't achieve this, and so He used the same kind of language in the Olivet prophecy, in the expectation that the Gospel would go into all the world in the lead up to AD70. But again this didn't happen; and so the Olivet prophecy, including the demand that we take the Gospel "unto all nations" before His coming in glory, has been rescheduled in total fulfilment until our last days. There are many other Biblical implications that there will be an unprecedented spread of the Gospel to the whole planet in the last days:

- Dan. 12:4 speaks of a time in the very last days when "many shall run to and fro (an idiom often used concerning response to God's word: Ps. 119:32,60; 147:15; Amos 8:11,12; Hab. 2:2; Jn. 8:37 RV; 2 Thess. 3:1 Gk.), and knowledge shall be increased [the context is of Daniel wanting to understand about the second coming of Jesus]... many shall be purified, and made white, and tried (in the tribulation); but the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand" . This increase of knowledge of the Gospel is to be spread world-wide by many running to and fro in the last days. The great commission will be fulfilled then as never before.
- The parable of the marriage feast highlights the tragedy of Jewish rejection of what could have been theirs. There will be an ever-increasingly vigorous preaching campaign by the "servants" , seeing that " they which were bidden were not worthy" (Mt. 22:8) - the Greek implying not enough numerically. As a result of this preaching, " the wedding was furnished ('filled' - numerically) with guests" (Mt. 22:10). This indicates that in some ways, God does work to a number. Once the required number of converts is made, then the supper can begin. Their appeal being to " the poor...maimed... halt and...blind" suggests that the marginal and desperate within society will be those who respond- and this is happening right now in the triumphant progress of preaching in our day. The servants are sent " into the highways" (Matt. 22:9), the Greek meaning 'a market square'. This must be designed to recall the parable of the labourers standing idle in the market place at the 11th. hour (Mt. 20:6,7). The very short probation of those 11th.-hour workers will match that of the latter-day converts. And again, it was the old and weak who nobody wanted to hire.
- In the parable of the great supper, which is similar but not necessarily the same as that of the marriage feast, the same point is made. The servants going forth " at supper time" (Lk. 14:17) fits more naturally into the context of a preaching appeal just prior to the second coming than to the first century. The " supper" , i.e. the Kingdom (Lk. 14:15; Mt. 22:2), is prepared, and at " supper time" - 'Kingdom time' - the appeal is made. " All things are now ready" (Lk. 14:17) explains the unmistakeable sense of urgency in the commissions given to the servants to preach. This again indicates reference to an eleventh hour preaching campaign just prior to the second coming. The 'decorum of the symbol' suggests that the animals being killed for the meal would necessitate a brief period of invitation immediately prior to the feast, rather than them being on the table for 2,000 years.
- A careful reading of Mt. 10:16-39 reveals many links with the Olivet prophecies concerning the latter day persecution of the saints; verses 17-21 are effectively quoted in Lk. 21:12-18. However, Mt. 10:16 prefaces all this by saying that these tribulations will attend those who go out preaching the Gospel in that latter day period. At this time, when many " shall be offended" (spiritually stumble) and " the love of many shall wax cold" for the truth (Mt. 24:10,11), the " Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto

all nations; and then shall the end come" (Mt. 24:14)- i.e. the full establishment of the Kingdom. At that time, " What ye hear in the ear (in quiet halls at the moment), that preach ye (then) upon the housetops" (Mt. 10:27). This seems to be giving special encouragement to persevere in preaching during the last days. There is a connection here with Mt. 24:17, which advises those upon the housetops to go with Christ at the time of his coming. This implies that at the moment of Christ's coming there will be zealous " upon the housetops" preaching by the faithful. This latter day witness will be accompanied by some measure of persecution. " Ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake" connects with " this Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached for a witness unto all nations" (Mt. 24:39,14). " My name's sake" and the Gospel of the Kingdom's sake are interchangeable expressions (Mt. 19:12,29; Mk. 10:29; Lk. 18:29).

- Before every 'coming' of the Lord there has been a period of persecution and zealous preaching: Noah preached righteousness before the flood, as Lot probably tried to before the Lord's coming down in judgment on Sodom (would God have wrought such wholesale destruction without giving the people a chance to repent? Cp. Nineveh and Jonah). The schools of the prophets preached from the street corners and temple steps to warn of the coming of the day of the Lord at the hand of the Babylonians and Assyrians. And of course the dramatic coming of the Lord in judgment upon Israel in AD70, was heralded by Paul and his committed band of zealots staging the greatest preaching campaigns this world has seen.

- We have suggested elsewhere that the great commission is repeated in John's Gospel but in more spiritual language. The whole world is to know the Gospel because of the unity of the believers (Jn. 17:18,21,23); and it follows that a situation will arise in which the extraordinary nature of true Christian solidarity over linguistic, ethnic, social and geographical lines will make a similar arresting, compelling witness as it did in the first century. The Lord had prophesied that His followers over time "shall become one flock" (Jn. 10:16 RV); they would be "perfected into one, that the world may know" (Jn. 17:23 RV). He surely hoped this would have become true in the first century. As the Gospel spreads worldwide in the last days, the unity of the believers will become all the more comprehensive, and this will of itself provoke yet more conversions. It could have been like this in the first century- for Eph. 3:9 speaks of how the unity of Jew and Gentile would "make all men see" the Gospel. This is the urgency of Paul's appeal for unity in Ephesians- he knew that their unity was the intended witness to the world which the Lord had spoken of as the means of the fulfilment of the great commission in Jn. 17:21-23. But sadly, Jew and Gentile went their separate ways in the early church, and the possibility of world-converting witness evaporated.

- Dan. 11:32,33 speaks of how in the time of the end " The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits...instruct many .

- The dragon/ beast made war with the seed of the woman " which keep the commandments (word) of God, and have the testimony (i.e. preaching) of Jesus" (12:17); it was because of " the word of their testimony (i.e. preaching) (that) they loved not their lives unto the death" (12:11), and then Rev.12 goes on to describe how this final witness amidst tribulation is resolved by the coming of Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom.

There are some definite links between the Greek text of Matthew's record of the commission, and the LXX of the end of Daniel 12:

**Matthew****Daniel 12:13 LXX**

Go ye into all the world (Mt. 28:20) Go thou thy way

“...then shall the end come” (when the Gospel has been preached to all the world) till the end

I am with you all the days (28:20 Gk.) for still there will be days

unto the end of the world to the end of the world.

- Daniel being sent away with God's promised blessing, the very picture of spiritual calmness and peace with his maker, sure in hope, yearning for the day...this is the very picture which the Lord gives of His preachers as He sends them forth. If we are to understand the time periods at the end of Daniel as literal days, i.e. a three and a half year period at the end, then we have in the great commission a specific hint that it will be fulfilled during the three and a half year tribulation. This possibility is developed at length in *The Last Days*.

The crucial question, of course, is whether the Gospel has truly gone into all the world. One perspective to bear in mind is that in the preaching of Paul, ecclesias which he founded are taken as representing a whole area- e.g. Philippi is called "Macedonia" (Phil. 4:15); Thessalonica is "Macedonia and Achaia" (1 Thess. 1:7); Corinth is Achaia (1 Cor. 16:15; 2 Cor. 1:1); Ephesus for Asia (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Cor. 1:8). In this sense Paul felt that he had fully preached the Gospel in a circle, moving from Jerusalem through Asia to Rome, and projecting onwards to Spain. Perhaps the Gospel goes into all the world in the sense that believers, however small in number, are to be found world-wide. And that seems to be where we're now up to in the 21st century.

## 5-6 The Great Commission In Matthew

### *The Great Commission: Closer Analysis*

The records of the great preaching commission are each slightly different, and each links with statements recorded earlier in the same Gospel.

“*Go ye into all the world*” evidently connects with the Lord's command in the parable: “*Go ye*” into the highways and “gather together *all*”, as many as were found. And this in turn is an extension of an earlier parable, where the net of the Gospel is presented as *gathering* “every kind”- every *genos*, every “kindred / nation / stock / generation”, as the word is elsewhere translated (Mt. 28:19; 22:9,10; 13:47). The work of the Gospel described in those earlier parables was now specifically delegated to the Lord's men. Through the work of the Lord's followers over the generations, there would in every nation and generation be some who were gathered in, of as many social classes as one finds walking along a street [highway / byway].

The net of Gospel preaching is filled (*pleroo*), and then pulled to shore for judgment. When the Gospel has been preached in all the world (with response), then the end will come. Elsewhere Paul uses the same word to describe how the Gospel is fulfilled by preaching it (Rom. 15:19; Col. 1:25). To have the Gospel is to have an imperative to preach it.

Matthew's record of the great commission draws on earlier themes and passages in his Gospel. The Lord told His men to go out and make disciples of men (Mt. 28:19 RV). In the immediate context, there are many references to the disciples (Mt. 27:64; 28:7,8,13,16). And the term "disciples" occurs more often (73 times) in Matthew than in any of the other Gospels (e.g. only 37 times in Luke). The Lord is telling His men: 'Go out and make men like you-disciples, stumbling 'learners', not experts'. Thus they were to witness from their own experience, to share this with others, to bring others to share the type of relationship which they had with the Lord. In this sense preaching is seen by Paul as a bringing forth of children in our own image. John likewise was "the beloved disciple", the *agapetos*. And yet this is the very term which he uses in his letters to describes his "beloved children" (1 Jn. 2:1; 4:11). He saw them as sharing the same relationship to his Lord as he had. The nature of our relationship with the Lord will be reflected in that of our converts. He tells His men to go to the lost sheep, and yet in that same context He calls them sheep, in the midst of wolves (Mt. 10:6,16). They were sheep sent to rescue sheep- to plead with men and women as men and women, to witness to humanity through their own humanity. Likewise the Lord spoke of how the extraordinary unity of His men would convince others that "thou didst send me" (Jn. 17:23), having just commented how they had surely believed "that thou didst send me" (:8).

The command to 'make disciples' of all men in Matthew is framed in such a way as to make '...baptising them...' a subordinate clause. Baptism is only part of the work of making disciples. In Mt. 28:19-20 *mathateusate* ("make disciples") is the main verb, while *poreuthentes* ("while going" or "when [you] go"), *baptizontes* ("baptizing"), and *didaskontes* ("teaching") are subsidiary participles. The focus clearly is upon making disciples- all the other things, the teaching, baptizing, our effort in travelling and preaching, are incidental to this main aim. This is why responsibility to those we may convert only begins at baptism; it's a beginning of a man or woman being fashioned into the image of Christ, not the end. This is why Paul often uses the language of preaching about his pastoral efforts with his brethren [e.g. his desire to 'preach the Gospel' to the believers at Rome to whom he was writing]. He sees himself as preaching Christ to them still, in so doing warning them, "that we may present every man perfect" (Col. 1:28). Thus Paul parallels being a minister of the world-wide preaching of the Gospel, and being a minister of the church (Col. 1:23, 25). He saw his continued work amongst his baptized readership as *fully preaching* the word of God (Col. 1:25 AVmg.). So Paul said in Gal. 4:19 "I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you". How do we see our responsibility to those to whom we have preached the gospel? We should continue to nurture and feed them well after the time of their baptism. It seems that this is not a general responsibility which falls on the shoulders of all of us. Rather we have a personal responsibility to those we have begotten through the gospel (1Cor. 4:15).

## 5-7 The Great Commission In Mark And Luke

## **Mark**

We are to preach to “all the world” (16:15)- the *kosmos*. In the last days, the Gospel will go to “all nations”- every *ethnos* (Mk. 13:10). The parallel record in Mt. 24:14 has Jesus saying that it must go to the whole world- *oikoumene*. What did He actually say? I suggest He used both words, in an emphasis of just how universal the witness would be: ‘The Gospel will be preached in the whole *oikoumene*, yes, to every *ethnos*...’. This is all some emphasis- every creature (individual), in the whole world system, every part of society (*kosmos*), of every nation (*ethnos*), on the whole planet (*oikoumene*) was to have the message. And this is our unmistakable mandate. The number of different words used by the Lord was surely intentional.

## **Luke**

Luke records how the Angel summarised the Lord’s work as good news of great joy for *all men* (Lk. 2:10). The Gospel concludes by asking *us* to take that message to *all men*. Straight away we are challenged to analyze our preaching of the Gospel: is it a telling of “great joy” to others, or merely a glum ‘witness’ or a seeking to educate them ‘how to read the Bible more effectively’, or a sharing with them the conclusions of our somewhat phlegmatic Biblical researches? Whatever we teach, it must be a joyful passing on of *good* news of “great joy”. The Lord began His ministry by proclaiming a freedom from burdens through Him (Lk. 4). And He concludes it by telling the disciples to proclaim the same deliverance (Lk. 24:47). Consider how He brings together various passages from Isaiah in His opening declaration in Lk. 4:18:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach [proclaim] [Heb. ‘call out to a man’] the acceptable year of the Lord”.*

This combines allusions to Is. 61:1 (Lev. 25:10); Is. 58:6 LXX and Is. 61:2.

Is. 58:6 AV: “To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free (cp. Dt. 15:12 re freedom of slaves, s.w.), and that ye break every yoke?” is in the context of an insincerely kept year of Jubilee in Hezekiah’s time, after the Sennacherib invasion. Is. 58 has many Day of Atonement allusions- the year of Jubilee began on this feast. We are as the High Priest declaring the reality of forgiveness to the crowd. Hence Lk. 24:47 asks us to proclaim a Jubilee of atonement. The Greek for “preach” in Lk. 24:47 and for “preach / proclaim the acceptable year” in Lk. 4:19 are the same, and the word is used in the LXX for proclaiming the Jubilee. And the LXX word used for ‘jubilee’ means remission, release, forgiveness, and it is the word used to describe our preaching / proclaiming forgiveness in Lk. 24:47. It could be that we are to see the cross as the day of atonement, and from then on the Jubilee should be proclaimed in the lives of those who accept it. It’s as if we are running round telling people that their mortgages have been cancelled, hire purchase payments written off...and yet we are treated as telling them something unreal, when it is in fact so real and pertinent to them. And the very fact that *Yahweh* has released others means that we likewise ought to live in a spirit of releasing others from their debts to us: “The creditor shall release that which he hath lent...because the Lord’s release hath been proclaimed” (Dt. 15:2RV).

We can't have a spirit of meanness in our personal lives if we are proclaiming Yahweh's release. This is one of many instances where the process of preaching the Gospel benefits the preacher. The jubilee offered release from the effects of past misfortune and even past foolishness in decisions; and our offer of jubilee offers this same message in ultimate term <sup>(3)</sup>. Incidentally, the Lord had implied that we are in a permanent Jubilee year situation when He said that we should "**take no thought what ye shall eat ...Sow not nor gather into barns**" **and not think "What shall we eat?"** (Mt. 6:26,31 = Lev. 25:20). There must be a spirit of telling this good news to absolutely *all*. And yet according to Luke's own emphasis, it is the poor who are especially attracted to the Jubilee message of freedom (Lk. 6:20-23; 7:1,22,23; 13:10-17). There are several links between Is. 58 and Neh. 5, where we read of poor Jews who had to mortgage their vineyards and even sell their children in order to pay their debts. The "oppressed" or "broken victim" of Is. 58, to whom we are invited to proclaim deliverance, were therefore in the very first instance those under the throttling grip of poverty, who had become bondslaves because of their debts and now had no hope of freedom, apart from the frank forgiveness of a year of Jubilee. We take a like message to Westerners overburdened with mortgage payments, to those suffering from absolute poverty in the developing world, and to all those with a sense of debt and being trapped within their life situation. We pronounce to them a year of Jubilee, a frank forgiveness, a way of real escape and freedom.

To preach [**proclaim**] the **acceptable year** of the Lord (Lk. 4:19) is thus parallel with "You shall **proclaim** liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Lev. 25:10). Likewise there are to be found other such allusions to the proclamation of Jubilee: "We as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive...the grace of God...a time accepted...in the day of salvation [the Jubilee] have I succoured thee: behold, now is the **accepted time**" (2 Cor. 6:1,2) "Repentance and remission of sins should be preached [**proclaimed**, s.w. 4:19] in his name among all nations" (Lk. 24:47)

#### Notes

(3) "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Mt. 6:12) is probably another allusion to the jubilee. We release / forgive men their debt to us, as God does to us. If we chose not to participate in this Jubilee by not releasing others, then we cannot expect to receive it ourselves.

## 5-8 The Great Commission in John

John's Gospel frequently repeats the themes of the Synoptic Gospels, but from a different angle and in more spiritual / abstract language:

The Synoptic Gospels      John's Gospel

Mt. 16:19 the keys of the      Jn. 20:21,23  
Gospel of the Kingdom

the more literal accounts      Jn. 1: 1-14  
of the birth of Jesus

The great preaching commission	Jn. 14:12; 17:18; 20:21; Jn. 15:8,16; Jn. 17:23 RV
Lk. 16:31	"If you believe not (Moses') writings, how shall you believe my words?" (Jn. 5:47). This is John's equivalent of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which concluded with the same basic point (Lk. 16:31).
The transfiguration	Whilst there is no account of the transfiguration in John, he repeatedly stresses how the Lord manifested forth His glory and was glorified. For John, the Lord's whole life was in a spiritual sense a form of the transfiguration experience which the synoptics described.
The Synoptics all include the Lord's Mount Olivet prophecy as a lead-in to the record of the breaking of bread and crucifixion	In John, the record of this prophecy is omitted and replaced by the account of the Lord's discourse in the upper room. "The day of the son of man" in John becomes "the hour [of the cross]... that the son of man should be glorified" (Jn. 12:23). "Coming", "that day", "convict / judge the world" are all phrases picked up by John and applied to our experience of the Lord right now. In our context of judgment now, we have to appreciate that the reality of the future judgment of course holds true; but the essence of it is going on now.
The three synoptic gospels all include Peter's 'confession', shortly before Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain.	In John's gospel the account of the transfiguration is lacking. Are we to assume that Thomas' confession in chapter 20 is supposed to take its place?
The need for water baptism	Jn. 3:3-5
The account of the breaking of bread	John's version is in John 6:48-58. He stresses that one must absorb Christ into themselves in order to really have the eternal life which the bread and blood symbolize. It seems John puts it this way in order to counter the tendency to think that merely by partaking in the ritual of breaking bread, believers are thereby guaranteed eternal life.

John expresses this in more abstract language: “The word was made flesh” (Jn. 1:14).

The many quotations from the Old Testament, shown to be fulfilled in the Lord Jesus.

The synoptics each give some account of the literal origin of Jesus through giving genealogies or some reference to them.

John’s Gospel speaks of Jesus as if He somehow existed in the plan of God from the beginning, but “became flesh” when He was born of Mary.

The transfiguration is recorded in the synoptics, and their records include the idea that it happened “after six days” (Mk. 9:2). John speaks of the same theme of Christ manifesting God’s glory, but he sees it as happening not just once at the transfiguration, but throughout the Lord’s ministry and above all in His death. Interestingly, John’s record also has the idea of the Lord manifesting the Father’s glory after six days. The Gospel opens by describing events on four successive days (Jn. 1:19,29,35,43), and then we read that “the third day” [i.e. six or seven days after the story has begun], Jesus “manifested his glory” (Jn. 2:1,11). Again in Jn. 7:37, it was on the last great day of the feast of Tabernacles, i.e. on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, that the Lord Jesus manifests Himself. Perhaps too we are to pay attention to the six days mentioned in Jn. 12:1, after which the Lord was crucified and manifested the Father’s glory.

In the same way as John matches the more literal accounts of the birth of Jesus with a more spiritual interpretation in Jn. 1, so he likewise refers to the great commission, expressing it in more spiritual terms throughout his gospel. I bring together here some comments that have been made elsewhere in these studies, to show the number of allusions:

- Jn. 10: 32: “If I be lifted up from [RVmg. ‘out of’] the earth, will draw all men unto me”. Straight after the Lord’s death and resurrection the great commission was given, to bring all men unto Him and His cross.

- God sanctified / consecrated Jesus and sent Him into the world (Jn. 10:36). But this sanctification was through His death on the cross (Jn. 17:19). Jesus was sanctified on the cross and sent into the world in the sense that we His people would be impelled by His cross to take Him into all the world. *We* would be sent into all the world in His Name.

- As the Lord was sent into the world, so He sends us into the world (Jn. 14:12; 17:18; 20:21)- the very language of the great commission. Jesus ‘came down’ to this world in the sense that He was the word of the Father made flesh, and ‘all men’ saw the light of grace that was radiated from His very being. And that same word must be flesh in us, as it was in the Lord.

- In Jn. 12:23-26, the Lord foretold aspects of His coming sacrifice: “The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit [spoke in the

context of potential Gentile converts]. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it...if any man serve me, let him follow me". Here the Lord goes on to assume that His death, His falling into the ground, would be matched by His followers also hating their lives, that they might rise again. And He connects His death with glorification. Soon afterwards, the Lord spoke of how his followers would likewise "bear much fruit", and thus *glorify* God. And in this context He continues with words which can be read as John's record of the great preaching commission: "I have chosen you...that ye should go [cp. "Go ye into all the world..."] and bring forth fruit" (Jn. 15:8,16). Clearly the Lord connected His bringing forth of "much fruit" through His death with the same "much fruit" being brought forth by the disciples' witness. It follows from this that the fruit which He potentially achieved on the cross is brought to reality by our preaching. And perhaps it is also possible to see a parallel between our preaching and His laying down of His life on the cross, as if the work of witness is in effect a laying down of life by the preacher, in order to bring forth fruit.

- The whole world is to know the Gospel because of the unity of the believers (Jn. 17:18,21,23); and it follows that a situation will arise in which the extraordinary nature of true Christian solidarity over linguistic, ethnic, social and geographical lines will make a similar arresting, compelling witness as it did in the first century. The Lord had prophesied that His followers over time "shall become one flock" (Jn. 10:16 RV); they would be "perfected into one, that the world may know" (Jn. 17:23 RV). As the Gospel spreads worldwide in the last days, the unity of the believers will become all the more comprehensive, and this will of itself provoke yet more conversions. And once the fullness of unity is achieved, our communal way of life will have hastened the coming of the Lord (2 Pet. 3).

- Matthew and Mark record how the apostles were *sent* to preach the Gospel and baptize, for the *forgiveness* of sins (cp. Acts 2:38). Luke records the Lord stating that the apostles knew that *forgiveness of sins* was to be preached from Jerusalem, and therefore they should be witnesses to this. I would suggest that John's Gospel does in fact record the great commission, but in different and more spiritual words: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you...If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (Jn. 20:21,23 NIV). These words have always been problematic for me, especially that last phrase. Can God's forgiveness really be limited by the forgiveness shown by fallible men? Yet if these words are taken as a record of the great commission to go and preach, and the ellipsis is filled in, things become clearer: 'I am sending you to preach the Gospel and baptism of forgiveness; if you do this and men respond, then the Gospel you preach really does have the power to bring about forgiveness. But if you don't fulfil the commission I give you to preach forgiveness, then the sins of your potential hearers will remain unforgiven'. Again, the forgiveness and salvation of others is made to depend upon our preaching of forgiveness. "Whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" becomes the equivalent of "he that believeth not shall be damned". Note that the Greek for 'retain' strictly means 'to hold / bind', and that for 'remit' means 'to loose'. This has evident connection with Mt. 16:19, where the keys of the Gospel of the Kingdom (which we all possess) have the power to bind and loose, i.e. to grant or not grant forgiveness. Jn. 15:8,16 also has some reference to the great commission: "...so shall ye be my disciples...that ye should go [into all the world] and bear fruit, and that your fruit [converts?] should abide". The eternal life of the converts is a fruit brought forth by the preacher's obedience to his Lord's commission. Likewise through the preaching of John, he turned men's hearts- the idea of repentance, being brought about by the preacher (Mal. 4:6).

- "These are written ["in this book" of John's Gospel] that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ...and that believing ye may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31 RV)- belief, life, "in his name", these are all references to the great commission. It's as if John is saying that he fulfilled it by the writing and preaching of his Gospel record. John's equivalent to an appeal for baptism may be his concluding appeal to believe that Jesus is the Christ, and as a result of that belief, to receive life "in his name" - into which we are baptized.

John's record of the great commission is not merely found at the end of his gospel. When John records how the disciples were to proclaim "the word" to the world (Jn. 17:20), he is surely intending connection to be made with how "the word" had likewise been made flesh in the Lord Jesus (Jn. 1:14); and how it was that same "word" which Jesus had given to His men, just as His Father had manifested that word through Himself. Our witness is to be in our making flesh of the word in real life, just as it was in the Lord.

## 5-9 Reaching the Unreached

There can be no doubt that the emphasis in the life of Paul was upon the geographical spread of the Gospel as far as possible. In around ten years, he established ecclesiases in the four provinces of Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. And then he speaks as if his work was done in that part of the world, he had spread the word from Jerusalem round to Illyricum [i.e. throughout the Eastern half of the Empire], and therefore "I have no more place in these parts" (Rom. 15:19,23). He speaks as if he has fulfilled the "line" or geographical apportion of areas to him, and now he was turning his attention to the Western side of the Roman empire, going to Rome, planning a visit to Spain. In some ways, this is surprising, for his letters indicate that the ecclesiases he had already established were weak indeed. All in Asia turned away from him, and he warned the Ephesian elders of this. Ecclesiases like Corinth were hopelessly weak in doctrine and practice, and many were turning away, either to the world, or back to Judaism as in the Galatian ecclesiases. He could so easily have spent his life running around the Eastern half of the Roman empire, seeking to strengthen what remained. But he seems to have considered his work to have been done, and presses ahead with fresh witness in another part of the world. He wrote letters and made occasional visits to address the problems as they arose, but his stress was repeatedly on pushing forward with the work.

This explains the speed with which he established ecclesiases. He stayed a few weeks or months in cities like Lystra and Thessalonica, returning, in the case of Lystra, after 18 months, and then again a few years later. He spent three consecutive sabbaths in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), baptized the converts, and then didn't come back to see them for about five and a half years (Acts 20:1,2). How were they kept strong? By the good shepherd, by the grace of God, by the Father and Son working with Paul. He seems to have drilled them with the basics of the Gospel and the life they needed to live, ordained immature elders who were literate and able to teach the word, and then left them what he repeatedly calls "the tradition", a document or set of teachings relating to practical life in Christ (1 Cor. 11:2,23; 2 Thess. 2:5; 3:6; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2; 3:14; Tit. 1:9) <sup>(4)</sup>. It was perhaps the simplicity and brevity of the message that was its strength in the lives of the early converts. Their lives were based directly upon reflection upon the implications of the basic elements of the Gospel. It is today amazing how simple men and women remember and reflect upon the things taught them even verbally, and show an impressive appreciation of them when they are visited again after some months or years. Interestingly, Corinth had the most evident problems and immaturity, even though Paul spent 18 months there, whereas ecclesiases like Philippi which he established far

quicker seem to have been far sounder. It therefore follows that length of pastoral work is not necessarily related to spiritual strength.

An insight into Paul's attitude is revealed in the way he speaks of how a door of preaching opportunity had been opened to him at Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:9). Surely he is alluding to the Lord's words about knocking in prayer, and a door is opened. He had presumably prayed for the opportunity to spread the word in Ephesus, and he was given the positive answer. We likewise should be praying systematically for the people in our lives, for unreached nations and peoples. Yet the language of a door being opened sends us to Acts 14:27, where the response of the Gentiles to Paul's missionary work is likewise spoken of as a door being opened- presumably, meaning that here was an answer to prayer for response. A door was opened at Troas, we assume also because of sustained prayer beforehand (2 Cor. 2:12). We must ask whether we really desire the Gospel to spread; if we do, it will be reflected in our prayer life.

The disciples asked how the fig tree [cp. Israel] withered away so quickly. The answer, of course, was in that Jesus had faith that it would. He goes on to tell them that if *they* had faith, the mountain of Zion, the hope of Israel, would be cast into the sea of nations (Mt. 21:20,21). The Lord Jesus is surely saying that *His* faith should not be seen as separate from *our* faith. According to the faith of the disciples, the Hope of Israel, rejected by the withered fig tree of Israel, could be spread to the Gentiles. But the spread of the Gospel world-wide was and is conditional upon our faith, modelled as it must be upon His example.

It was also the Lord's desire that His word should be spread. The neat maps in our Bibles notwithstanding, it is clear that Paul had no such clear plan of where to found ecclesiastas. He preached in Galatia because illness required that he spend some time there, against his original intention (Gal. 4:13). He was forbidden to preach in Bithynia as he had planned, he fled to Athens for safety and ended up preaching there, then he fled from there to Corinth (Acts 16:6,7). And it seems that he was only in transit through Ephesus, but found the people responsive and therefore continued working there (Acts 18:19). Indeed, his movements were so uncertain that he was open to the charge of vacillating about his plans (2 Cor. 1:15,18). And yet it has been shown <sup>(5)</sup> that the places where Paul founded ecclesiastas were strategic points, in that they were centres where different nationalities mixed, where trade routes crossed, where social and religious conditions were better than elsewhere for the spread of the Gospel. Yet this was not due to any conscious desire of Paul for this; the Lord overruled this, so that, e.g., from Thessalonica the message sounded out throughout Asia, due to the many mobile people who heard the Gospel there.

## Notes

(4) We perhaps need such a document today especially in the mission field. Robert Roberts' 'The Commandments Of Christ' and the similar booklet by my dear wife Cindy could perhaps be more widely translated and used.

(5) Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999 Ed.) ch. 2.

## 6. Touching The Raw Nerve In Preaching

Paul summarises his argument of Romans chapters 1 and 2 by saying that there he has accused / charged (in a legal sense) all men and women, Jews and Gentiles, of being "under [judgment for] sin" (Rom. 3:9 Gk.). With typically devastating logic, he has demonstrated the universal guilt of man. Twice he stresses that whoever we are, we are without excuse (1:20;

2:1). All men have a conscience which is dynamically equivalent to the specific knowledge of God's law; in this sense they are a "law unto themselves" (2:14- although this phrase is used in a different sense in modern English). "By nature" (Strong: 'native disposition, constitution') they have the same moral sense that God's law teaches. This is why human beings have an innate sense of right and wrong- it's why, e.g., there is protest at ethnic cleansing. God is understood / perceived by what He has created, namely our own bodies. But through, e.g., sexual perversion, man has distorted the image and glory of God which he was intended to be, and has worshipped the created body rather than the creator (1:20-23). Fashion, adverts and power clothing all do this, as well as the present obsession with sexual expression. The Lord Himself taught that because we are in the image of God, therein lies an imperative to give our bodies to Him. The goodness of God can lead *all men* to repentance (Rom. 2:4). God has set a sense of the eternal in the human heart (Ecc. 3:11 AVmg). An awareness of judgment is alive as a basic instinct in people. God is "not far from every one of us...forasmuch as we are [all] the offspring of God" (Acts 17:27-29- stated in a preaching context), being created in His image.

Further on in Romans, Paul comments that truly Israel have already heard the essence of the Gospel we preach, in that "the word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach" (Rom. 10:8). He quotes here from Dt. 30:12: "For this command [to be obedient- or, as Paul interprets it, the word of the Gospel]...is it not far from thee [cp. how God is "not far" from anybody, Acts 17:27]. It is not in heaven above, that thou shouldest say, Who will ascend for us into heaven, and bring it to us, that we may *hear and do it?*" (Dt. 30:12 LXX). As Moses spoke these words on the last day of his life, he was at the foot of Nebo, which he ascended for his final meeting with God. He is surely alluding to the way in which he had 'ascended to heaven' before in ascending to God on Sinai, fulfilling Israel's wish that he should bring God's word to them rather than God Himself speak with them. He had returned bringing God's word to them, to which they had agreed they would "hear and do". Earlier, in Deut 5:27, Moses had reminded the people how they had said: "Go thou near, and hear all that the LORD our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the LORD our God shall speak unto thee; and we will *hear it, and do it*". Now he is telling them that actually the word he had brought to them needn't have been brought to them as in essence it was within their hearts. It is for exactly this reason that Paul could reason elsewhere in Romans that the Gentiles do by nature the things contained in the Law, although they don't know the letter of the Law. And the same principle is found in 1 Thess. 4:9: "As touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves [i.e. from within yourselves?] are taught of God to love one another". This is rather like how the Gentiles were not 'written unto' and yet they knew from their conscience the essential spirit of the Mosaic Law.

### ***Preaching Always Touches Hearts***

What this means in practice is that whenever God's Truth is presented to a man, the raw nerve of his conscience will somehow be touched. He is in God's image, and knows somehow he should respond to this. He may react by flinching away, covering up his weakness; He will not come to the light, lest his deeds are reproved (Jn. 3:19,20). Or he may realise that he has been touched, and respond in humility. So often the introduction of the Gospel is treated by people with indifference: 'Oh, another leaflet', a woman may jovially respond when she's handed one of our tracts. But when she realises it's about Jesus...then, things will change. 'Oh, I see...' she may say, and her body language will change. She has been touched on the raw nerve. She may get angry because of this, or quickly change the

subject- or let her conscience be touched. Paul tellingly spoke of how people hold down the [conscience of] the truth on account of their unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18 Gk.). When they come to know God, they darken their foolish hearts (1:21). And so it was with the preaching of the Gospel in Acts. Those who heard it were pricked in their conscience: some responded by wanting to kill the preachers (Acts 5:33; 7:54); others followed their conscience and accepted baptism (Acts 2:37). We too have our hearts pricked by the Gospel- and we either effectively shut up the preaching, or respond.

It's easy to get discouraged in our preaching by the apparent lack of response. But all the witnesses that we make, the points we get across, the bills we distribute, adverts we place...the people who receive them *don't* treat them as they would say a commercial advertisement. *Everyone out there has a religious conscience*- let's remember that. They know, deep down, what they ought to be doing. And our preaching invites them to do it. If there is no immediate conversion, well don't worry. *You have touched peoples' hearts* by your witness. Paul describes our witness in terms of the burning of aromatic spices during the triumphant procession of a victorious general, in our case, the Lord Jesus. His victory train goes on and on and on; and each generation of preachers is the aroma. But in Paul's image, the aroma strikes the bystanders in only one of two ways: some find it pleasing and life-giving, whereas others find it nauseating and deadly (2 Cor. 2:14-16). The point is, the fragrance of our witness penetrates *everywhere* (2 Cor. 2:14), and it is an odour which *cannot be ignored*. It is either repulsive, or life-giving. Our hearers will react in only one of those two ways, whatever their apparent indifference to us.

Remember that the hearts of all men have *become darkened* because of the way they consistently harden their hearts [in an ongoing sense] from childhood, resulting in them passing from having a religious conscience to a hardened state (Eph. 4:19). But somewhere deep down, that "feeling" is still there, and can easily be touched by our witness. I find it intriguing to observe how men who perceive themselves as confirmed 'atheists' find it almost irresistible to blaspheme. When they spill their coffee or forget something, almost involuntarily their thoughts fly to the God and the Jesus they so fiercely deny. I'd estimate that the everyday speech of the 'atheistic' USSR included more references to 'God' than in that of the 'Christian' West.

This fact also explains why response to the Gospel is coming from unexpected places and groups of people. Several hundred atheists have been baptized in the last few years; and a growing number of Muslims, Buddhists, Jews and Hindus are responding. Most of the conversions I witness have been due to the true Gospel touching the conscience of men and women, rather than by us first of all demolishing their previous belief system blow by blow. They taste and see that the Lord is good. There is no need for 'apologetics' to convert a man, e.g. literature justifying the Bible from science, or 'proving' it as against the Quran. These things are confirmation, but not the power of conversion. The message of Christ *in itself* convicts the conscience of men and women, without us needing to preach anything else. Paul directly preached the Gospel to Felix, a man steeped in Roman paganism, without seeking to prove that sin is sin, or that only one God exists. In Corinth likewise he "determined" to *only* preach Christ, and he made no 'apology' to anyone or anything else. That Gospel touches the raw nerve in every human being, regardless of their background. This is why people respond in only one of two ways to that touch of the raw nerve- the majority draw back from the prongs of the Gospel, whilst a minority are not of them who draw back, but believe to the saving of the soul. This is why the preaching of Christ causes divisions between people, as the Lord did by His very being amongst men (Jn. 7:12,43; 9:16; 10:19).

Our contact with the Father, with His Son and with His word, all this likewise touches the raw nerve in us. The parable of the sower surely describes the response of any man or woman *whenever* the word is sown into them. And like the woman who receives a leaflet on the street, we can either draw back within ourselves, hiding behind a surface level spirituality, or allow the real import of Yahweh's Truth to touch us. We can make a few cosmetic changes to our characters, scratching around on the surface of our natures; or we can really change.

### **6-1 Preaching: Workshop Dialogues**

Work through the following dialogues in pairs. Note how the first one brings Sue round to realising that there is mileage in our position, and makes her admit what is lacking in her church going. Note how the second one fails to build up rapport and is constantly locked into conflict. Now write similar dialogues reflecting the need for:

- recognition of our own fallibility
- preaching doctrine
- identifying and touching the raw nerve in others without causing a knee-jerk reaction against us
- correcting others' misunderstandings without seeming conceited
- seeking the salvation of others rather than proving ourselves right
- to preach Jesus Christ rather than ourselves or membership of our religion as opposed to another one.

#### **Dialogue 1**

A: Morning! How was the weekend?

B: Great! Had a real blessed time at church, wow, the minister was really on form.

A: Good! Must admit my spiritual life is a bit of a yo-yo, what goes up must come down, 3 steps back and 4 forward kinda thing.

B: You know, I'm sure you guys are missing out on something. And it's called simply: the Holy Spirit!! It'll give you all joy and peace!

A: Hmm...yeah, you've said that before and you know, I really have thought about it. I don't quite get all the Bible teaching about the Holy Spirit, but you know, I do feel that joy and peace, just from believing deep within me that, you know, it's all real, that there is a God above, that He loves me through Christ, that the Kingdom of God will come on earth, Jesus will come and raise me and judge me...

B: OK, yeah, actually I do notice you do have a peace. When my husband was late home from work the other night, wow, I was freaking out all over the place!

A: I can't imagine you freaking out! You seem so calm!

B: Ha, you know underneath I'm pretty wound up.

A: Wound up, yeah, that's about me too. But I feel so bad that I have what I honestly believe to be the Truth and yet I am so wound up about things. I don't think it means I don't believe or I don't have the right things to believe, it's just my weakness of faith.

B: Yeah, must admit, my faith gets pretty weak at time! Still, I hope the Holy Spirit's gonna help me.

A: Well in my low moments I just throw myself before God in prayer and I keep reading His word, and thinking of how Jesus really had my nature....

B: Oh yeah but you've got that weird stuff about Jesus not being God, yeah?

A: Well the point is, when my faith is weak, I think of Him like Hebrews says "tempted in all points like as we are yet without sin". It's a real comfort, that He was sinless...

B: Sure is. Must admit, I never know where to turn in the Bible. You know what, some times I feel like a total FRAUD!

A: No no, hey, you're not a fraud, you're a lovely, real person. You've just got your doubts like we all have. But dear Sue, you know, I wonder....wonder wonder wonder...whether this idea that 'you've got the Holy Spirit and therefore if you believe you can do anything, get everything, you'll feel happy all the time', you know, I wonder if that doesn't lead to depression in people and feeling their frauds when they aren't? Like, I know you are totally sincere, it's tragic you feel a fraud...

B: Dunno...but you know, there sure are a lot of depressed people in our church, come to think of it. But don't go inviting me to your church, please!!

A: Come on, I'm not interested in getting people along to our church. You know for me, I'm perhaps a very closed person. What matters to me is my relationship with the Lord Jesus, and showing the fruit of the Spirit, getting that love, joy, peace, and I do feel very very slowly I'm getting there. But, sorry to go on, but you're so BRAVE to be so open with me!

A: Dunno about brave. But, well, thanks for making me feel I'm not a fraud. Yeah you know, I'm a closed person too. Like you, can't share that much, actually I sometimes wonder about going to church at all. Well, I really must have a look at that Holy Spirit stuff a bit more. I'll ask the pastor.

B: Sure, ask the pastor. Maybe I could give you a booklet about it? I don't want to confuse you, but, you know Sue, PRAY for God to guide you, I do as well, I mean, we're like children coming to Him...

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## *Dialogue 2*

A: Morning! How was the weekend?

B: Great! Had a real blessed time at church, wow, the minister was really on form.

A: Yes we had a good meeting in the ecclesia yesterday, the exhorting brother was great!

B: Yeah, he was all preaching on the Holy Spirit, I swear I almost saw a dove descend on him!

A: Come on now, in the Bible, the word Spirit means power of breath, and Holy means set aside for a special purpose, like in Luke 1 when Jesus is going to be born, the Holy Spirit is called the power of the highest that overshadowed Mary. The Greek word ‘dynamis’...

B: Yeah, woo, you guys! You know what, I don’t care about the Greek, I care about Jesus! I want to be anointed with His spirit! Problem with you guys is that you don’t have the Spirit in your lives, that’s why you’re often so depressed!

A: But don’t *you* get depressed sometimes? No, I think we are all very happy in the ecclesia, happy because we’ve got the Truth, you know I’ve been reading the Bible many years and I really know it’s the Truth.

B: Yeah but I believe the Bible is the Truth as well!

A: No, I meant, that our doctrines are the Truth, you know, that the truth is the truth.

B: Well Jesus said, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth and He’s gonna lead us into all truth, I just say, sit back and be lead.

A: No Sue, come on, we’ve got to read the Bible not just sit back.

B: But we DO read the Bible! I carry a New Testament in my bag everywhere!

A: Yes but it’s not just the New Testament we’ve got to read but the *whole* Bible, I mean, the Gospel is based on the promises to Abraham and all the types of the Law point forward to Jesus...

B: What types of Law? There was only one law I thought, and now we have grace, come on, we don’t need law.

A: No you just don’t understand, I meant, the types which point forward to Jesus, types in that sense.

B: Oh, I just don’t get this. Let the spirit in your life! Amen!

## **7. Dealing With Error Whilst Preaching Truth**

### **7-1 The Word Will Not Return Void**

As Israel moaned and groaned their way through the wilderness, so the condemned generation in which we live are likewise full of a negative spirit. Many of the movies and songs which fill the subconscious thinking of many men and women are likewise negative in

their essence. For those who work long hours doing repetitive work (and that in principle includes almost everyone, wherever they live), a complaining, grumbling spirit can easily develop. Everything becomes a burden, a load we must bear because we have no choice. Familiarity with family members can slip into a lack of respect, those we should love become simply another of life's irritations, grudgingly tolerated because there is no way out of the family structure we are in. And in the repetition of the activities of ecclesial and spiritual life, a like chafing at the bit can so easily develop. Especially is there the tendency to look at one's fellow man in a critical way. We can look at the unbelievers around us and consider them so far gone that we don't even try to preach to them: 'Well, he's a Muslim...she's so caught up with her new baby...he's so rich'. And we can look at our brethren in a similar way, noticing their faults, irked and irritated by their ways (this is especially true when we are meeting with the same two or three believers, as many readers are).

Yet there is a hopefulness in the Father and Son which must rub off on us; a spirit of grace, a grace and love that thinks no evil and delights in what is positive. The grace of the Father, and the life of grace lived and shown through His Son, is so essentially outgoing, *so unregarding of human response*, piling "grace upon grace" (Jn. 1:16 Gk.), that if we sense it, we will show it too. The Father is ever seeking for some positive response, and is highly sensitive to it. He told Moses: "If they will not believe...neither hearken to the voice of the first sign, that they will believe the voice of the latter sign [but] if they will not believe also these two signs..." (Ex. 4:8). The God who knows the end from the beginning gives the impression that He is sure they will believe- even though they didn't. He is so seeking for faith in His creatures (cp. "surely they will reverence my son", Mt. 21:37, and Ex. 19:21 cp. 20:18). In this, Isaiah says, He shows His matchless grace: "For he said, Surely they are my people, children that will not lie: *so* [therefore] he was their Saviour...but they rebelled, and vexed his holy [gracious] spirit" (Is. 63:8,10). Our tendency is to notice the negative in others, and let it outweigh the positive. God works quite the other way. He hopes for positive response, and even speaks as if He will get it when He knows He won't. Consider how Job shook his fist at God through many of his speeches- so much so that Elihu, on God's behalf, had to rebuke him at the end. Finally, Yahweh asks Job to "declare thou unto me" (Job 40:7; 42:4): to make a declaration. And Job does, in a matchless humility: "...therefore have I uttered that I understood not...I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes". And Yahweh immediately comments to the unrepentant friends: "Ye have not spoken of ['unto'] me the thing that is right [Heb. 'prepared'], as my servant Job hath" (42:7). Evidently Job hadn't spoken "right" earlier; but it's as if God seizes upon this one recognition of failure and is so pleased with it. He was looking for repentance in Job, and triumphantly seizes upon it once it is stuttered out by him. And so with our preaching of the Gospel and in our seeking to win back brethren who go astray [and I do hope we all make some personal effort to do this...]: *seek* for response. As the disciples came upon the Lord talking to the woman by the well, it looked as if He were *seeking* something (Jn. 4:27). But they didn't ask what- for it was obvious. His body language reflected how He was *seeking* her salvation. He seeks the lost until He finds them, even now (Mt. 18:12; Lk. 15:8); as He looked up into the branches of the sycamore tree seeking Zacchaeus, He was epitomising how He came (and comes) to seek and save *all* the lost (Lk. 19:5,10). Our preaching to others isn't a cold-hearted witness, or a theological debate; it is a *seeking* of glory to the Father; we exhort one another, *considering* how we may provoke to love (Heb. 10:24). But let me ask: do you *consider* how you might encourage your brethren, or those in the world around you; what words to say, what to do or not to do...?

### ***The Word Will Not Return***

We must believe, really and truly, that the word will not return void, but it will accomplish what it is intended to achieve. We are not scattering seed with the vague hope that something might sprout up; we are planting, fully expecting to see a harvest. "The word of God grew and multiplied" (Acts 12:24) surely means that the number of converts to the word multiplied- for the same word is repeatedly used in this sense (Acts 6:1,7; 5:14; 9:31; 19:20). Thus "the word of God" is put by metonymy for 'the response to the word of God', as if the word will inevitably bring forth response. The RV translates the parable of the sower as if the seed sown is the convert: "he that was sown..." (Mt. 13:19 RV). And later on in Mt. 13:38 we are told so again: "the good seed are the children of the Kingdom". Yet the seed was a symbol of the word of God. The parallel between the seed and the convert is such as to suggest that the word of God will produce converts in some sense; it will not return void (Is. 55:11). The apparent dearth of response to some preaching therefore poses a challenging question. Are we preaching the word of God alone, or our own ideas? Does God withhold blessing for some reason unknown to us? Is this parable only part of a wider picture, in which somehow the word *does* return void due to man's rejection? Thus the word of God was 'made void' by the Pharisees (Mk. 7:13 RV- a conscious allusion to Is. 55:11?).... This is perhaps one of the most defiantly unanswerable questions in our experience. As an aside, one possible explanation is that "the word" which is sent forth and prospers, achieving all God's intention, is in fact Messiah. The same word is used about the 'prospering' of the Servant in His work: Is. 48:15; 53:10 cp. Ps. 45:4. Another is to accept the LXX reading of this passage: "...until whatsoever I have willed shall have been accomplished". Here at least is the implication that *something* happens and is achieved when we preach God's word. The same idiom occurs in Ez. 9:11 AVmg., where we read that "the man clothed with linen"- representing Ezekiel or his representative Angel- "returned the word, saying, I have done as thou hast commanded me". The word 'returned' in the sense that someone, somewhere, was obedient to it even if others weren't.

### **7-2 The Teaching Style Of Jesus**

#### ***The Style Of Jesus***

The Lord and the Gospel writers seem to have recognized that a person may believe in Christ, and be labelled a 'believer' in Him, whilst still not knowing the fullness of "the truth": "Then said Jesus to those Jews which had believed on him, If you continue in my word, then are you truly my disciples; and you shall know the truth" (Jn. 8:31,32). Clearly the Lord saw stages and levels to discipleship and 'knowing the truth'. The life of Jesus was a life of outgiven grace and seeking the salvation of men, after the pattern of Joseph going to seek the welfare of his brethren. Even when he was delirious, according to the Hebrew text of Gen. 37:15 [AV "wandering"] he told the stranger that he was seeking his brethren (who hated him); seeking them was his dominant desire. And so it was in the life of the Lord. Like His Father, He was willing to be incredibly patient, in order to win people. Consider how without any doubt, God granted forgiveness during the Old Testament, on the basis of the shedding of blood. He allowed the Priest to make a real, valid atonement for sinners. And yet Hebrews makes clear that that blood couldn't redeem sin. Yet God as it were imputed faith and understanding to the offerers which they surely didn't have.

Consider some examples from the life of His son:

### ***The Demon Issue***

The centurion seems to have believed in demon possession. He understood that his servant was “grievously tormented” by them. He believed that the Lord could cure him, in the same way as he could say to his underlings “go, and he goeth” (Mt. 8:6-10). And so, he implied, couldn’t Jesus just say to the demons ‘Go!’, and they would go, as with the ‘demons’ in the madman near Gadara? The Lord didn’t wheel round and read him a lecture about ‘demons don’t exist’ (although they don’t, of course, and it’s important to understand that they don’t). He understood that this man had faith that He, as the Son of God, had power over these ‘demons’, and therefore “he marvelled, and said...Verily...I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel”. He focused on what faith and understanding the man had. With the height of His spirituality, with all the reason He had to be disappointed in people, the Lord marvelled at a man’s faith. It is an essay in how He seized on what genuine faith He found, and worked to develop it, even if there was an element of false understanding in it<sup>(1)</sup>.

In Mk. 9:23, the father of the child was asked whether he could believe [i.e., that Jesus could cast out the demon]. The man replied that yes, although his faith was weak, he believed [that Jesus could cast out the demon]. His faith was focused on by Jesus, rather than his wrong beliefs. Faith above all was what the Lord was focusing on *in the first instance*.

Legion believed he was demon possessed. But the Lord didn’t correct him regarding this before healing him; indeed, one assumes the man probably had some faith for the miracle to be performed (Mt. 13:58). Lk. 8:29 says that Legion “was driven of the devil into the wilderness”, in the same way as the Lord had been driven into the wilderness *by the spirit* (Mk. 1:12) and yet overcame the ‘devil’ in whatever form at this time. The man was surely intended to reflect on these more subtle things and see that whatever he had once believed in was immaterial and irrelevant compared to the Spirit power of the Lord. And yet the Lord ‘went along’ with his request for the demons he thought were within him to be cast into ‘the deep’, thoroughly rooted as it was in misunderstanding of demons and sinners being thrown into the abyss.

“By whom do your sons cast them [demons] out?” (Lk. 11:19) shows the Lord assuming for a moment that there were demons, and that the Jews could cast them out. He doesn’t directly challenge them on their false miracles, their exaggerated reports of healings, nor on the non-existence of demons. He takes them from where they are and seeks to lead them to truth.

There may well be more examples of this kind of thing in the NT than may appear to the English reader. The warning that the wicked will be cast into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil (Mt. 25:41) was referring to the apocryphal fate of supposedly ‘wicked angels’ as recorded in 1 Enoch 54. The references to Tartarus and sinful angels in 2 Peter and Jude are also clear references to wrong beliefs which were common in Jewish apocryphal and pseudo-epigraphical writings. These wrong ideas- and they *are* wrong- are not corrected directly, but rather a moral lesson is drawn from the stories. This is the point of the allusion to them; but there is no explicit correction of these myths in the first instance. The way the Lord constructed His parable about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is proof enough that He Himself alluded to false ideas without correcting them, but rather in order to make a moral point within the faulty framework of understanding of His audience. Indeed, the Bible is full of instances of where a technically ‘wrong’ idea is used by God without correction in order to teach a higher principle. Thus an eagle doesn’t bear its young upon its wings; it hovers over them. But from an earth-bound perspective, it would appear that [looking up], the eagle is

carrying its young on its wings. God accommodates Himself to our earthly perspective in order to lead us to Heavenly things. He doesn't seek to correct our knowledge at every turn, or else His end aim would not be achieved.

### ***Other Examples In The Teaching Of Jesus***

- The Lord's men were accused of 'threshing' on the Sabbath because they rubbed corn in their hands (Mk. 2:23-28). The Lord could have answered 'No, this is a non-Biblical definition of working on the Sabbath'. But He didn't. Instead He reasoned that 'OK, let's assume you're right, but David and *his* men broke the law because they were about God's business, this over-rode the need for technical obedience'. The Lord Jesus wasn't constantly correcting specific errors of interpretation. He dealt in principles much larger than this, in order to make a more essential, practical, useful point.
- The eagerness of the Lord for the inculcation of faith is seen in the way He foresees the likely thought processes within men. "Begin not to say within yourselves...." (Lk. 3:8), He told a generation of vipers; and He eagerly strengthened the centurion's faith when it was announced that faith was pointless, because his daughter had died. And we sense His eager hopefulness for response when He said to the woman: "Believe me, woman..." (Jn. 4:21 GNB). Even though she was confrontational, bitter against Jewish people, and perhaps [as it has been argued by some] pushing a feminist agenda...the Lord sought for *faith* in her above correcting her attitude about these things. God too seeks for faith, and some of the 'flash' victories He granted in the Old Testament were to otherwise unspiritual men who in their desperation turned to Him. He so respects faith that He responded (e.g. 1 Chron. 5:10-20).
- When the Jews mocked Him for saying that He had seen Abraham, the Lord didn't respond that of course that wasn't what He meant; instead He elevated the conversation with "before Abraham was I am".
- The disciples didn't have enough faith to cure the sick boy. Jesus told them this: it was "because of your little faith...if ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove..." (Mt. 17:20 RV). Think carefully what is going on here. They had not even faith as a tiny grain of mustard seed; they didn't have the faith to cure the boy. But Jesus says they did have "little faith". He recognized what insignificant faith they did have. He was so sensitive to the amount of faith in someone, even if it was insignificant in the final analysis. We likewise need to be able to positively and eagerly discern faith in those we preach to and seek to spiritually develop. In a similar kind of way, God was disappointed that His people had not only been disobedient to *Him*, but they had not even been obedient to their conquerors (Ez. 5:7). He so values obedience, and had an attitude that sought to see if they would show it to at least someone, even if they had rejected *Him*.
- The Lord spoke of not making the Orthodox Jews stumble by not paying the tribute; yet He goes on to say that one must beware lest we make the little ones who believe, to stumble (Mt. 17:27; 18:6). Is it not that He saw in Orthodox Jewry the beginnings of faith...a faith which was to come to fruition when a great company of priests were later obedient to the faith in Him? None of us would have had that sensitivity, that hopefulness, that seeking spirit. It is truly a challenge to us.
- When the disciples foolishly sought to have what they thought were to be the favoured places at His right hand and His left, the Lord could have answered: 'You foolish people!

Those on my left hand will be condemned!'. But He graciously didn't comment on their glaring error. He pushed a higher principle- that we should not seek for personal greatness, seeing that God is the judge of all (Mt. 20:23). Yet sadly, so much of our preaching has been solely concerned with pointing out the errors of others without being sensitive to what little faith and understanding they *do* have, and seeking to build on it.

- When the people asked: "What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee?" (Jn. 6:30), the Lord could have spoken words similar to Heb. 11:1 to them- He could have corrected them by saying that actually, faith is not related to what you can see. You cannot "see and believe" in the true sense of belief. But the Lord doesn't do that. He says that He in front of them is the bread of God, miraculously given. And their critical tone changes: "Lord, evermore give us this bread!" (:34). This surely is our pattern- not to necessarily correct every error when we see it, but to pick up something the other person has said and develop it, to bring them towards truth.

- Another woman thought that by touching His garment, she would be made whole. She had the same wrong notion as many Orthodox and Catholic believers have today- that some physical item can give healing. The Lord corrected her by saying telling her that it was *her faith*- not the touch of His garment- that had made her whole (Mt. 9:21,22). Again, He had focused on what was positive in her, rather than the negative. We know that usually the Lord looked for faith in people before healing them. Yet after this incident there are examples of where those who merely sought to touch His garment were healed (Mk. 6:56; Lk. 6:19). They were probably hopeful that they would have a similar experience to the woman. One could argue they were mere opportunists, as were their relatives who got them near enough to Jesus' clothes. And probably there was a large element of this in them. But the Lord saw through all this to what faith there was, and responded to it. It is perhaps not accidental that Mark records the link between faith and Jesus' decision to heal in the same chapter (Mk. 6:5). When we fear there is interest in our message only for what material benefit there may be for the hearers, we need to remember this. To identify wrong motives doesn't mean that we turn away; we must look deeper, and hope more strongly.

- Yet another woman was evidently a sinner; and the Lord made it clear that He knew all about her five men. But He didn't max out on that fact; His response to knowing it was basically: 'You're thirsty. I've got the water you need'. He saw her need, more than her moral problem; and He knew the answer. When she replied that she had no husband, He could have responded: 'You liar! A half truth is a lie!'. But He didn't. He said, so positively, gently and delicately, 'What you have said is quite true. You had five men you have lived with. The one you now have isn't your husband. So, yes, you said the truth' (Jn. 4:16-18). He could have crushed her. But He didn't. And we who 'have the truth' must take a lesson from this. He let Himself be encouraged by her response to Him, even though her comment "Could this be the Messiah?" (Jn. 4:29) implies she was still uncertain. Raymond Brown has commented: "The Greek question with *meti* implies an unlikelihood" (The Gospel According To John, Vol. 1, p. 173). And so this Samaritan woman was at best being deceptive when she said that "I have no husband / man / fella in my life" (Jn. 4:17). The Lord could have answered: 'Don't lie to me. You know you're living with a man, and that you've had five men in your life'. Instead, the Lord picks up her deceptive comment positively, agreeing that her latest relationship isn't really a man / husband as God intends. I find His positive attitude here surpassing.

- The Lord knew that Peter had a sword / knife hidden in his garment when in Gethsemane. But He did nothing; He didn't use His knowledge of Peter's weakness to criticise him. He knew that the best way was to just let it be, and then the miracle of healing Malchus must have more than convinced Peter that the Lord's men should not use the sword. For their Master had healed, not murdered, one of the men sent to arrest Him.

- "John bare witness unto the truth [i.e. the legitimacy of Jesus' claims]. But I receive not testimony from man [e.g. John]; *but these things I say, that ye might be saved...* I have greater witness than that of John... the works which the Father hath given me... bear witness... the Father himself... hath borne witness of me". I wish to stress the Lord's comment: "*But these things I say, that ye might be saved*". The Lord wanted men to accept His Father's witness; but He was prepared to let them accept John's human witness, and actually this lower level of perception by them, preferring to believe the words of a mere man, would still be allowed by the Lord to lead them to salvation.

- There is no record that the Lord corrected the disciples' misunderstanding that He was going to commit suicide in order to "go unto" Lazarus (Jn. 11:16). He let events take their course and allowed the disciples to reflect upon the situation in order to come to a truer understanding of His words.

- The disciples thought the resurrected Christ was a spirit, a ghost. They returned to their old superstitions. Yet He didn't respond by lecturing them about the death state or that all existence is only bodily, much as He could have done. Instead He adopted for a moment their position and reasoned from it: "A spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have" (Lk. 24:39). The essence of His concern was their doubt in Him and His resurrection, rather than their return to wrong superstitions.

- The record stresses the incongruity and inappropriacy of the young man's self-righteousness: "The *youth* answered, all these have I kept from my *youth* up". He was young-and he says that since a young man he had kept all the commands. Now the Lord doesn't lecture him about self-righteousness, nor does He point out that the young man is way over rating his own spirituality and obedience. Instead, the Master focuses on the positive- as if to say 'You are zealous for perfection? Great! So, sell what you have and give to the poor. Go on, rise up to the challenge!'.

- The Pharisees had reasoned themselves into a position whereby plucking heads of corn whilst walking through a corn field on the Sabbath was regarded as reaping. When the Lord was questioned about this issue, He didn't reply as most of us would have done: to attack the ridiculous definition of 'work on the Sabbath'. He seeks to teach by general principle that the extent of His Lordship meant that He and His men were free to do as they pleased on this kind of matter.

- The Lord explained that "the least in the Kingdom of Heaven" would have broken "the least" commandments, and would have taught men so (Mt. 5:19); and yet "the least in the Kingdom" was a phrase He elsewhere used about those who would actually be in the Kingdom (Mt. 11:11). Here surely is His desire to save, and His gracious overlooking of intellectual failure, human misunderstanding, and dogmatism in that misunderstanding ('teaching men so').

- As the Son of God, walking freely in His Father's house, Jesus didn't have to pay the temple tax (Mt. 17:26,27). He could have insisted that He didn't need to pay it, He could have stood up for what was right and true. But doing this can often be selfish, a defence of self rather than a seeking for the Father's glory. And so He told Peter that "lest we should offend them", He would pay it. He was so hopeful for their salvation one day that He was worried about offending these wretched men, who weren't fit to breathe the same air that He did. We would have given up with them; but He worried about offending what potential faith they might have.

- The Pharisees resisted paying Roman poll tax because the coin of Tiberius held him up to be God. The Lord's response was that it should be given to Tiberius, but that which bore the image of God- i.e. our body- given completely to God. He didn't say 'Don't touch the coins, they bear false doctrine, to pay the tax could make it appear you are going along with a blasphemous claim'. Yet some would say that we must avoid touching anything that might appear to be false or lead to a false implication [our endless arguments over Bible versions and words of hymns are all proof of this- even though the present writer is more than conservative in his taste in these matters]. The Lord wasn't like that. He lived life as it is and as it was, and re-focused the attention of men upon that which is essential, and away from the minutiae. Staring each of us in the face is our own body, fashioned in God's image- and thereby the most powerful imperative, to give it over to God. Yet instead God's people preferred to ignore this and argue over the possible implication of giving a coin to Caesar because there was a false message on it. Morally and dialectically the Lord had defeated His questioners; and yet still they would not see the bigger and altogether more vital picture which He presented them with.

- The Lord wasn't naïve, although He was so positive. He told the disciples quite frankly that they were full of "unbelief", and couldn't do miracles which He expected them to because they didn't pray and fast (Mt. 17:19-21). And yet when quizzed by the Pharisees as to why His disciples didn't fast, He said it was because they were so happy to be with Him, the bridegroom (Mt. 9:15). Here surely He was seeing the best in them. They come over as confused, mixed up men who wanted the Kingdom there and then and were frustrated at the Lord's inaction in establishing it. But He saw that they recognised Him as the bridegroom, as Messiah, and He exalted in this, and saw their lack of fasting as partly due to the deep-down joy which He knew they had.

- Similarly, His parable of the sower concluded by lamenting that His general Jewish audience did *not* understand, and He spoke the parables knowing they wouldn't understand and would be confirmed in this. And He stressed that a feature of the good ground is that His message is understood. In this context, the Lord commends the disciples because they saw and heard, in the sense of understanding (Mt. 13:13,15,16,23). Yet so evidently they didn't understand. And yet the Lord was so thrilled with the fact they understood a very little that He counted them as the good ground that understood.

- The wedding feast at Cana had been going on for some time, to the point that men had drunk so much wine that they could no longer discern its quality. The Lord didn't say, as I might have done, 'Well that's enough, guys'. He realised the shame of the whole situation, that even though there had been enough wine for everyone to have some, they had run out. And so He produced some more. He went along with the humanity of the situation in order to teach a lesson to those who observed what really happened (Jn. 2:10).

- The Lord evidently knew how Judas was taking money out of the bag. As the Son of God He was an intellectual beyond compare, and sensitive and perceptive beyond our imagination. And He noticed it; and yet said nothing. He was seeking to save Judas and He saw that to just kick up about evident weakness wasn't the way. If only many of our brethren would show a like discernment.

- When John the Baptist had his crisis of faith, and sent his men to ask Jesus whether He was really Messiah, the Lord spoke of John to the multitude as if he was a strong believer, no reed shaken in the wind of doubt. And yet He didn't just paper over John's doubts and forget them, pretending He hadn't seen. The message He returned to John encouraged him to look back to the Isaiah prophecies of Messiah, and to remember especially the way that the weak, doubting ones would be made strong. The Lord evidently sought to strengthen the weak John by this allusion.

- His attitude to John's disciples is very telling. He saw those who "follow not us" as being "on our part", not losing their reward, as being the little ones who believed in Him; and He saw wisdom as being justified by *all* her children, be they His personal disciples or those of John (Mk. 9:38-41; Lk. 7:35). John's men had a wrong attitude to fellowship- they should have 'followed with' the disciples of Jesus; and it would seem their doctrinal understanding of the Holy Spirit was lacking, although not wrong (Acts 19:1-5). Indeed, they are called there "disciples", a term synonymous with all believers in Luke's writing. And the Lord too spoke in such an inclusive way towards them. No wonder His disciples had and have such difficulty grasping His inclusiveness and breadth of desire to fellowship and save.

- This focus on the positive is shown by the way the Lord quotes Job 22:7 in the parable of the sheep and goats: "Thou hast not given water to the weary to drink, and thou hast withholden bread from the hungry". These words are part of Eliphaz's erroneous allegations against Job- for Job was a perfect man, and not guilty on these counts. Yet the Lord extracts elements of truth from those wrong words, rather than just contemptuously ignoring them. Likewise Job 22:25 speaks of God being our "treasure...our precious silver" (RV). Surely the Lord had this in mind when saying that our treasure must be laid up "in heaven", i.e. with God (for He often uses 'Heaven' for 'God'). And James follows suite by approvingly quoting Job 22:29 about the lifting up of the humble (James 4:6).

I am not suggesting from these examples that therefore doctrine is unimportant. But what I am saying is that we must look for the positive in others, and like the Lord in His attitude to demons, bear with them and recognise faith when we see it. God worked through the pagan superstitions of Laban regarding the speckled animals, and through the wrong beliefs of Rachel and Leah regarding their children...in order to *build* the house of Israel. He didn't cut off His dealings with men at the first sign of wrong understanding or weak faith or mixed motives. Moses seems to have shared the primitive idea that a god rose or fell according to the fortunes of his worshippers, when he asks God to not cut off Israel in case the nations mock Yahweh. He could have responded that this was far too primitive and limited a view. But no, He apparently listens to Moses and goes along with his request!

John the Baptist showed the same spirit of concession to human weakness in his preaching. He told the publicans: "Extort no more than that which is appointed you" (Lk. 3:13 RV). He tacitly accepted that these men would be into extortion. But within limits, he let it go. Likewise he told soldiers to be content with their wages- not to quit the job. Consider too how the disciples responded to the High Priest rebuking them for preaching; he claimed that they

intended to bring the blood of Jesus upon them (Acts 5:24). The obvious, logical debating point would have been to say: ‘But *you* were the very ones who shouted out ‘His blood be upon us!!’ just a few weeks ago!’. But, Peter didn’t say this. He didn’t even allude to their obvious self-contradiction. Instead he positively went on to point out that a real forgiveness was possible because Jesus was now resurrected. And the point we can take from this is that true witness is not necessarily about pointing out to the other guy his self-contradictions, the logical weakness of his position...it’s not about winning a debate, but rather about bringing people to meaningful repentance and transformation.

Another example of the Biblical record going along with the incorrect perceptions of faithful men is to be found in the way the apostles nicknamed Joseph as ‘Barnabas’ “under the impression, apparently, that it meant ‘son of consolation’ [Acts 4:36]. On etymological grounds that has proved hard to justify, and the name is now generally recognized to... mean ‘son of Nabu’”<sup>(2)</sup>. Yet the record ‘goes along’ with their misunderstanding. In addition to this, there is a huge imputation of righteousness to human beings, reflected right through Scripture. God sought them, the essence of their hearts, and was prepared to overlook much ignorance and misunderstanding along the way. Consider how good king Josiah is described as always doing what was right before God, not turning aside to the right nor left- even though it was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> year of his reign that he even discovered parts of God’s law, which he had been ignorant of until then, because the scroll containing them had been temporarily lost (2 Kings 22:2,11).

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### **Notes**

(1) It is likely that to some degree the Father overlooks the moral and intellectual failures of His children on account of their ignorance, even though sins of ignorance still required atonement and are still in some sense seen as sin. This could explain why Eve committed the first sin chronologically, but she did it having been “deceived” by the serpent; whereas Adam committed the same sin consciously and was therefore reckoned as the first sinner, the one man by whom sin entered the world.

(2) Margaret Williams, *Palestinian Personal Names in Acts* in Richard Bauckham, ed. *The Book of Acts* Vol. 4 p. 101 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995).

### **7-3 Paul's Teaching Style**

#### ***Paul's Concessions***

Paul speaks to the Galatians in human terms, alluding to the pagan concept of “the evil eye”: “Who cast the evil eye on you?” (Gal. 3:1 Gk.). He rejected the superstitions of “the evil eye”, and yet he uses the phrase in writing to them. Clearly Paul and the inspired writers wrote with a certain freedom, not scared that they might be misinterpreted, but using contemporary language freely.

Mary was the first to see the risen Lord (Mt. 28:1; Lk. 24:10; Jn. 20:1). But Paul speaks in 1 Cor. 15:5 as if Peter was the first witness of the risen Jesus. From his other writings and practice, it’s evident that Paul wasn’t simply ‘anti-women’. But here he’s surely making another concession to weakness- for in the first century world, the witness of a woman wasn’t acceptable. And so Paul speaks of the first man who saw the resurrected Lord, rather than mention Mary. Paul graciously speaks of some brethren "who are of the circumcision [party]" as his "fellow workers unto the Kingdom of God", noting that they are "men that have been a comfort unto me" (Col. 4:11 RV). The circumcision party understood things very differently

to Paul- he is ever arguing against their position, showing that circumcision profits nothing. And yet these brethren whom he here refers to were still acceptable to him as fellow workers, and he even took "comfort" from their fellowship. I find that a beautiful example of how tolerance can be practiced; despite the fact Paul was right and they were wrong, the simply reality that they were mistaken on this point, he could still work with them and be encouraged by them. He didn't reason: 'If you don't agree with me on this point, well, we're not working together, that's it, goodbye, I can take nothing positive from you by way of fellowship or encouragement'. In fact we could read the AV translation as implying that although Paul had many fellow workers, out of them all, the ones who were a personal comfort to him were these brethren who were of the circumcision party: "Aristarchus... Justus, who are of the circumcision, these only are my fellow workers... which have been a comfort unto me". Paul also wrote to the Thessalonians how their faith was a comfort to him in his "distress". And yet he goes straight on to say that he plans to visit them in order to "perfect that which is lacking in your faith" (1 Thess. 3:7,10). I find this so wonderful. Their faith was imperfect- and yet Paul all the same rejoices in what faith they do have, and can speak of "all the joy wherewith we joy for your sakes before God" (1 Thess. 3:9). Yet we are all too easily discouraged by the immaturities we notice in others' faith; instead, in a world where the majority don't truly believe, we need to focus on the positive in our brethren and rejoice in it, rather than holding them to some ideal standard which we claim to have in our own mind or understanding or perception. For when compared against the spirituality of our Lord, we are ourselves so miserably imperfect.

### ***The Sabbath***

Paul's positivism is a wonderful thing to study. When he met people believing in "the unknown (Gk. *agnosto*] God", he didn't mock their agnosticism. He rejoiced that they were as it were half way there, and sought to take them further. His position regarding the Sabbath and observance of the Law is a prime example of his patient seeking to bring men onward. There is no lack of evidence in the NT that the Lord's sacrifice precluded the need to do these things. And yet Paul and the Council of Jerusalem made concessions to the Jewish brethren who couldn't bring themselves to accept the Truth in these areas, in the hope that continued practice of these things within the context of the Christian community would make them see for themselves that they were inappropriate. Paul says that Sabbath keeping is a matter of personal conscience (Rom. 14:1-10), even though elsewhere he argues so forcibly that to do this is to return to the weak and beggarly elements. Here, as with the demons issue, there was a clear concession to some degree of human non-acceptance of Divine truth and the implications arising from it. It seems that although the Law was done away by the cross, by the time of 2 Cor. 3:7,11 it could still be spoken of as "that which is being done away" (RVmg.). There was a changeover period allowed, rather than a bald insistence that acceptance of Christ and the meaning of His death must mean that the old Jewish ways were dropped instantly.

### ***Meat Offered To Idols***

Paul's whole position about meat offered to idols reflects the fact that he recognised that there would be some believers who still could not escape the sense that the idol is really something to be feared, that in some sense it is alive and accepting the sacrifice offered to it, even though the believer in the other half of his brain knew full well that idols are nothing and there is only one true God. We *all know this*, Paul reasons, and yet some still can't escape their sense that the idol is there, and that if they eat meat offered to it they are fellowshipping

with it, even though it doesn't exist. Our tendency would be to be hard on such a person, insisting that they cannot worship the true God and yet also have this sense of the idol. And yet Paul knew that there is a dualism within each of us; we can still have a sense of the false even whilst we believe the true. One of the most spiritual and doctrinally conservative sisters I ever knew once admitted to me that for many years after her baptism, she had retained the belief that her unbelieving mother was in heaven as a departed soul, even though she knew and taught the very opposite. And yet the Lord is more gracious than many of us seem to be to this feature of our nature. Within Romans, Paul stresses how Abraham was "not weak in faith" and must be the pattern for our spirituality (4:18-21). And yet he also teaches: "Him that is *weak in the faith* receive ye...", clearly alluding to how Abraham was *not* weak in faith. Thus, he is surely saying, although Abraham's faith is out pattern, yet receive those brethren who evidently don't rise up to that level. We must focus on the positive in our brethren. John , writing to ecclesias clearly falling away both morally and doctrinally, could rejoice that he "found certain of thy children walking in truth" (2 Jn. 4 RV).

Paul's general attitude was akin to that of his Lord, in that he was not hyper careful to close off any opportunities to criticize him. This fear of and sensitivity to criticism is something which seems to have stymied our community. He says things like "I am a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6), not "I was a Pharisee and now repudiate their false doctrines". Having explained the truth about Holy Spirit gifts, Paul comments: "But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant" (1 Cor. 14:38). This recalls his comment in 1 Cor. 11:16 about head coverings: "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God". Paul seems to allow for the possibility of some in the church remaining in disagreement with his inspired teaching. His desire, it seems, was to state Divine truth and not to cause division in the ecclesia by insisting that all he said about these procedural issues in church life should be enforced at all costs. Considering he was inspired, this is quite some concession.

#### **7-4 Patient Teaching And Preaching**

##### ***Patient Leading***

These examples surely mean that we must look at the positive in our brethren, without being naïve. God Himself was very patient with the Jewish difficulty in accepting the Law had ended on the cross. He inspired Paul to write that the law is being done away, even at the time he wrote to the Corinthians, many years after Calvary (2 Cor. 3:11,13 RV). God and Paul could have taken a hard line: the Law is finished. This is why Jesus bled and lived as He did. But they are so sensitive to the difficulty of others in accepting what we know to be concrete truth. And we must take our lesson. In our witness to the world, we mustn't give up at the first sign of wrong doctrine or inability to accept our message. See what is positive and work on it. And when you see weakness in your brethren, if you observe someone asking visiting brethren for more money than they need, somebody exaggerating their situation to get sympathy, someone distorting things to reflect badly on someone else, a brother with alcohol on his breath...don't let your mind get filled with the injustice of it all. And don't think, either, that some senior brethren are simply naïve. They may be showing a mature love, living the life of grace, by knowingly overlooking something and pressing onwards in showing the ever outgoing love of Christ to brethren who may appear somehow dubious. Don't think that just because a brother says something which you think isn't the right interpretation of a passage that you *must* jump up and make a big scene with him, because truth is at stake.

The Lord, in the examples given above, didn't act like that. He spoke the word to men "as they were able to *hear* it", not as *He* was able to *expound* it. He didn't always relay to men the maximum level of understanding which He Himself possessed. There is a tendency amongst some personality types to turn every disagreement over interpretation of Scripture into a right : wrong, truth : error scenario. Matters relating to basic doctrine are capable of being dealt with like this. But to turn the interpretation of every Bible verse into a conflict area is a recipe for ecclesial disaster. So often the debate becomes personal, with a brother sure that *he* is right and the other wrong, and the other must be shown to be wrong. This leads inevitably to pride, and there is the possibility that the other party is degraded and feels abused by the other. We simply have to accept that much of Scripture is open to various levels of interpretation, which if placed side by side would appear to be contradictory. Consider, for example, how many different applications the NT gives to Psalms 2 and 110.

This is perhaps why the Lord seems to have let some issues go without immediate comment- His use of the language of demons is a major example. He lost a battle to win the war- of showing men that the power of God was so great that there was no room for belief in the existence of demons. Yet on the way to that end, He commanded 'unclean spirits' to leave men, with the result that observers marvelled that 'even unclean spirits obey him!'. He didn't on that occasion challenge the wrong belief directly, even though this meant that in the short term the wrong belief was perpetuated. But over time in His ministry, and in the whole NT, reference to demons becomes less and less, as His preaching of Truth by example and miracle made the point that these things really don't exist. Likewise the gods of Egypt were not specifically stated to not exist: but through the miracles at the Exodus, it was evident that Yahweh was unrivalled amongst all such 'gods', to the point of showing their non-existence (Ex. 15:11; 18:11). When accused of being in league with 'satan', the Lord didn't read them a charge of blasphemy. He reasoned instead that a thief cannot bind a strong man; and likewise He couldn't bind 'satan' unless He were stronger than satan (Mk. 3:23-27). He doesn't take the tack that 'satan / Beelzebub / demons' don't exist; He showed instead that He was evidently stronger than any such being or force, to the point that belief in such a concept was meaningless. Faith must rather be in Him alone.

We must speak the word as others are able to hear it, expressing the Truths of Christ in language and terms which will reach them. There are some differences within the Gospels in the records of the parables. It could be that the different writers, under inspiration, were rendering the Lord's Aramaic words into Greek in different styles of translation. Also, we must bear in mind the different audiences. Mark speaks of the four watches of the night which would have been familiar to Romans (Mk. 13:35 cp. 6:48), whereas Lk. 12:38 speaks of the Jewish division of the night into three watches (cp. Jud. 7:19). Yet Luke seems to translate the Palestinian style of things into terms which were understandable by a Roman audience. Thus Lk. 6:47; 11:33 speak of houses with cellars, which were uncommon in Palestine; and in Lk. 8:16; 11:33 of houses with an entrance passage from which the light shines out. The synagogue official of Mt. 5:25 becomes the " bailiff" in Lk. 12:58. In Palestine, the cultivation of mustard in garden beds was forbidden, whereas Lk. 13:19 speaks of mustard sown in a garden, which would have been understandable only to a Roman audience. It seems in these cases that inspiration caused Luke to dynamically translate the essence of the Lord's teaching into terms understandable to a non-Palestinian audience. Even in Mt. 5:25 we read of going to prison for non-payment of debts, which was not the standard Jewish practice. Imprisonment was unknown in Jewish law. The point of all this is to show that we must match our terms and language to our audience.

### **Patient Teaching**

In our preaching of the word to others or in dialogue with our brethren, there's no point in seeking to address every area of deviation from God's Truth at the same time. We *must* address them, but I am talking about *how* we do it. You won't get far with converting a Pentecostal if you tell him *in the same sentence* that you think the trinity is blasphemous, their claims to Spirit gift possession are a joke, there's no devil, and we don't go to Heaven...far better to take just one subject and concentrate on it, ignoring (for the moment) whatever he may say about the other areas. I'm not saying 'Do nothing about misbehaviour or conduct unworthy of the name of Christ or wrong doctrine'. We must reprove and rebuke, from the inspired word, considering ourselves whilst doing so, and disfellowship clear false teachers. But I'm not talking about these cases. It has been observed of Paul: "In Phil. 3 he concludes a fundamental statement of his own Christian conviction by commanding his opinion: 'So let those of us who are mature think in this way. And if in any way you think differently, this too will God reveal to you. Only we must stand by that conclusion which we have already reached' (3:15,16). That is: I am sure that mine is a correct, mature, Christian view, and I believe that in God's time, you will in the end share it. But what matters is that you honestly maintain and live by the position you have at present reached"<sup>(1)</sup>. This wisdom, I emphasize, does not and cannot apply to matters of fundamental doctrine; but it could well be applied to many of our squabbles .

Forbearance and tolerance are to be characteristic of our attitude to others (Eph. 4:2; Phil. 4:5). Paul was aware that on some matters, brethren can quite honestly hold different points of view (Rom. 14:5,6). But there is a difference between tolerance and indifference. The tolerance which is the fruit of the spirit is something hard to cultivate, and it can only spring from love. It's not that we think something doesn't matter...but rather than in sympathy with the other person, we seek to understand why the other person is thinking and behaving as they do. There is some truth in the saying that to know all is to forgive all. And when false doctrine does have to be challenged, the truth must be spoken *in love* (Eph. 4:15). Opponents are to be corrected "with gentleness" (2 Tim. 2:23-25; 1 Pet. 3:15). It is all too easy, knowing the truth as we do, to win the argument but lose the person. And so often I have been guilty of this.

### **Tolerance**

The Lord condemned how the Pharisees "devoured widow's houses"- and then straight away we read of Him commanding the widow who threw in her whole living to the coffers of the Pharisees. It wasn't important that the widow saw through the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and didn't 'waste' her few pennies; her generosity was accepted for what it was, even though it didn't achieve what it might have done, indeed, it only abetted the work of evil men. We read that a whole crowd "with one accord" believed Philip's preaching of the gospel (Acts 8:6). There was evidently a crowd mentality- every person in the crowd had the same mindset towards Philip's preaching at that moment. Now it seems to me that we would likely judge such momentary, mass response as mere passing emotion. But God is more positive- the record which He inspired counts it to them as real belief, just as the "crowd" who followed the Lord are credited with faith, even though soon afterwards they were doubting Him. That indicates to me not only the hopefulness of God for human response to His grace, but also His willingness to accept people. Or think of the song of Zacharias in Luke 1. Clearly he understood Messiah as the One who would bring immediate relief from the Roman occupation. He'd misread, as many Jews do today, the Old Testament prophecies and types

which involve two comings of Messiah, and the need for Him to firstly die the death of rejection. But all the same, we find no hint of condemnation, but rather of commendation, for this Godly man.

1 Cor. 1:2 can be read several ways: "them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, both theirs and ours". Paul could be saying that Jesus Christ is Lord both of 'us' and also of all the congregations of believers. But he could also mean (and the Greek rather suggests this) that the same Jesus *understood and interpreted somewhat differently amongst the various believers* "in every place" was in fact Lord of them all. For your interpretation of the Lord Jesus and mine will inevitably differ in some points. Now this must of course be balanced against John's clear teaching that those who deny Jesus came in the flesh are in fact antiChrist.

The fact that the majority of early Christians were illiterate surely means that their understanding of the Lord Jesus depended to some extent upon their personal meditation and recollections of the words about Jesus which they had heard preached from inspired men. Yet within such an oral culture, there would have been ample opportunity to misunderstand a few things around the edges. It's highly unlikely that illiterate people would have had any comprehension of the detailed statements of faith which exist today- and yet they were in fellowship with the Father and Son, standing with us in Hope of the glory of God. Therefore, how can we treat others who may differ from us over some details as not in fellowship?

Eph. 4:12,13 speaks of how the body of Christ is built up until we come to "the unity [or, unanimity] of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ". I understand this to be describing how the body of believers is progressively educated, matured, built up, until finally at the Lord's return we are all brought to be like Christ, to know Him fully, and to "the unity of the faith". The implication would therefore be that there will never be total understanding of "the faith" in its fullness, nor will there be "unanimity" amongst us on every point as a body, until the Lord is back.

## **The Tolerance Of Jesus**

Jn. 8:31 credits some of the Jews with believing on Jesus- and yet the Lord goes on to show how they didn't 'continue in His word', weren't truly confirmed as His disciples, and were still not true children of Abraham. Yet it would appear God is so eager to recognize any level of faith in His Son that they are credited with being 'believers' when they still had a very long way to go. The Lord condemned how the Pharisees "devoured widow's houses"- and then straight away we read of Him commanding the widow who threw in her whole living to the coffers of the Pharisees. It wasn't important that the widow saw through the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and didn't 'waste' her few pennies; her generosity was accepted for what it was, even though it didn't achieve what it might have done, indeed, it only abetted the work of evil men. The Lord was criticized for "receiving sinners" and eating with them (Lk. 15:2). Instead of the usual and expected Greek word *dechomai*, we find here the Greek *prosdechomai*- He welcomed them *into fellowship*, symbolizing this by eating with them. This was an act which had religious overtones in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. Notice that *prosdechomai* is used by Paul to describe welcoming a brother / sister in spiritual fellowship (Rom. 16:2; Phil. 2:29). The Lord fellowshipped people in the belief that this would lead them to repentance, following His Father's pattern of using grace in order to lead people to repentance (Rom. 2:4). He didn't

wait for people to get everything right and repented of and *only then* fellowship them, as a sign that they were up to His standards.

The Lord criticized the people for their refusal to believe apart from seeing signs and wonders (Jn. 4:48). In line with this, the Lord attacks Nicodemus' belief on the basis of the miracles, saying that instead, a man must be born again if he wishes to see the Kingdom (Jn. 3:2,3). But later He says that the disciples were being given miraculous signs greater than even healing to help them believe (Jn. 11:15); He bids people believe because they saw signs, even if they were unimpressed by Him personally (Jn. 5:20; 10:37; 14:11). Clearly enough, the Lord was desperate for people to believe, to come to some sort of faith- even if the basis of that faith wasn't what He ideally wished. And it's possible that His initial high demand for people to believe not because they saw miracles was relaxed as His ministry proceeded; for the statements that faith was not to be based upon His miracles is found in Jn. 3 and 4, whereas the invitations to believe because of His miracles is to be found later in John.

### **Paul's Tolerance**

1 Cor. 1:2 can be read several ways: "them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, both theirs and ours". Paul could be saying that Jesus Christ is Lord both of 'us' and also of all the congregations of believers. But he could also mean (and the Greek rather suggests this) that the same Jesus *understood and interpreted somewhat differently amongst the various believers "in every place"* was in fact Lord of them all. For your interpretation of the Lord Jesus and mine will inevitably differ in some points. Now this must of course be balanced against John's clear teaching that those who deny Jesus came in the flesh are in fact antiChrist. The fact that the majority of early Christians were illiterate surely means that their understanding of the Lord Jesus depended to some extent upon their personal meditation and recollections of the words about Jesus which they had heard preached from inspired men. Yet within such an oral culture, there would have been ample opportunity to misunderstand a few things around the edges. It's highly unlikely that illiterate people would have had any comprehension of the detailed statements of faith which exist today- and yet they were in fellowship with the Father and Son, standing with us in Hope of the glory of God. Therefore, how can we treat others who may differ from us over some details as not in fellowship?

The issue of meat offered to idols gives a valuable window into the extent of Divine tolerance. Paul bases his position upon a Scripture, Ps. 24:1, "the earth and its fullness are the Lord's" (1 Cor. 10:25,26). On that basis, he argues that all food is acceptable to eat. But- and this is the significant bit- he accepts that despite that clear Biblical support for his inspired position, some Christians just can't handle it. And he's prepared to accept that. And it appears that different advice was given to different churches on the matter; for the Lord Jesus Himself condemns eating meat offered to idols in his letters to the churches in Rev. 2:14,15,20-25. But Paul says to other churches that in fact it is OK to eat such meat, if you understand that idols are nothing in the world. The advice doesn't contradict; rather does it reflect a sensitivity to different Christian consciences in different areas. Both the Lord and Paul could've just laid a law down from Scripture; but there is a tolerance of the fact that despite clear Biblical support, not all believers are mature enough to accept it.

### **Old Testament Examples**

- Jephthah, as I read the record, appears to have actually offered his daughter in sacrifice. What he did was from a misunderstanding of God, as well as His word [for according to the Mosaic law, he could

have offered a sacrifice or made a gift to redeem her]. And yet this faithfulness to a misconception doesn't exclude him from being listed amongst the faithful in Hebrews 11.

- The promises to David about the future seed and house which he would have were misinterpreted by him, perhaps wilfully, to refer to his son Solomon. The New Testament very clearly applies the promises to the Lord Jesus. But God is so eager to work with men that He accepted David's misinterpretation, and worked along with this. David seems to have held the idea that Yahweh could only be worshipped in the land of Israel- hence he blames Saul for driving him out of the land and thus making acceptable worship impossible for him (1 Sam. 26:19). This was the same misunderstanding as held by the exiles in Babylon and also Jonah; and yet for all that misunderstanding, David was still a man after God's own heart.

- Josiah is described as having done "that which was right in the sight of the Lord"- even though he was ignorant of part of God's word and law (2 Kings 22:2,10-13), not knowing *all* "that is enjoined us to do" (2 Kings 22:13 RVmg.), and not knowing all that was in "the book of the covenant" (2 Kings 23:2). Full knowledge, even of some quite important things, didn't stop Josiah from being credited with doing what was right before God and not 'turning aside to the right hand or to the left' (2 Kings 22:2). He was judged according to how well he responded to that which he *did* know. And this may be a helpful window for us into how we should feel towards those who sincerely seek to follow the Lord and yet with imperfect knowledge. Time and again the prophets judged Israel according to their "ways", rather than according to their theological or academic knowledge (Ez. 18:30). The Lord Jesus likewise commended the faith of the Centurion, who believed Jesus could heal his servant, on the basis that *he* as a Centurion, *also* had people under him, whom he could command to go and come at will (Lk. 7:8). Clearly enough, the man held the idea that his servant's illness was a result of demons, which, in doctrinal terms, don't exist. And yet the Lord saw beyond that misunderstanding; He was pleased with the faith that the man had, and commends him for it, and responds to it. And so it all seems to depend on *how* we deal with what understandings we genuinely hold. It's why Luke's record paints Zacharias as a wonderful old believer, despite the fact that he thought that the coming of Messiah would mean immediate freedom from the Romans and the Kingdom of God physically there and then. This, actually, was the very misunderstanding which Jesus so laboured to correct and deconstruct. But the record still speaks positively of Zacharias' faith in the Christ, despite that misunderstanding by him.

Intolerance is at the root of the divisions which tragically wreck the body of Christ. Division is sometimes necessary- if false doctrine which denies the truth of Christ enters in. But such occasions are rare. More often than not, those who are 'on the same side' divide from each other over how to deal with individual members who stray to the periphery of the body, in either practice or doctrinal understanding. John Robinson incisively observed: "What dismays me is the vehemence- and at bottom the insecurity- of those who feel that the Faith can only be defended by branding as enemies within the camp those who do not (2). The significant word here is surely "insecurity". There is indeed a chronic insecurity in those who mount campaigns to 'out' others from the one Body because of the *fear* that they *may* allow apostasy to enter. For those who are secured in Christ, who know that the ultimate issues of their personal future are already decided in Him, there is no such fear nor insecurity on a personal basis. They know whom they have believed. And no apostasy nor possible apostasy nor thin ends of any wedges can ever affect that.

There's of course a great paradox associated with tolerance. What appears to be weakness, moral cowardice, is in fact the most mature reflection of humility and love. It also reflects faith- that God

can save whom He wishes as He wishes, without being bound by *our* understanding of truth as He has revealed it to us. Intolerance in any case tends to drive people more deeply back into their errors which we find so intolerable. It's not the way towards saving people nor does it reflect any value of the individual human person, with whom God may be uniquely working in a way He does not work with us. And of course another part of the paradox is that Christ as a person is *the* truth; and yet this surpassing fact can easily lead to a dogmatism which claims to have found truth in its wider sense rather than ever be seeking it, and a spirit which is not self-critical but only critical of those who don't agree with us. As Paul Tournier observed: "There is no greater obstacle to the truth than the conviction that one possesses the truth" (3). I have seen this all too often. A woman sets about to 'find the truth' and she searches everywhere and finds the truth of Christ, but wraps it up in a system of dogma that then makes her closed-minded, and quite the opposite to the person she once was. She adopts a dogmatic system that simplifies and systematizes everything, reducing everything to simple oppositions, truths and errors, resulting in her being in bondage rather than being liberated. For the truth, as Jesus meant it, sets free- rather than enslaves us to endless arguments about wording and propositions. And the opposite end of the paradox is true too. A man may be so fearful of appearing intolerant, cutting an image of the religious bigot with his friends, that he never expresses nor even feels the solid conviction which comes from faith, hiding behind vague generalizations when he speaks about his 'faith', careful not to show too much of that 'religious enthusiasm' which is so despised in society. Both these extremes can be avoided if we realize that our tolerance must be rooted in the recognition of our own weakness; that we so desperately need truth, we whose very self-talk is so often *untruthful* and *misinformed*, whose own minds are described by the Bible as the 'devil', a 'false accuser'. And yet just because of that, we need a source of truth outside ourselves- which we find in the Lord Jesus and the Word of God. The only way to avoid both self-deception and arrogance is to have a standard of judgment outside of ourselves- and that, again, is found alone in the Lord and His word. Our specific fine-tuned interpretations of the Bible and the policy position of our church aren't to be confused with the overall and ultimate truth of Christ and the word of God. So often I see what I'd call 'automatic intolerance'- because someone has a position or interpretation that differs with that of the group, the church, the home Bible study group etc. to which a person belongs, *therefore* that person condemns the other automatically as 'not of the truth'. Taking truth from our understanding of the Word and the spirit of our Lord *alone* rather than from any human person or group will help us avoid all this.

## Intended Ambiguities

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that God has written His word in such a way as to leave some things intentionally ambiguous. He could just have given us a set of brief bullet points, written in an unambiguous manner. But instead He gave us the Bible. Given that most of His people over history have been illiterate, they simply couldn't have been able to understand His word in an academic, dissective, analytical sense. Take Rom. 5:1- it could read "Let us have peace" (subjunctive) or "We have peace" (indicative). The difference is merely the length of a vowel, and this would only have been apparent in *reading* it, as the difference wouldn't have been aurally discernible when the letter was publically read. Was the "land" meant to be understood as the whole earth, or just the land of Israel...? God "chose to reveal his son *in* " Paul (Gal. 1:16). Grammatically it's unclear- *to* him, in his heart, *through* him, or *in Paul's case*? The ambiguous genitive fills the Bible- is "the love of God", God's love to us, or our love of Him? Is the "woe!" in Lk. 6:24-26; 11:42-52 an imprecation ['woe to'] or a lament ['alas!']? Paul even had to write and correct the Thessalonians because they had misunderstood his inspired words about the return of Christ as meaning they should quit their

jobs as the second coming was imminent. My point is that God *could* have chosen another way to communicate with us rather than through language which inevitably is ambiguous. And why are some of the parables capable of so many meanings- e.g. that of the unjust steward? I find it hard to avoid the conclusion that it is the process of our engagement with God's word, our love of it, our integrity in considering it etc., which is therefore more important to God than our grasping the final 'truth' of each clause in a final, Euclidean sense. By saying this I take nothing away from the fact that "the truth" is "in Jesus", that there is a wonderful personal reality of salvation for each of us in Christ, a living personal relationship with Him. My point is simply that God's intention in giving us His word is surely not to relay to us a heap of individual specific truths- for the written word isn't the best way to convey such things to simple, illiterate folk, nor indeed to computer-assisted students of our own times. Rather does He seek us to enter into *relationship* with Him and His Son, and He uses His word and its ambiguities as a way of achieving this. The Lord Jesus used language like this- consider how He uses the word *psuche*, life, in Mk. 8:34-37. We are to lose our life in order to find life... and "what does a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self? What can he give to buy that self back?" (NEB). The ambiguous usage of *psuche* is surely in order to get us thinking about our relationship with Him. And thus the Lord's parables often end with questions which have open-ended, ambiguous answers, through which we reveal and develop our relationship with Jesus- e.g. "What will the owner of the vineyard do?" (Mk. 12:9- kill them? be gracious to them? give them yet another chance? keep them as His people anyway?). I am not saying that correct interpretation of Scripture doesn't matter; rather am I saying that in *some* ways, in some places, in some aspects, interpreting the Lord's words is designed by Him to be open-ended rather than intended to lead us all to identical conclusions.

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### **Notes**

- (1) C.K. Barrett, *Paul* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994) p. 51.
- (2) John Robinson, *Honest To God* (London: SCM, 1963) p. 9.
- (3) Paul Tournier, *The Person Reborn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) p. 102.

## **7-5 Glorifying God In Preaching**

### ***Glorifying The Name***

The overriding desire of the Lord was for the glorification of Yahweh's Name, not proving others wrong. God's Name is His characteristics (Ex. 34:5-7). We glorify that Name when due to us, those characteristics are manifested somehow- maybe through others, or through ourselves. The fruits of the Spirit glorify those characteristics / the Name of Yahweh. When the Lord saw faith, or joy, or repentance, or even the possibility of these things in men, He worked to develop them. He didn't give up because they were also selfish or unloving or not joyful...And so with us, as the petty selfishness and weaknesses so evident in the flesh of our fellows presses upon our consciousness, focus instead on what is good, on what potential is

there, and work on that. Abound in the life of grace, of outgiving when there is no response and no appreciation; and rejoice to live it, and see the honour of being called to live the life of the Saviour in *your* little life. John Thomas rightly observed that God manifestation rather than individual human salvation is the essential aim of the preaching of God's word. The Lord Jesus struggled in Gethsemane between "save *me...*" and "Father, glorify thy name". The glorifying of the Father's Name meant more to him than his personal salvation. Likewise Moses and Paul [in spirit] were prepared to sacrifice their personal salvation for the sake of Yahweh's Name being glorified in the saving of His people (Ex. 32:30-34 cp. Rom. 9:1-3).

And yet the peerless example of the Lord as He prayed in Gethsemane, as we imagine Him moving around Galilee nearly 2000 years ago... can be so remote to us today. He was there, He was as He was, but we are here, and we are as we are. This gap between Him and us can mean that He personally recedes in our minds to the point where He is a distant example, a personification of good, one who was better than us and therefore saved us...but no more. This is a tragedy if we see Him like this. One of our most distinctive doctrines is that the Lord was our representative and not a substitute. I understand this to mean that He personally represented each of us, not only in His death but in His life; for we are saved by His life as it was and as it now is through resurrection (Rom. 5:10). Paul could say that the Son of God "loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20); and you and I and thousands of others can and have said the same. It is one of redemption's finest mysteries (and yes, there are some mysteries still) that Christ died and suffered personally for you, and for you, and for me; and therefore you, and I, and you over there, must live a life of response to Him, based on His very personal sacrifice for us. In baptism we show that we identify ourselves with that dying and rising *for us* which He achieved; and in our lives afterwards, we live this out. We are under the tyranny of words in writing about these things. Whilst we struggle intellectually to understand the depth of the atonement, may I suggest that one practical thing that comes out of the representative nature of the Lord's work and death for each of us is that somehow the personal experiences which we have in daily life, He also had in essence. We are living out His life and living. This is why I commend each of us to a serious, personal study of the Gospel records; for in His life you and I must see something of our own. By its' very nature, this study which I suggest can only be personal. According to tradition, it was obligatory for early Christian converts in some ecclesias to learn the Gospel of Mark by heart; and one can see why.

### ***Placarding Forth Christ Crucified***

There is a major theme in the NT: that we are living the life of Christ, and thereby His life becomes ours. In this sense we have and live the eternal life. "As he is, so are we in this world" (1 Jn. 4:17); we will be persecuted as He was persecuted (Jn. 15:20); we fellowship His sufferings, being made conformable to the image of His death, and thereby will fellowship His glory (1 Pet. 4:13; Phil. 3:10; 2 Cor. 1:7). Paul had this idea ever before him: "It is now my joy to suffer for you; for the sake of Christ's body, the church, I am completing what still remains for Christ to suffer in my own person" (Col. 1:24 REB). When he speaks of "...that I may win Christ....to live is Christ", his idea seems to be of attaining a spirituality even in this life where the life we live is Christ living in us, totally reflected in our actions (Phil. 1:21). We have not yet resisted unto blood in our striving against sin, as the Lord did in Gethsemane (Heb. 12:4 cp. Lk. 22:44); but, the implication is, we ultimately should. We bear about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal body (2 Cor. 6:10)- not just at resurrection, but now. And it is through this that we bear witness to the resurrected Jesus. He can be seen as alive because He lives in

us. Paul could tell the Galatians that in him they had seen Jesus Christ placarded forth, crucified before their own eyes (3:1). Paul knew that when people looked at his life, they saw something of the crucifixion of the Lord. The Galatians therefore accepted him " even as Christ Jesus" (Gal. 4:14). He could describe his own preaching as "this Jesus, whom I preach unto you..." (Acts 17:3), as if Jesus was right there before their eyes, witnessed through Paul. As the Lord was Paul's representative, so Paul was Christ's. The idea of representation works both ways: we see in the Gospel records how the Lord experienced some things which only we have; and we show aspects of His character to the world which nobody else can manifest.

If we can rise up to all this, placarding forth the Lord's crucifixion sufferings in our lives, then there will be a power and credibility to our preaching which will be hard to resist. It was before the eyes of the Galatians that they saw in Paul, Jesus Christ crucified (Gal. 3:1). But the only other reference to the eyes of the Galatians is in Gal. 4:15- where we read that they had been so transfixed by Paul's preaching that they had been ready to pluck out their eyes. And where's the only other reference to plucking out eyes? It's in the Lord's teaching, where He says that if our eye offends us, we should pluck it out [Mt. 5:29- same Greek words used]. The connection is surely this: Paul's personal reflection of the crucified Jesus was so powerful, so compellingly real and credible, that it motivated his hearers to rise up to the spirit of the very hardest demands of the moral teaching of that same Jesus. Insofar as we genuinely live out the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, our preaching of His radical moral demands will likewise be heeded. The crucified Christ that Paul placarded before their eyes was " the truth" (Gal. 3:1; 4:14-16); and the integrity and reality of that truth was confirmed by the congruence between the example of Paul, and the reality of the crucified Jesus whom he manifested to them. In Paul's body language, in his character, in his response to problems and frustrations great and small, in the way he coped with physical weakness, his audience somehow saw the crucified Christ. In the same letter, Paul reminds the Galatians how they had initially seen him preaching to them in a weak bodily state, and had seen Christ in him then (Gal. 4:13,14). He says in Gal. 3:1 that they saw Christ crucified in him. Perhaps the way Paul handled a sickness or bodily weakness which he then had, somehow reflected to his audience the spirit of Christ crucified.

The effort we should consciously make to allow the life of Christ to be lived in us, is a natural outflow of the basic doctrine: that Christ was our representative. If we love Him and the record of His life, we will see in Him and His living the essence of our own: the same betrayal, barriers with His family and all close relationships, the pouring out of the love of God to a world and people who misunderstood, who thought they understood but didn't, who were blind, who thought they saw, who only broke from the petty materialism of their lives to listen to Him because they thought they might get some personal benefit...all the time, He poured out His grace and the Father's love. And He kept on to the final unspeakable, unwriteable, unenterable agony at the end. And even there, we sense He was not gritting His teeth trying to be patient, trying not to sin...He was pulsating with a love for men, a care for Pilate (comforting him that another had a greater sin); concern for the women who wept crocodile tears, that they might really repent; praying for forgiveness for those who knew not [i.e., fully] what they did; preaching to the thieves in whispers, each word taking an agony of pain, heaving Himself up on the nails to get the air to speak it... To love one's neighbour as oneself is to fulfil the law (Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:10); and yet the Lord's death was the supreme fulfilment of it (Mt. 5:18; Col. 2:14). Here was the definition of love for one's neighbour. Not a passing politeness and occasional seasonal gift, whilst secretly and essentially living the life of self-love and self-care; but the love and the death of the cross, for His neighbours as for Himself; laying down His life "for himself that it might be for us" in the words of Bro.

Roberts. In Him, in His time of dying, we see the definition of love, the fulfilment of the justice and unassuming kindness and thought for others which was taught in the Mosaic Law. And we through bearing one another's burdens, through bearing with their moral and intellectual and spiritual failures, must likewise fulfil the law, in a voluntary laying down of our lives for each other (Gal. 6:2). And in this, as with the Lord, will be our personal salvation.

## 8. The Hopefulness Of The Preacher

When David wrote that "Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee" (Ps. 51:13), he was paralleling his teaching with others' conversion- in a way that suggests he was so confident that his preaching would certainly bring forth conversion. Yet distribution of leaflets, countless conversations, piles of correspondence course students...all these preaching activities are inevitably repetitious, and so few respond that we can lose our basic *love* for our fellow man, and lose the hopeful spirit which pervades throughout the self-revelation of our Heavenly Father. Israel never really wholeheartedly committed themselves to Yahweh, and yet 2 Chron. 20:33 positively and hopefully says: "As yet the people had not prepared their hearts unto the God of their fathers". They never did. Especially in the preaching of the word of salvation to those who they knew wouldn't respond, the Father and Son show their hopeful spirit. Having explained "how hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom", the Lord went on to comment: "With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible" (Mk. 10:25,27). It is impossible for a rich man to be saved, He seems to be saying. And as we seek to convert the rich and self-satisfied in the societies in which we live, this does indeed seem the case. But although on one hand it *is* an impossibility, yet not with God: for He desires to seek and save the rich too. And indeed He does, achieving what with men is impossible. And the Father seeks to impress His positive attitude upon us. The disciples were so slow to perceive. And yet the Lord could (perhaps gently and smilingly) tell them: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see" (Mt. 13:16). Yet He later reprimanded them for being so slow of heart to perceive... Surely He was speaking of the potential which He recognized in them; a potential which He rejoiced to see. And this is why we are to patiently correct and instruct those who contradict themselves, "in the hope that" God will grant them repentance "unto the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25 RV with NIV).

Elijah, as many an isolated preacher, felt that he alone was faithful. Yet he was reminded that Yahweh had left Himself 7,000 that had not bowed the knee to Baal. It is easy to assume that this means that those 7,000 were out there in Israel but unknown to Elijah. However it is possible to read the Hebrew text as meaning 'I have marked off 7,000 potentially, now Elijah, stop moaning, go out there and find them and convert them'. This would be why Elijah prayed that the people would see that God had already turned their heart back (1 Kings 18:37)- He had potentially enabled their conversion. Something similar may be hinted at in Jn. 1:7, where we read that all of Israel could have believed due to the work of John. It was potentially possible. The events recorded in Gen. 24 concerning a wife being sought for Isaac are all capable of symbolic interpretation; the steward [= the ministry of the preacher] is sent to seek a wife [= the bride of Christ, the ecclesia] for Isaac [cp. Jesus], and told not to bring Isaac back- i.e., they *had* to succeed in their search, and they would. Yet there was the recognition that she *may not* be found (Gen. 24:41 RV "if they give her not..."); and yet the response to the question 'Peradventure the woman will not follow me?' was that the Lord would prosper the way "and thou *shalt* take a wife for my son" (:40). This wasn't blind optimism. The possibility of failure was entertained. But there was a positivism that

Yahweh's intention would be carried out. The Lord Himself *marvelled* at the unbelief of men (Mk. 6:6), despite knowing what was in man. Surely He could only have genuinely felt such marvel because He began with such an essentially positive spirit.

### ***Jesus And The Jews***

God is in search of man, and so is His Son. We surely all at times get depressed, feeling we are nothing and nobody, just used rather than needed. But just as we have our need to be needed, so does God, seeing we are made in His image and likeness. We see it all worked out visually when the Lord Jesus was starving hungry (Gk.), and saw a fig tree far away. He walked towards it, fixing His mind upon the tree. It wasn't the time for figs, but the tree had leaves, and He was so hungry, He'd have been prepared to eat the most immature, unripe figs (Mk. 11:12,13). This is an acted parable, of His search for man, for fruit upon us. The same imagery of a fig tree bearing fruit is used by the Lord in Lk. 13:6 to speak of His hope of spiritual fruit from Israel. But when the Lord finally arrived at the leafy fig tree, He found no fruit at all, and so He cursed it, and it withered. The same word is used about the withering of those rejected at the last day by the Lord Jesus- they will be withered, and then gathered up and burnt (Jn. 15:6). So as the Lord Jesus strode the long way towards the fig tree, focused upon it with all the focus and hope of a hungry man, so eager and hopeful to find fruit... so He is striding towards us with the same hope in us, of finding at least something, however immature, however unripe. But at least something.

The good shepherd searches for the sheep until He finds it. John 10 is full of reference to Ezekiel 34, which describes God's people as perishing on the mountains, eaten by wolves. But the Lord Jesus set Himself to do that which was impossible- to search *until He found*, even though He knew that some were already lost. Our attitude to those lost from the ecclesia and to those yet out in the world must be similar. In studying the attitude of the Lord towards the Jews there lies endless inspiration for a thoroughly hopeful spirit in our preaching:

- The Lord knew there would not be repentance by Israel. But He went to the fig tree seeking fruit, even though it wasn't the time for fruit (Mk. 11:13). He hoped against hope that there would be at least something, even though all of OT prophecy and precedent was dead against it.
- He saw the crowds who wanted only loaves and fishes as a great harvest (Mt. 9:37). He saw the potential... Note how the phrase "the harvest is *plenteous*" uses the word usually translated "great" in describing the "great multitudes" that flocked to the Lord (Mt. 4:25; 8:1,16,18; 12:15; 13:2; 14:14; 15:30; 19:2; 20:29) . Those crowds were seen by Him as a harvest.
- He asked His men whether they were really able to drink of His cup, referring to the crucifixion. 'Yes!' they immediately replied. If we were Jesus, we would likely have indignantly replied: 'Oh no you won't! You'll run away!'. Considering the pain of His cross, both physically and mentally, the sheer trauma of it all, it was an essay in gracious positivism that the Lord replied: 'OK, you will share my cross...'. It is so gracious of Him to be willing to consider our light afflictions as a genuine participation in His cross, which thereby warrants our resurrection with Him.

- “Are you also *yet* without understanding?” (Mt. 15:16), the Lord asked the disciples; as if to say that He was surprised the disciples still hadn’t come to the understanding which He hoped the Pharisees soon would.

- He saw Simon the proud Pharisee as having been forgiven a little, and as loving Him a little (Lk. 7:44-48). This isn’t how we would have seen that man. This is surely something more than generosity of spirit, even though the Lord certainly had this. His attitude reflects a hopefulness for Simon, an earnest desire for his salvation that only saw and imagined the best.

- He cured the man sick of a palsy that the onlooking, cynical Scribes *might know* that He had power to forgive sins (Mk. 2:10). He didn’t *only* reward the faith of the man’s friends; His motive for the miracle was to seek to teach those Scribes. Our tendency surely would have been to ignore them, to be angry that in the face of grace they could be so legalistic and petty and so far, far from God...and get on and heal the sick man who believed. But the Lord’s picture of human salvation was far wider and more inclusive and more hopeful than that.

- In the parable of Lk. 13:8,9, the Lord portrays Himself as even reasoning with God, who had decreed the Jewish tree be cut down in the third year of His ministry. He as it were persuades God to allow His efforts to continue for another six months, in desperate hope against hope that there would be some fruit of repentance. We, to a man and to a woman, would have given up on Israel, and would have somehow been gratified that the Father wanted to treat them like this. I would have turned to the Gentiles a long time before the Lord and Paul did. And consider too how Peter’s speech of Acts 2 was made in response to a mocker’s comment that the speaking in tongues was a result of alcohol abuse (Acts 2:13,14). We would likely have told those men not to be so blasphemous, or just walked away from them. But Peter responds to them with a speech so powerful that men turned round and repented and were baptized on the spot.

- In those last six months, the Scribes and Pharisees repeatedly tried to trick the Lord. But He took the time to answer their questions, seeking to lead them to understanding and repentance- and His denunciations of them were probably softly and imploringly spoken, still seeking for the inevitability of future judgment to lead them to repentance. As the Son of God, walking freely in His Father’s house, Jesus didn’t have to pay the temple tax (Mt. 17:26,27). He could have insisted that He didn’t need to pay it, He could have stood up for what was right and true. But doing this can often be selfish, a defence of self rather than a seeking for the Father’s glory. And so He told Peter that “lest we should offend them”, He would pay it. He was so hopeful for their salvation one day that He was worried about offending these wretched men, who weren’t fit to breathe the same air that He did. We would have given up with them; but He worried about offending what potential faith they might have. Even at the end of His ministry, He still sought to convert them. He reasoned with them, using carefully prepared Old Testament allusions in the hope they would understand them, when we would almost certainly either have given up, or would just be gritting our teeth, trying to be patient with them because we didn’t want to sin...but He was full of a genuine, unpretended desire for their salvation. And earlier in His ministry, He had told the cured leper to tell no other man but go and offer for his cleansing, in order to make a witness to the priests. All three synoptics record this, as if it made a special impression on everyone (Mt. 8:4; Mk. 1:44; Lk. 5:14). It could be that the Lord is using an idiom when He told the leper to tell nobody: ‘Go and make a witness *first and foremost* to the priests as opposed to anybody else’. Such was His zeal for their salvation. And the fact that “a great company of

the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7) shows how this apparently hope-against-hope desire of the Lord for the conversion of His enemies somehow came true.

- After Jesus had commanded the disciples to sail to the other side of the lake, a scribe came to Him. By talking to this man, who likely was just asking the Lord trick questions and trying to catch Him out, the Lord delayed their departure; with the result that they nearly lost their lives in the storm that came (Mt. 8:18-23). The disciples must have many times during that storm reflected with bitter annoyance how the Lord has gotten them in to this problem all because He had been wasting time with that Scribe. But the Lord had such a hopefulness and a spirit of passionate concern for the salvation of the individual, however arrogant and conceited they seemed to be, that He would risk danger in order to spend time with such a person. I find this an amazing example, surrounded as we are by a majority of people who appear like that Scribe.

- The Lord said that the Jews were evil, and therefore good things could not come from them (Mt. 12:34; 7:17-20). And yet He also said, presumably with the same audience in mind, that although they were evil, they potentially knew how to give good things, e.g. to their children; and therefore how much could God give them good things if they repented (Mt. 7:11).

- The way the Lord didn't just ignore the Jewish leaders, as we might ignore trouble makers at a public meeting or correspondence course students who ask endless questions...this is really quite something. He grieved for the hardness of their hearts (Mk. 3:5), and finally broke down and wept over Jerusalem, in an agony of soul that they would not respond. The apparently foolish catch questions of Mk. 3:21-29 are answered in some depth by the Lord, and He concludes with pointing out that they are putting themselves "*in danger* of eternal damnation" (although, mark, not yet condemned). One senses the urgency with which He put it to them.

- The Lord sort to inculcate in His followers His same positive spirit. We must love our enemies "and lend [in whatever way] never despairing" (Lk. 6:35 RV). To never give up with people, for all the losses, the casualties, the hurt...never despairing of humanity. This was and is the spirit of Jesus.

And to some extent, the Lord's hopefulness for Israel paid off. Many of the Scribes were later obedient to the Faith of Christ. In Jn. 12:39-42 we find John quoting the words of Isaiah about how Israel would not believe the message of Jesus: "Therefore they could not believe, because Isaiah said again, He hath blinded their eyes...*nevertheless* even of the rulers many believed on him" (RV). "*Nevertheless*" shows the wonder of it all; despite clear prophecy that they would not believe, some of them did. The Lord's hopefulness paid off. And so can ours. The Father Himself had this same spirit of hopefulness for Israel. "Surely they will reverence my Son" is the thought imputed to Almighty God in the parable, as He sends His only Son to seek for spiritual response in Israel (Mk. 12:6). The parable frames God as almost naive in believing that although Israel had killed the prophets, they would reverence the Word made flesh, and the speaking of God to them in Him. Yet of course God knew what would happen; but in order to express the extraordinary, unenterable extent of His hopefulness, He is framed in this way. Just as the Father thought that His people "surely" would reverence His Son, so He was 'certain' that if His people went to Babylon in captivity, "surely then shalt thou be ashamed... for all thy wickedness" (Jer. 22:22). But the reality was that they grew to like the soft life of Babylon and refused to obey the command to return to God's land. Such was and is the hopefulness of God.

The Father had the same attitude to Israel in Old Testament times: “I thought that after she had done all this, she would return to me, but she did not” (Jer. 3:7 NIV). The Lord Jesus reflected the Father’s positive spirit in the way He framed the parable of the prodigal son to feature the Heavenly Father as running out to meet the returning son, falling on his neck and kissing him...in *exactly* the language of Gen. 33:4 about Esau doing this to Jacob. The connection can’t be denied; but what was the Lord’s point? Surely He was willing to see something positive in the otherwise fleshly Esau at that time, He as it were took a snapshot of Esau at that moment...and applied it to God Himself, in His extravagant grace towards an unworthy Jacob. This was how positive minded the Lord was in His reading of even the darkest characters.

The Lord spoke of the spiritual harvest in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine as “plenteous” (Mt. 9:37). He uses the very same word translated “great” in the very frequent descriptions of the “great multitudes” of fascinated people who thronged Him (Mt. 12:15; 13:2; 14:14; 15:30; 19:2; 20:29). We would likely have been cynical of them and the depth of their interest. But if the Lord had had enough and strong enough [the Greek implies] labourers, those crowds would have been harvested as converts. Note too that the harvest is elsewhere the end of the world, and the workers who reap it are the Angels (Mt. 13:39). But in Mt. 9:37 and Jn. 4:35, the Lord says that the harvest was already ripe, and that the reapers are in fact us. Surely the point is that if we go out into this world with His hopefulness, aiming to reap in true converts, then we will be working with the Angels in this endeavour; and the point of conversion is in essence their entry into the things of the Kingdom. We too need to see the crowds of vaguely interested folks we deal with as a potential harvest for the Lord, their gathering into the garner dependent solely upon our working together with the Angels. And the Lord even saw the unconverted and the unreached as His potential sheep. He criticizes the “hireling” who has “no concern for the sheep” (Jn. 10:13) with the same expression as is used in Jn. 12:6 to describe how Judas was “not concerned for the poor”. He parallels “the sheep” with the “poor” whom He and His group sought to help materially as best they could; He saw those crowds, whom we would likely have dismissed as just of the “loaves and fishes” mentality, as potential sheep.

### ***Paul***

The Lord Jesus told Paul about the Jews: “...get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me” (Acts 22:18). And yet Paul always appealed first of all to the Jews, despite his emotional turning unto the Gentiles at one stage. Even by Acts 28:17, he started preaching “to those that were of the Jews first” (RVmg.). The principle of “to the Jews first” was paramount and universal in the thinking of Paul. And despite the Holy Spirit repeatedly warning him not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22,23; 21:11), he went there. He hoped against hope that even in the light of the foreknowledge that Israel would reject the Gospel, somehow they might change.

Paul appropriates the words of Hab. 1:5 LXX to his work of preaching: “I *work a work* in your days, which ye will in no wise believe though *a man* declare it unto you”. And so when we read of the *men* Barnabas and Saul being sent out on the *work* of the first missionary journey, we are to see an allusion back to Heb. 1:5 (Acts 13:2; 14:26). And yet that passage went on to say that the work would not be believed. Yet hoping against hope, they embarked on the missionary journey. Cyprus didn’t respond, initially- as they had expected. But soon their positive spirit was rewarded, and converts were made, against all odds.

## *The Prophets*

Likewise God told Ezekiel that Israel would not hear his preaching (Ez. 3:7); and yet Ezekiel repeatedly prefaced his preaching addresses with an appeal to *please hear* God's word (Ez. 6:3; 13:2; 18:25; 20:47; 34:7; 36:1,4). He was hoping against hope; his preaching work was asking him to attempt the impossible. To make a nation hear who would not hear. Jeremiah likewise was told that Israel wouldn't hear him (Jer. 7:27), but still he pleaded with them to hear (Jer. 9:20; 10:1; 11:6; 16:12; 17:24; 38:15); God's hope was that perhaps they would hearken (26:3) although He had foretold they wouldn't. Jeremiah was told not to pray for Israel (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11) and yet he did (Jer. 14:20; 42:2,4). And in similar vein, knowing the destruction that would come on all except Noah, God waited in the hope that more would be saved. He as it were hoped against His own foreknowledge that more would be saved (1 Pet. 3:20). Hosea clearly knew that both Israel and Judah would fall together in condemnation for the same sins (Hos. 5:5; 6:4,10,11; 12:1,2); and yet Hosea appeals to Judah to *not sin* as Israel had so that they would avoid that same condemnation (Hos. 4:15; 11:12). The Lord Jesus saw the fields of Israel as white to the harvest, even though it was clear enough from Is. 53:1 and many other types that Messiah was to be rejected by Israel and crucified by them. The hopefulness of God through His prophets was no doubt partly because He perceived the power of the word they were preaching; and the more we perceive that, the higher will be our hopefulness, knowing that we do have as it were the real, genuine product which nobody else has on offer. There's an element of unreality in the parable of the mustard seed which highlights this point. A man sowed *one* grain of mustard seed, representing the word of the Kingdom (Mt. 13:31). He was so certain that it would germinate and grow into a tree. Typically one sows a number of seeds in the hope that one or two will "take". But the Lord Jesus was totally certain as to the power and ultimate success of the seed of the Gospel which He planted.

### **8-1 A Positive Spirit In Preaching**

Our task of witness may likewise seem hopeless. But we are to be prepared ("be instant") to preach "in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). "Out of season" translates a Greek word only elsewhere rendered 'lacking opportunity' (Phil. 4:10). Whether there is apparent opportunity or not, we must still witness- not just wait until someone asks us if we are religious. This is a common fallacy we all fall into at times. Several times the Lord invites us to "go" and preach- we are all to feel a spirit of outgoing witness, rather than the defensive, tell-them-if-they-ask attitude which has dominated so many of us for so long. We need the same spirit of heroism in our witness which Jeremiah and Ezekiel had, as they reflected the indomitable Spirit of God in this matter of human salvation. Our unbelieving families, our workmates, our neighbours, seem to be stony ground to the point that it just isn't worth bothering. But we need a positive spirit.

People *are* interested. It seems to me that world-wide, there are more people interested today than there were ten years ago. There *is* interest in our message! Bill Hybels claims from surveys that "about 25% of the adults in the US would go to church if a friend would just invite them"<sup>(1)</sup>. And moreover, I never cease to be amazed that those I think would never be interested *are* in fact interested, deep below the irreligious surface. Indeed, many of those who are boldest in proclaiming their disinterest are those who are the most haunted by their spiritual need; their inner struggle against themselves becomes reflected in an aggressive proclamation of their mockery of religious people and appeals. There is a theme in the New Testament that major response to preaching is often unexpected. The disciples were told to

cast the net on the other side, when they were convinced there would be no response. Philip was told to go onto a road in the heat of the day- when nobody was travelling (Acts 8:26). His willingness to go, to do at least something, resulted in an amazing response. This is exactly why predicting response to preaching is well nigh impossible. It's why the geographical spread of the Gospel is so hard to explain when it is humanly analyzed.

The Lord Himself was of the persuasion that people are more interested than His brethren may think. "You say 'Four months from sowing to harvest: the time is not yet'... [But I say that] the fields are already white for reaping. Already the reaper is taking his pay" (Jn. 4:35). It seems that the disciples thought there had to be a gap between sowing and reaping, whereas the Lord is saying that people were more ready for harvest than His preachers thought. And it can be the same with us- our insistence that there has to be a respectable gap between sowing the Gospel and reaping the harvest isn't a concept upheld by the Lord. There's more of a harvest out there than we think. And perhaps the relatively poor response to the preaching of Jesus in AD30-33 was because His disciples didn't do their part?

It's so easy to have a negative spirit. Are people sincere? Do they just get baptized in the hope of material help? Can we cope with so many converts? Won't many of them leave? What does this person really believe about doctrine? Can you believe them? Isn't this or that the thin end of the wedge? This isn't the spirit of the Lord's parable about the drag net fishermen (note, not fishing with a line for a special, prize catch- but concentrating on saving as many as possible, of whatever quality, Mt. 13:47). But there are other questions, more personal. Can we afford it? Can I, should I, allow my worldly advantages to slip just so I can do this or that for the Lord's cause? Can I afford to write so many letters? Do I have time to go to that Bible School? What about giving more time to revising for my exams rather than doing the readings? Our knowledge of the positive Christ means that we don't think like that. One of the many slanderous allegations against Paul was that he was indecisive and negative spirited. His response was that this was not so, for the gospel and Lord whom he preached were so essentially positive, that he too had become likewise through his experience of them: "...our word toward you was not yea and nay. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us...was not yea and nay, but in him was yea. For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (2 Cor 1:18-20). And in that knowledge, let us unashamedly show forth a positive spirit about how God sees us ourselves, about our brethren, and in our witness to the world.

## All Can Be Saved

One obvious encouragement to be hopeful in our witness is the Biblical implication that all men and women, potentially, have the possibility of responding to the Gospel. It was so in the first century- John the Baptist had the *potential* to convert all Israel, for He came "that all men through him might believe" (Jn. 1:7), so that Christ "should be made manifest to (all) Israel" (Jn. 1:31). The entire nation *could* have converted; but they didn't. Saul of Tarsus must've seemed the most unlikely of men to convert to Christ. But he later refers to how God chose "to reveal his son in me" (Gal. 1:16). The Greek word *apokalupto* means literally 'to take the cover off'. The implication is that Christ is passively within each person, but has to be revealed in them, through response to the Gospel. The cover can be taken off every single man or women with whom we come into contact! The Galatians passage could equally mean that Paul was called as an apostle to 'take the cover off' Christ to others; and yet Paul felt his calling was to all people on earth, to the ends of the world (Acts 13:47)- to every single person of all the Gentile nations (Rom. 15:11; 2 Tim. 4:17). "The residue of men", every single

non-Jew, was to be invited to the Kingdom (Acts 15:17). Every single person whom we can ‘find’- and the Greek word *heurisko* is elsewhere translated ‘see, perceive’- should be invited by us to the wedding feast (Mt. 22:9). “As many as” [s.w. “all”] we can see or possibly imagine should be invited- so they must surely all be capable of responding. That’s the whole point of our being sent to call them.

Another indication that all men who hear the Gospel have the potential to respond to it is perhaps seen in the parable of the prodigal son. His ‘coming home’ to the Father is just that- a coming home, a being received back, to all we were created to be from the very beginning. And perhaps this explains the odd reference to how ultimately, Egypt shall "return unto the Lord" (Is. 19:22). For Egypt were never 'with' the Lord. But in prospect, Egypt along with all humanity were redeemed, and they have to be brought by us to Him in actuality. And so it seems to me that underneath, people *are* interested in salvation, even desperately interested. For they were created for this 'return to God'. Psychologists confirm that the problem of our destiny, of our ultimate future, either consciously or unconsciously preoccupies the minds of most people. Now put this together with the fact that all such people can potentially be saved, and that in the Gospel we have the power of God unto that salvation... ! Doesn’t that just motivate us to get out there and witness to people about it, seeing through their surface level disinterest? And it also underlines for us the tragedy of mass abortions, or multiple thousands slain by earthquakes and tsunamis... because each of those people was a unique person with the potential of salvation.

### **God's Desire For Human Repentance**

God's hopefulness is reflected in the way that He sought the repentance of men like Pharaoh and Saul even at the close of their poorly lived lives; or the Lord's final appeal to Judas at the last supper ["what you do, do quickly" I take to be an invitation to repentance, along with passing Judas the favoured morsel from the supper]. The plagues upon Pharaoh were to bring him to repentance, although his lack of response to them led him to only harden his heart. Consider how carefully they were planned- these were not random acts of wrath from an offended Deity. They are in three cycles, and each cycle begins in the same way- the first plague of each cycle has Moses standing before Pharaoh in the morning, and warning him; the second plague of each cycle has Moses simply coming to Pharaoh and warning him; and the third plague in each cycle has no warning. Thus:

First cycle	Second Cycle	Third Cycle	Prelude
1. Blood	4. Flies	7. Hail	Warning: Moses stands before Pharaoh in the morning
2. Frogs	5. Pest	8. Locusts	Warning: Moses comes before Pharaoh
3. Gnats	6. Boils	9. Darkness	No warning

My simple point is that a huge amount of thought went into the plagues, and the careful planning behind them was surely intended to appeal to Pharaoh and convict him that a God far mightier than himself or his deities was at work in his life.

The patience or *makrothumia* which God has is intended to be had by us too (2 Pet. 3:9,15; Rom. 2:4; Eph. 4:2). And especially is the preacher encouraged to have this *makrothumia* (2 Tim. 4:2; 3:10). God waits / is patient for repentance, amazingly so... and we are to have it in this same way too.

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### **Notes**

(1) Bill Hybels, *Becoming A Contagious Christian* (Zondervan, 1996) p. 129.

## **9. Christians Unlimited**

### **9-1 Christians Unlimited**

I recall how impressed I was when I first heard the phrase ‘Divine ecology’. The idea is that all aspects of God’s purpose somehow work together for good, even if in the short term it seems there is something not in order or out of balance in the way God is working. If we over analyse one aspect of God’s purpose or workings with men, we can get an unbalanced picture; God may seem, e.g., too soft, or too hard. We need to see the different parts of His purpose in the wider picture and how they all work together to achieve the complete fulfilment of His purpose in us. Because we are too finite to comprehend the whole complex system, there are some aspects of His ways which appear to us unbalanced, but ultimately, this is not the case. I say all this because I want to focus on just one aspect of God’s dealings with us: the way in which He gives us unlimited freewill to serve Him.

We need to understand this within the context of predestination; the sovereign will of God at work to achieve His will without the input of any man. We learn, I suggest, the fact that many things we do which seem to advance God’s purpose, e.g. preaching and prayer, are primarily for our benefit, rather than being absolutely essential for the fulfilment of God’s will. Consider, in a preaching context, how the faithful overcome by the blood of the lamb- by what is done for them- and also by the word of their preaching, as if the act of preaching and witnessing against a hostile persecuting system was what helped maintain their faith (Rev. 12:11). And because of this, Paul encouraged Timothy to take heed “to thy teaching...for in doing this [i.e. preaching] thou shalt save both *thyself*, and them that hear thee” (1 Tim. 4:16 RV). Having true doctrine is related to “speaking the truth”, “dealing truly” (Eph. 4:13-15 RVmg.) with each other- as if the sensitive, heartfelt preaching of truth should result in our own truthfulness. We continue professing / confessing our hope “that it waver not” (Heb. 10:23 RV). It doesn’t waver for us, exactly because we preach it.

Paul Tournier in *The Meaning Of Persons* perceptively comments: “We become fully conscious only of what we are able to express to someone else. We may already have had a certain intuition about it, but it must remain vague so long as it is unformulated” <sup>(1)</sup>. This is why anyone involved in preaching, public speaking, writing or personal explanation of the Gospel to someone else will know that *they* have gained so much from having to state in so many words what they already ‘know’. And in the course of making the expression, our own understanding is deepened, our personal consciousness of what we believe is strengthened, and thereby our potential for a real faith is enhanced. Tournier’s observation is validated by

considering the record of the healed blind man in Jn. 9. Initially he says that he doesn't know whether or not Jesus is a sinner, all he knows is that Jesus healed him. But the Jews force him to testify further, and in the course of his witness, the man explains to them that God doesn't hear sinners, and so for Jesus to have asked God for his healing and been heard...surely proved that Jesus wasn't a sinner. He was sinless. The man was as it were thinking out loud, coming to conclusions himself, as he made his bold witness (Jn. 9:31,33).

The parable of the sower leaves us begging the question: 'So how can we be good ground?'. Mark's record goes straight on to record that the Lord right then said that a candle is lit so as to publicly give light and not to be hidden. He is speaking of how our conversion is in order to witness to others. But He says this in the context of being good ground. To respond to the word ourselves, our light must be spreading to all. The only way for the candle of our faith to burn is for it to be out in the open air. Hidden under the bucket of embarrassment or shyness or an inconsistent life, it will go out. We will lose our faith if we don't in some sense witness to it. Witnessing is in that sense for our benefit. When the disciples ask how ever they can accomplish the standards which the Lord set them, He replied by saying that a city set on a hill cannot be hid (Mt. 5:14). He meant that the open exhibition of the Truth by us will help us in the life of personal obedience to Him.

### **Total Freedom**

This said, let me outline the thesis: God can do anything, He is omnipotent. But He chooses to limit His omnipotence in order to allow man total freewill. Therefore effectively, how far God will fulfil His purpose depends upon how far we are obedient to Him. Thus Israel limited the Holy One of Israel (Ps. 78:41). Only at the return of the Lord Jesus will God 'take to Himself His great power' (Rev. 11:17)- which language of itself suggests that God has chosen to limit His omnipotence for the moment. Of course, God can act quite independently of us; He has the sovereign right and ability to act as He likes, and achieve His objectives how He likes. But it seems that God chooses to limit His ability to do this. We have complete freewill, and God works with us individually in proportion as we work with Him. We have genuine choice, not only as to whether to serve God, but *how* and on what level and to what extent we serve Him, within the salvation we experience in Christ. Indeed, the world has no freedom; men are slaves to sin, mastered by their own pride and lies. In Christ, we have experienced the gift of freedom (Rom. 5:15-18); "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is free" (2 Cor. 3:17). The extent of our liberty is such that we must use it carefully lest we offend others (1 Cor. 8:8- e.g. the kind of thing we spend our money on, how far we indulge in 'relaxation'...). This "liberty" in which the NT so frequently exults (Lk. 4:18; 1 Cor. 10:29; Gal. 2:4; 5:13; James 1:25; 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:16) will be fully revealed in the freedom of the Kingdom: "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). As it will be then, so now: we will not be free to do what we like morally, but within the context of God's covenant, we are free, totally and utterly free, in our service of Him. God doesn't see us as robots serving their maker; He sees us as His partners, His sons, His friends, even the willing, freely persuaded bride of His Son <sup>(2)</sup>. But as the Master Chess player He builds our limitations into His total game plan. For example, God uses our weaknesses and experience of moral failure for the furtherance of His purpose. Thus a man's marriage out of the Faith is sometimes used to bring a woman *to* the Faith (not that this justifies it). Somehow God is never beaten; man can do nothing against the Truth, only for it (2 Cor. 13:8). He wasn't beaten when Moses failed to sanctify Him; He sanctified Himself through His judgment of that failure: "Ye believed me not, *to sanctify me* in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them. This is the water

of Meribah; because the children of Israel strove with the LORD, and *he was sanctified* in them" (Num. 20:12,13). Somehow God's word never returns unto Him void, somehow the lost sheep is always found. These are not just expressions of the essential hopefulness of the Father and Son (although this in itself is something to be truly inspired by); these are statements which reflect the way in which within God's scheme of working, everything works out to His glory.

The final judgment will be of our works, not because works justify us, but because our use of the freedom we have had and exercised in our lives is the basis of the future reward we will be given. Salvation itself is not on the basis of our works (Rom. 11:6; Gal. 2:16; Tit. 3:5); indeed, the *free gift* of salvation by pure grace is contrasted with the *wages* paid by sin (Rom. 4:4; 6:23). And yet at the judgment, the preacher receives *wages* for what he did (Jn. 4:36), the labourers receive *hire* (s.w. wages) for their work in the vineyard (Mt. 20:8; 1 Cor. 3:8). There is a *reward* (s.w. wages) for those who rise to the level of loving the totally unresponsive (Mt. 5:46), or preaching in situations quite against their natural inclination (1 Cor. 9:18). *Salvation* itself isn't given on this basis of works; but the nature of our eternal existence in the Kingdom will be a reflection of our use of the gift of freedom in this life. In that sense the judgment will be of our works.

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### **Notes**

(1) Paul Tournier, *The Meaning Of Persons* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) p. 22.

(2) This is the thesis of Karl Barth, *The Gift Of Freedom* (John Knox Press, 1960) pp. 74-79.

### **9-2 Limiting God**

The fact that God so loves us is itself a limitation to Him. Because in any relationship, one person usually loves more than the other. And the one who loves the most- which is unquestionably God- has the least power. This is why He, the more powerful in physical terms, changes His mind to accommodate us. But the Almighty also allows His infinite power to become limited by our degrees of spirituality. We are kept "by the power of God through faith..." (1 Pet. 1:5); His power in practice is in some sense paralleled with and in that sense controlled by our faith. His word is sent forth and *will accomplish* its purpose, Isaiah says; and yet we can make "the word of God of none effect" (Mt 15:6) by our traditions or our lack of preaching it. The word / Gospel will inevitably have a result, and yet it is also limited by the attitudes of men. Take another example: the widow woman was told to borrow pots in which to place the oil which would be miraculously provided. The extent of the miracle was limited by the number and size of the pots she borrowed in faith. Or take 2 Kings 8:10: "Thou mayest certainly recover: howbeit the Lord hath shewed me that he shall surely die". Ben-Hadad *could* recover, it was possible in prospect, but God knew he would not fulfil certain preconditions, and therefore he would not. Abraham told his servant that God would send His Angel before him, so that his mission to find a suitable wife for Isaac would succeed: "He shall send his Angel before thee, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence. And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee..." (Gen. 24:7,8). The Angel prepared in prospect for the success of the mission; but it still depended upon the woman's freewill. The whole incident in Genesis 24 can be read as typical of the search, through the preaching of the Gospel, for the bride of Christ. And consider how the men of Meroz "came not to the help of the Lord" (Jud. 5:23). Such huge potentials are planned in prospect for us- e.g. all the

details of Ezekiel's temple could have come true at the restoration. But Israel would not. The ministry of John the Baptist could have made Messiah "manifest to all Israel", through his witness it was intended that "all men through [John] might believe [in Christ]" (Jn. 1:7,31). But they chose not to. We need to remember in our preaching that success is potentially possible; God is working through us to give those we intersect with the chance of a real salvation. Their rejection shouldn't be so discouraging the more we perceive that we on God's side in all this, He is working through us to try to appeal to them. And appreciating this will give a far greater intensity and urgency of appeal to our preaching. In Jer. 11:4,5 God speaks of how obedience is required in order for Him to fulfil the promises to us which He so wishes to fulfil: "Be my people... and this will allow me to carry out the oath that I swore to your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as I have in fact done". We see here how God allows Himself to be limited by us- we can 'allow Him' to carry out His purposes, or not. And yet in this example we see His grace, in the words "As I have in fact done". For Israel weren't obedient to the covenant- and yet He still gave them the promised land. His grace shines through, breaking even His own conditions.

In a sense God requires not help from man; and yet in another sense He has delegated His work to us, and limits His achievements according to what we are willing to do. C.S. Lewis in *The World's Last Night* observes: "He seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye. Creation seems to be delegation through and through. I suppose this is because He is a giver" <sup>(3)</sup>. As any employer soon learns, delegation is a risk. We have been "entrusted with the Gospel" (Tit. 1:3 RV); and therefore the world God so wants to love, the world God is appealing to, may never see Him; for He makes His appeal through us, as Paul told the Corinthians. Those who did God's work in the Old Testament temple were similarly given a "trust", they were entrusted with God's work (1 Chron. 9:22 RVmg.). Frederick Buechner remarked upon this "folly of preaching": "to choose for his holy work in the world...lamebrains and misfits and nitpickers and holier-than-thous and stuffed shirts and odd ducks and egomaniacs..." <sup>(4)</sup>. Yet weak Israel are described as God's "strength", the channel through which His strength would be shown to the nations; and they failed Him (Ps. 78:61). Frequently missionary brethren lament such attitudes in the committee brethren who control their resources. But the point is, that we are all like this. And God has chosen to work through the likes of us.

Every time Paul speaks of having been entrusted with the Gospel, he uses the common Greek word for 'to have faith in'; and within a few verses, we find him using the same Greek word again, in the context of our belief in Christ (1 Tim. 1:11,16; Gal. 2:7,16). We had faith in the Lord, and He had faith in us, He en-faithed us, with the preaching of the Gospel we have believed in. Here we see the awesome mutuality between a man and his Lord. We have been entrusted with the preaching of the Gospel; the Lord believes in us to do His work.

Israel in the wilderness *could have had* honey out of the rock to feed them (Ps. 81:16), but because they "limited the Holy One of Israel" (Ps. 78:41), they received only water and manna. In the very context in which we read that Israel "limited the Holy One of Israel" (Ps. 78:41), we find Israel described as "a deceitful bow" (Ps. 78:57). In whose hands was that bow? Surely in God's. In the same way as the quality of the bow limits the power of the archer, and causes hurt to him if it backfires on him, so were Israel to God; and so we are to Him. God had clearly promised them: "The Lord thy God shall deliver [the tribes of Canaan] into thine hand, and thou shalt destroy them with a mighty destruction" (Dt. 7:23). There are no conditions attached to this prediction in the record, and yet we must clearly understand it

as meaning ‘This is what is potentially possible for you, I have enabled it in my plan, but it depends upon your faith’. And tragically, Israel would not. They would inherit a land which was blessed with iron, and from whose hills “thou *mayest* dig brass” (Dt. 8:9); and yet they failed to make the effort to dig this out, and therefore they were dominated by the Canaanite tribes who had iron weapons. The Angels had made it potentially possible, but the realization of their potential plans depended upon Israel’s freewill effort. When Lot says that he “cannot” flee from Sodom, the Angel responds by saying that he “cannot” [same Hebrew word] do anything until Lot has left- as if to suggest that the Angel’s mission depended upon Lot’s freewill decision for its realization (Gen. 19:19,22). The same word is found on the lips of another Angel in commanding Jacob that he had “prevailed” (Gen. 32:28)- literally, he had ‘coulded’. He had achieved what had been made potentially possible in terms of his relationship with that Angel. Caleb and Joshua perceived that Israel were “well able” to overcome the tribes and inherit the land, seeing that the Angel-hornet had gone ahead and prepared the way; and yet due to Israel’s disabling of this possibility at the time, it was in some ways so that God Himself was “not able” to give them the inheritance, because *they* judged that *they* were “not able” to take it (Num. 13:30,31; 14:16).

Think of Jeroboam. The final comment upon him is that he was not as God’s servant David (1 Kings 14:7-9). And yet he was set up with that potential possibility. Consider:

<i>Jeroboam (1Kings 11)</i>	<i>David</i>
Man of valour v. 28	1 Sam. 16:18 RV
Young man v. 28	1 Sam. 17:58
Ruler over all v. 28	1 Sam. 18:5
I will taken thee and thou shalt reign over Israel v. 37	2 Sam. 7:8
Build a house v. 38	2 Sam. 7:11
v. 40	1 Sam. 19:2,10

And it works the other way, too. Prophecies of doom can be turned round by our repentance. Nineveh avoiding certain destruction on account of their repentance is a clear example. And one is tempted to think that Joshua’s appeal to Achan to properly confess his sin was meant to give him the chance of avoiding the ‘definite’ condemnation promised. Likewise Acts 20:28-31 records Paul predicting the apostacy that was to come upon Ephesus; but he pleads with the elders to take heed and watch, so that his inspired words needn’t come true. Indeed, every one of us in Christ is in effect nullifying the principle / prophecy that sin brings death, and for our sins we must return to the dust for ever.

According to Heb. 11:12, God’s promises to Abraham were fulfilled on account of his faith; God in some way allowed Himself to be potentially limited by Abraham’s faith. Indeed, the promised world-wide blessing of all nations was promised only “because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:16,18). In this sense the covenants of salvation were partly due to another man [Abraham] being faithful [although above all our salvation was due to the Lord Jesus]. In this sense he is the “father” of the faithful. Or take forgiveness. God is willing to totally forgive the repentant sinner. He could just forgive men; it is within His power to do this. But

He doesn't. He allows His power to do this to be limited by the extent of our repentance. "If so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil which I purpose to do unto them" (Jer. 26:3). Likewise "Repent ye therefore..., and be converted, *that* your sins may be blotted out...Repent therefore...and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart *may* be forgiven thee" (Acts 3:19; 8:22). The ability of God to forgive is controlled by our repentance (" *that...may*" ). This is used by Peter as the source of appeal for men to repent. The power of the Lord was present to heal the Pharisees- but they would not make use of what was potentially made available (Lk. 5:17). He could not do a mighty work in Nazareth because of their unbelief- as if He would have done a mighty miracle greater than the few healings He did perform there, but that possibility was discounted by their lack of faith (Mk. 6:5,6). The conditions on which God's love and forgiveness operate was likewise stressed by Christ: "When ye stand praying, forgive...that your Father...may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mk. 11:25,26). God's eagerness to forgive us is therefore reflected in His eagerness to see us forgive others. His desire to make all grace abound towards us is something beautiful, something wondrous.

The very idea of our limiting its application to ourselves should fill us with a sense of urgency to forgive others so this might not be the case. If we can accept that God allows His power (i.e. His omnipotence) to be limited, it becomes easier to accept that there are circumstances He allows His omniscience (i.e. His knowledge) to be limited. Thus the God who by nature cannot forget and for whom time is nothing, can therefore have the capacity to not remember our sins on account of the Lord's death (Is. 63:25). God clearly speaks of limiting His omniscience in Is. 65:16, saying that "the former troubles... are hid from my eyes". We can also reflect how an omnipotent God could have achieved salvation in a less painful way than He did- but He made bare His arm in the death of the cross (Is. 52:10), i.e. He expended Himself greatly. The same idea is present when we read of Yahweh paying a price for the redemption of His people from Egypt. He didn't pay the Egyptians anything, but the figure is used to express the extensive effort He was involved in for His people. This idea of God limiting His omnipotence and also His omniscience also explains why God is described as if He suddenly becomes aware of something, makes haste to intervene, or is hurt by sudden apostasy. These ideas are hard to understand if in fact God has total knowledge, i.e. awareness, from the beginning. They either express God to us in human terms; or God limits His omniscience, as He limits His omnipotence, and therefore disallows Himself from foreseeing all our possible futures. The fact is, God 'the Saviour of Israel' can become "as a mighty man that cannot save" by our refusal to accept His salvation (Jer. 14:8,9). He so identified Himself with Israel that in Egypt, He Himself heard a language which He understood not (Ps. 80:5). He *could* have understood it, and in a sense He did; but so identified is Yahweh with His people that He allows Himself to be limited by their perceptions. It's all brought together in the way Elisha tells Joash to smite upon the ground with arrows; if Joash had perceived deeper what Elisha meant, he would have smitten many times and the Syrian threat would have been eliminated entirely. But he didn't, and therefore Elijah was frustrated with him; the great potential victory was limited by a man's lack of spiritual perception (2 Kings 13:19).

In all these things, God is seeking to work a new creation in the experience of men and women. He has done this for us in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), and yet the reality of it is still dependent upon whether we will allow ourselves to put on the new man after the image of God, whether we will become born again after His image and likeness (Eph. 4:23,24). All the Corinthian Christians could have been prophets, all could have spoken with tongues (1 Cor.

14:1,5)- but the reality was that they didn't all rise up to this potential, and God worked through this, in the sense that He 'gave' some within the body to be prophets and tongue speakers (1 Cor. 12:28-30). He works in the body of His Son just the same way today, accommodating our weaknesses and lack of realization of our potentials, and yet still tempering the body together to be functional. The fact we fail to realize our potentials doesn't mean God quits working with us. Reflect how Judah was given the potential to possess the whole land, and yet they selfishly only focused upon their own inheritance (Jud. 1:2,3). And yet God still worked with them, giving them victory in what battles they did fight (Jud. 1:4). Yet even then, Judah didn't follow through with the help God was so eager to give them. They took Jerusalem, but later we read that the Jebusites were soon back living there (Jud. 1:8,21).

### ***The Limitation Of Prayer***

Heb. 11 cites women receiving their dead back to life as an example of faith. Because of the faith and prayers of the women, a third party, their dead loved ones were at times resurrected. Lazarus being raised because of his faithful sisters Martha and Mary is the obvious example we know about, but the Hebrew writer may well have had his mind on unrecorded Old Testament examples too. Our faith in prayer in some sense limits God's ability. The Jewish food laws were ended by the word of God (i.e. the Gospel of Christ) *and* Christian prayer before eating meat: personal prayer was a vital component to enable the sanctifying of food (1 Tim. 4:5). The widow woman believed that her little drops of oil would be multiplied; but how much they multiplied was limited, not by God, but by the number of pots she borrowed in faithful anticipation (2 Kings 4:3). So it was with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There was exhortation to "seek the best gifts"; and yet they were distributed "according as God hath dealt to every man [according to] the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3 and context). God doesn't just 'give' men faith. But He gave to each of them in the early church gifts which reflected the measure of faith shown by the individual believer. How much they could achieve for their Lord was limited by their faith.

We frequently commit the horror of limiting God in our attitude to prayer. All too often we see ourselves in the man who believed and yet still had unbelief: " If thou (Jesus) canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible" (Mk. 9:22,23). The man thought that Christ's power to help was limited: 'If you can do anything to help, well, please do'. The Lord Jesus turned things right round: 'If you can believe, anything's possible' - in other words, God can do anything, but His ability to directly respond to some particular need is limited by our faith, not by any intrinsic lack of ability within Himself. The man hadn't thought about this. He saw God as sometimes able to help a bit; Christ turned the man's words round to show that God's power is infinite, limited only by our faith <sup>(5)</sup>. The same message is taught by putting together the fact that with God nothing is impossible (Lk. 1:37), and the fact that nothing is impossible *unto us* (Mt. 17:20). God's possibility is our possibility; and this is what the Lord was teaching the man who thought that it all depended upon the Lord's possibility alone. There are other instances where the extent and nature of the Lord's healing seems to have been limited by the faith of the recipient (Mt. 8:13 " as...so" ; 9:29 " according to" ; 12:22 " inasmuch" ).

The Lord Jesus went on to comment on the healing of the boy: " This kind (of cure) can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting" (Mk. 9:29). Only intense prayer could send forth this kind of answer from God; He does not act on emotional grounds, just because He feels sorry for somebody. It needs to be noted that initially the man's child was not cured because

the disciples didn't have the faith to do it. This teaches that God's activity for others is partly dependent on the prayers of a third party. Job 42:8 implies that the forgiveness of Job's friends was only because he prayed for them. What stronger motivation could we have to pray earnestly for each other? The prayer of the man of God caused Jeroboam's hand to be healed (1 Kings 13:6). Again, the prayers of someone else can affect the fortunes of another in a way which would not happen if they just prayed for themselves. The Corinthians "helped...by prayer for us" (2 Cor. 1:11)- as if Paul's unaided prayers had less power than when the Corinthians were praying for him too. Stephen believed this to the point that he could pray for the forgiveness of his murderers, fully believing God could hear and grant such forgiveness. Job believed this, in that he prayed God would forgive his children in case they sinned. The friends mocked this in Job 5:4; 8:4; 17:5 and 20:10, saying that the children of the foolish die for their *own* sins, whereas, by implication, Job had figured that *his* prayers and sacrifices could gain *them* forgiveness. Yet in the end, Yahweh stated that Job had understood Him and His principles right, whereas the friends hadn't. And when the Lord asked Martha: "Believest thou this?" (Jn. 11:26), is not the implication that Lazarus was raised because of *her* faith...? This one needs some meditation upon the context.

The deeper we think about these things, the more we come to marvel at the intricacy of God's working with us in our lives. Zechariah had prophesied in the context of the restoration, that Jerusalem could have been a city without walls, with God's protection (2:4-6). But Israel lacked faith, and therefore God came down to their lower level and allowed them to build a wall, and worked with them in this. The exercise of building that wall was a display of great faith and zeal on Nehemiah's part; yet in fact the work He did was a result of Israel's limiting God by their lack of faith, even though Nehemiah himself had faith. Indeed the whole failure of Israel became "riches for the world." (Rom.11:12) Nothing is ultimately wasted or lost. Nothing can be done against the Truth (2 Cor. 13:8). Meditate on your own life and identify the countless failures through which, especially as you look back over time, the "invisible" hand of God is discernible.

If Judah had remained in the land and not fled to Egypt, God would have repented of the evil He had promised, and would there and then have restored the land and rebuilt Jerusalem (Jer. 42:10 cp. Zech. 6:15); the whole restoration from Babylon would never have happened. But Israel would not. And yet the whole restoration exercise, as it happened, brought glory to God through the faith and spirituality of men like Ezra and Nehemiah. Behold once again 'Divine ecology'. The closer one looks, the more conditional prophecies and Divine statements there are. "My house shall be called a house of prayer" had the extent of its possible fulfilment limited by the Jews turning the temple into a trading centre (Mk. 11:17). The statement that Nebuchadnezzar would be humiliated for seven years *could* have been changed by his repentance (Dan. 4:16 cp. 27-29). "Thou *shalt* drive out the Canaanites, though they have iron chariots, and though they be strong" (Josh. 17:18) was in fact conditional on their effort and faith- although it doesn't sound like that in the positive way it is spoken. Daniel understood that after 70 years Jerusalem must be restored; but he earnestly prayed for their forgiveness *so that* this would happen (Dan. 9:2 cp. 19). Perhaps he opened his window and prayed towards Jerusalem exactly because he wanted to fulfil 2 Chron. 6:37,38: "If they shall bethink themselves in the land whither they are carried captive, and turn, and pray unto thee...toward their land...and toward the city which thou hast chosen". He knew that repentance was a precondition for the promised restoration to occur.

Perhaps the most telling example of the limitation of prayer is in Abraham's request that God would spare Sodom for the sake of fifty righteous men there. He then lowers the number to

40, and then finally to ten, assuming that surely Lot's family were righteous and would comprise ten righteous. If Abraham had left off praying at, say, forty...then this would have been the limit God set. If there were ten righteous there, the city wouldn't have been saved. But Abraham went on to set the limit at ten. But we wonder, what would have happened if he had gone further and asked God to save Sodom for the sake of one righteous man, i.e. Lot? My sense is that the Father would have agreed. But the city wasn't saved for the sake of the one man Lot, because Abraham limited God's desire to save by the smallness of his vision. This principle can possibly be extended even wider. David asks: "Let thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, according as we hope in thee" (Ps. 33:22). And whoever prayed Ps. 132:10 asked to be heard "for thy servant David's sake"- he or she believed that God would remember David and for *his* sake respond favourably [and how much more powerful is prayer uttered for the sake of the Son of God!].

All this works the other way, too. It is not only so that we can limit God by our prayers. It is also true that prayer and spirituality can to some degree change the stated intentions of God, such is His openness to it. That God has intentions proves of itself that there can be a degree to which what He intends to do is governed by human response. James reasons that because we have seen "the end intended by the Lord" (James 5:11 NKJ) we ought therefore to do the maximum of *our* ability. Thus Amos pronounced what the Lord had shown him: that the land would be destroyed by grasshoppers, and then by fire. But each time he begged Yahweh to relent. And "the Lord repented for this: It shall not be, saith the Lord" (Am. 7:1-7). Israel's salvation was to some degree dependent on the love and prayer of Amos. God may have prepared great things potentially, which are only 'released' by our prayer for them. Solomon asked God for a wise heart- but he was told that God had already given him this (1 Kings 3:12). The process of educating Solomon in wisdom would have started long before; but it was released, as it were, by Solomon's specific prayer.

To summarize. God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He doesn't pretend He is answering our prayers when He is only doing what He was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference as to the ultimate actions of Almighty God. God is not to be understood as looking with a great unblinking cosmic stare towards us on earth; He is open to having His mind and actions changed by our little words of prayer. Yet because of this, God in some sense allows Himself to be limited. Hasidic scholars coined the word *zimsum* to describe this self-limitation. When God 'chose' a world of time and space, He chose a medium with specific restrictions, just as an artist is 'limited' by his canvas and paints. He *could* have done it all another way. But this was the way He chose. C.S. Lewis summed it up: "Perhaps we do not realize the problem, so to call it, of enabling our finite free wills to co-exist with omnipotence. It seems to involve at every moment almost a sort of "divine abdication""<sup>(6)</sup>.

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## Notes

(3) C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night* (New York: Jovanovich, 1959) p. 9

(4) Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984) p. 142

(5) The word "believe" is omitted from many texts. Thus we could paraphrase: "Regarding that "If you can..." which you said- as regards that, well, all things are possible". This is the view of F.B. Meyer and Marvin Vincent. The RV reads: "And Jesus said unto him, If thou canst! All things are possible to him that believeth".

(6) C.S. Lewis, *The World's Last Night* (New York: Jovanovich, 1959).

### 9-3 The Power Of Preaching

Paul was encouraged to stay in Corinth and preach because the Lord had much people in the city (Acts 18:9,10). Because of the potential, because God was in a sense relying on him, Paul stuck it out. Not only our salvation but that of others can be limited by our exercise of freewill. If others' salvation is not dependent upon our preaching, then there is no meaning to the very concept of preaching. This is true to the extent that a watchman can occasion the death of those he could warn, if he doesn't do it. And their blood [for they will die] *will be required* at his hand (Ez. 33:8,13). The wicked will only turn from their ways if the watchmen warns them- and Ez. 33 shows clearly enough that the watchman can be lazy to fulfil his commission, with the result that some will die eternally who need not have done so. It's not that another watchman is raised up to do the job- it is his responsibility, which he can discharge or not. God's word has been delegated to us; to not speak it forth is therefore in a sense to diminish His word. Hence Jeremiah is told to "keep not back a word" of all God's words (Jer. 26:2 AV; RV: "Diminish not a word").

Paul tells Timothy to pray for the Government to allow him to continue preaching because God "will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:1-4). There is here the suggestion that Timothy's prayers would enable more men to come to the knowledge of the Truth, and thereby fulfil God's intention. But that intention and will of God had been made dependent on the prayers and preaching of the likes of Timothy. God's "will" is that all will be saved; yet not all will be. His will is that not one of the little ones perish (Mt. 18:14); but we can offend the little ones, so that they do perish. His *intention* is that the church reveals His wisdom to this world (Eph. 3:10); but it doesn't always do so. None can resist His will; and yet His will is not necessarily what He *does*, in that His will does not force men and women into obedience or compliance. Further, God's intention in giving His Son was that the world might be saved (Jn. 3:17). Why, then, the masses of humanity who never heard the name of Jesus? My comment is that it was potentially possible for the whole world to hear, it was God's wish and intention; but it was the dysfunction of His church, and His refusal to intervene to force us another way, His commitment to honouring our freewill, which left those masses without the saving knowledge of Jesus. And the tragedy continues to this day.

The classic verse is Rom. 10:14: "How shall they hear without a preacher?" It's impossible to hear without a preacher. Of course, God could beam the message into men some other way. But normally He chooses to work through human preachers. The preachers in the parable of the great supper are bidden " Compel them to come in, that my house may be filled" (Luke 14:28). The house of God's Kingdom is filled with people as a result of enthusiastic preaching. Paul *so* spoke that men believed (Acts 14:1). Presentation *is* important. Yet, his speech was "rude...contemptible...not with wisdom of speech" (2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6; 1 Cor. 1:17AVmg.). Yet it was because Paul *so* spoke that men believed. He spoke God's Truth in his own words, with no pretensions, with no attention to a smooth presentation; and the more real, the more credible. Because he spoke things as they are, right between the eyes, without posing as anyone apart from the real, human guy Paul...therefore men believed. He came over as credible and convinced, and he inspired others to this end. Thus Paul told Titus to affirm the faithful sayings "confidently, *to the end* that they which have believed...may maintain good works" (Tit. 3:8 RV). The congregations' spirituality was related to the confidence of their pastor's presentation. Those "good works", as ours, have

been “afore prepared” in the Father’s plan for us to perform (Eph. 2:10); but we have to be inspired to live up to the potential which He has prepared for us. Num. 14:20 records how the Father forgave Israel according to Moses’ word. And in just as real a sense, He has placed the reconciliation of this world in the hands of our ministry.

Paul preached in Ephesus from 11a.m. to 4 p.m. (Acts 19:9 Western text)- the siesta period. Whilst working with his own hands to support himself, he somehow persuaded men and women to break their usual sleep pattern to come and hear him. F.F. Bruce has commented that more Ephesians were awake at 1a.m. than 1 p.m.<sup>(7)</sup>. He preached, and so the Corinthians believed (1 Cor. 15:11). “Our preaching” and “your faith” are paralleled in 1 Cor. 15:14. He called the Galatians to the Gospel by his preaching, in response to how God had called him (Gal. 1:6 cp. 15). Philemon owed his salvation to Paul’s preaching, and was therefore eternally obligated to him (Philemon 19). We too can be a tree of life to those with whom we live; we can win their souls for the Kingdom (Prov. 11:30). The Thessalonians would be accepted in the final glory of judgment day simply “because our testimony among you was believed” (2 Thess. 1:10). Eve, taken out of the wounded side of the first man, was a type of the ecclesia; and her name means ‘source of life’, in anticipation of how the church would bring life to the world.

The Pharisees had the “key of knowledge” that enabled men to reach the Kingdom (Lk. 11:52); but they took it away from men, and thus stopped them entering (Mt. 23:13). Likewise if the elders / judges of Israel had been wise, the entire people would have entered the land (Dt. 16:20). The whole of Israel would’ve stayed in the wilderness and not entered the Kingdom / land if Gad and Reuben hadn’t initially gone over Jordan (Num. 32:15). Wrath would come upon all Israel if the Levites weren’t encamped around the tabernacle (Num. 1:53). The curses of Dt. 28:4,18 involved cursing coming upon descendants of sinful people; perhaps in that their fathers influenced them to do wrong. Thus the salvation of men can be affected by a third party not preaching to them or not teaching them correct doctrine. Herein lies the crying need to ‘defend the Faith’. Speaking of how he had suffered to defend purity of understanding of the Gospel, Paul reflected: “Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sake, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ” (2 Tim. 2:10). *Their* salvation was dependent upon *his* enduring. And therefore he endured for their sakes. More positively, those keys of knowledge were given to Peter, and through his preaching they opened up the closed door of salvation to many who would not otherwise have entered (Mt. 16:19). Losing bonds is the language of bringing salvation and forgiveness (Is. 51:14; 58:6; Mt. 13:30; 18:27; 22:13; Lk. 13:16). And those keys are likewise in our hands too. If we introduce the Gospel of salvation to a man, the door is opened to him; if we don’t, it remains closed for him. In this sense what we bind and loose is automatically confirmed by God, in that He has delegated to us the preaching of entrance into His Kingdom<sup>(8)</sup>. Because the salvation of others is in our hands, both in and outside of the ecclesia, we are held responsible for their eternal loss if we do not minister to them. “Rescue those being led away to death [if we don’t, then they will die]...if you say, “But we knew nothing about this”, does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards *your* life [as you keep your brother’s life] know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done? [at judgment day]” (Prov. 14:11,12 NIV).

“(God’s) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known” (Eph. 3:10). The church is the body of Christ; He is manifest only through us. We are Him, in that sense. Our bodies are members of His body (1 Cor. 6:15). All that we do, in word and deed, is in the Name of the Lord Jesus- i.e. as representing Him whose Name we

called upon ourselves in baptism (Col. 3:17). We are the words of His epistle to both the world and the brotherhood; He has no other face or legs or arms than us (2 Cor. 3:3). We can thereby limit Him. According to John 17, our unity will convert the world. The Gospel is a message of reconciliation with God which overflows into reconciliation between each other, according to Ephesians. The church is a foretaste, an advertisement, of what the future Kingdom will be like (James 1:18). The way Simon the Zealot and Matthew the pro-Roman tax collector were all welded together within the 12 would have been an arresting display of unity in the Gospel, which cannot fail to have impressed first century Palestine. And it would have been so in the Antioch ecclesia too- the elders included Paul, the fiery ex-Orthodox rabbi; Manaen, one of the intimates of the Herod family; Barnabus, a Cypriot Levite who had owned land there to get round the Law's demands; Simeon the black man; Lucius from Cyrene, also in Africa. No wonder it was from this ecclesia that the Gospel really spread outwards. When the early church showed that uncanny unity between Jew and Gentile, slave and master, they converted the world. And so would and could and do we. And yet when and where we are divided, the power of conversion is lost. This is why the Philippians were told to live lives appropriate to the Gospel they preached, and to 'contend as one man' for the Gospel (Phil. 1:27,30). Their united witness, according to John 17, would convert the world. But if they were disunited, that great salvation would not be shared as it could potentially be.

Converts are described as being added to the church, and yet also added to Christ; the play on ideas seems deliberate (Acts 2:41,47 cp. 5:13,14; 11:24). He assures us that if we come to Him, we will find "rest" (Mt. 10:28); but the same word is only used elsewhere about the rest / comfort which our brethren give us (1 Cor. 16:18; 2 Cor. 7:13; Philemon 7,20). Our trials are specially designed so that we *may* give comfort to others who suffer in essence the same experiences- and this is how "our comfort aboundeth through Christ" (2 Cor. 1:4,5 RV). He is the comforter insofar as His brethren minister that comfort which He potentially enables them to minister. As we partake in the Lord's sufferings, so we partake of the comfort which is in Him- but which is ministered through the loving care of those in Him (2 Cor. 1:7). This is why any attitude of insularity is totally impossible for the true brother or sister in Christ. Behind every human face, there is a tragedy behind the brave façade which is put up. Almost everybody has been bruised by life, and is feeling the pressure of temptation or defeat, depression, loneliness or despair. It's true that some need to be disturbed from their complacency, but the vast majority need above all else to be given by us *the comfort of God's love*. People, all people (not just our brethren) are desperate for real comfort and compassion. And it is up to us to mediate it to them.

John the Baptist's ministry was so that the 'crooked' nation of Israel should be 'made straight' and ready to accept Jesus as Messiah (Lk. 3:5). God's enabling power was present so that this might have happened; but the same word is used in Acts 2:40 and Phil. 2:15 to describe Israel as still being a 'crooked' nation. John's preaching, like ours, was potentially able to bring about the conversion of an entire nation. So instead of being discouraged by the lack of response to our witness, let's remember the enormous potential power which there is behind it. Every word, witness of any kind, tract left lying on a seat... has such huge potential conversion power lodged within it, a power from God Himself.

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### Notes

(7) F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 132.

(8) This idea of binding and loosing recurs in Mt. 18:18, in the context of warning us not to be too hasty to cast a brother out of the ecclesia. It doesn't mean that any ecclesial decision has God's automatic sanction. But because salvation is related to remaining in the Christ body, the Lord may be saying: 'By unnecessarily expelling someone from association with My people, you are endangering their salvation. I won't necessarily come to their rescue; I have delegated the keeping of that brother to you. You are your brother's keeper. If you throw them out, they will probably lose their salvation. What you do on earth in these decisions is not necessarily overridden by Heaven. The eternal saving of a man is delegated to His brethren, and therefore you also have the possibility of causing him to stumble from salvation'. The implication of this is surely that we should only cast out of the ecclesia those who openly and beyond doubt have placed themselves outside of God's salvation. And the Lord surely meant us to compare this against His command not to judge. He is surely saying in this passage: 'You can argue it out with your brother, and eventually get the ecclesia to disfellowship him. But by this you'll be saying that he is out of the way of salvation, and what you do may well drive him to condemnation; for it's a hard and unlikely way to the Kingdom without your brethren. And you know that you mustn't condemn him. So better just forgive him, 490 times / day, unconditionally'. Paul takes this idea seriously when he says that if he forgives anybody, he does it "in the person of Christ", and so, by extension, the church at Corinth did too, seeing they were partakers in that same one body of His (2 Cor. 2:10).

#### **9-4 God Chooses To Depend Upon Us**

How far His affairs prosper is dependent upon the zeal and initiative of us His stewards (Lk. 19:12,13; 1 Cor. 4:1,2). The disciples wondered why only they had been chosen- for wasn't God's plan to invite the whole world to salvation in Jesus? The Lord replied by saying that "I am the vine, ye are the branches. He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit" (Jn. 14:22; 15:1-11). His function was to nourish the branches, the life which they drew from Him and lived, this would bring forth the fruit which would offer all men salvation. And this is perhaps why initial preaching by bills and adverts in a new area of the world brings forth response, but it dries up once a few converts are made. It is *their* duty to bring forth more fruit in that area. In another figure, Christ is the head, we are the body. As a man may have a healthy head and mind, and yet be limited by the weakness of his limbs- so with the Lord Jesus. 1 Cor. 12:21 gives something more than a random example: the head (the Lord Jesus) cannot do without the feet (a symbol of the preacher in Rom. 10:15). In the work of witness especially, the Head is reliant on the preacher for the work He wills to be done. He likens preaching to drag net fishing (Mt. 13:47), in which one big fishing boat drags a net which is tied to a small dinghy. God's fishing is thus dependent on us, the smaller boat, working with Him. Thus the harvest was plenteous during the Lord's ministry, but relatively few were converted due to the dearth of labourers (Mt. 9:37 implies). The victorious truth that "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" is purposefully juxtaposed against the next clause, which seems to contradict it: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations..." (Mt. 28:18,19). Through teaching and baptising all nations, the extent of that universal power is made known. But it depends on the freewill obedience of the believers to this commission. The Lord had the Spirit without measure, and yet He "could not" do many miracles in Nazareth because of their unbelief. And not only on a personal level, but also collectively, we can limit the amount and extent of witness. Thus Paul had a door opened to him to preach in Troas, but the ecclesial problems in Corinth that were so sapping his energy meant he had to leave those opportunities inadequately used (2 Cor. 2:12,13 RSV).

#### **Preparing The Way For Others**

The command to prepare a way along which to flee to the cities of refuge (Dt. 19:3) is expressed with the very same words used about God through the Angels preparing a way for Israel to flee along, out of Egypt to the promised land (Ex. 23:20). This was obviously done purely at God's initiative. But now, Israel were asked to do the same- to prepare a way for their and others' salvation. When we reflect upon our own way of escape from this world, it's clear enough that it was by grace. By God's sole initiative we came into contact with the Gospel, or were born into such a family at such a time as enabled us to hear it. Our response to that grace must be like Israel's- to prepare a way for others to flee, when they like us find themselves in a situation that is spiritually against them, although not of their conscious choice. In fact, if Israel were indifferent to preparing the way for others' salvation, then

innocent blood would be shed and they would be responsible for it (Dt. 19:10). This is powerful stuff. Indifference to providing others with a way of escape from their sin and death means we are actually guilty of their lack of salvation. And yet we tend to think that committed sin is all we have to worry about / avoid. The lesson here, however, bites far more caustically and insistently into our comfort zone. If we are indifferent to marking out the way of escape for others, their blood will be upon our heads. Our chief excuses for not witnessing enthusiastically basically amount to laziness, indifference, not getting our act together because we don't see we have to... when actually, there is an intense urgency about our task.

All this doesn't mean that God doesn't participate in the salvation process, and has 100% turned it over to us. How could He ever be like that, when the whole marvellous plan involved the giving of His Son? There is an interplay between God's calling of men, and human participation in that outreach. The case of Paul exemplifies this. Without the vital work of Ananias, he wouldn't have been able- in one sense- to come to Christ. And yet it was God who called Paul. 'Ananias' means 'the grace of God'. And several times Paul alludes to this, saying that "By [Gk. 'on account of'] the grace of God [i.e. Ananias] I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:10; Gal. 1:15; Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 1:14). His conversion was by both God and Ananias. And thus we see the seamless connection in every conversion between God's role, and that of the preacher.

God reconciled the world; but the word of reconciliation is committed unto us (2 Cor. 5:19). All men were reconciled to God on the cross, even while they were sinners (Rom. 5:10); but it depends upon us to take that Gospel of reconciliation to them. So far as we fail in this, so far we leave His death for them in vain, only a potential achievement. We were given reconciliation personally (Rom. 5:11 RV); and we are also given "the ministry of reconciliation", the command to preach that reconciliation and share it with others (2 Cor. 5:10). To be reconciled to God is to be given a charge to reconcile others. Consider how the unclean animals which Peter saw in the vision represented all the Gentile world (Acts 10:15,28). They had already all been "cleansed" by the blood of Christ, but He was dead in vain, the cleansing achieved for nothing, unless the likes of Peter took the message to them. The more and the wider and the more powerfully we do this, the more we enable the cross of Christ to be victorious, to achieve its end, the more 'worthwhile' as it were was the Lord's sacrifice. Acts 15:17 (cp. Am. 9:12) encourages us to preach to the Gentiles "upon whom my name is [Amos says 'has already been'] called". The Name is called upon us by baptism; yet in prospect, in potential, the Name has already been called upon the whole world. But it is for us to go and convert them. This explains why Paul is spoken of as having been a convert before he actually was. Consider:

- He wrote that he bore in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus. He seems to be alluding to the practice of branding runaway slaves who had been caught with the letter F in their forehead, for *fugitivus*. His whole thinking was dominated by this awareness that like Jonah he had sought to run, and yet had by grace been received into his Master's service. But the figure implies that he already was a slave of Jesus at the time of his 'capture' in conversion.
- Ananias addresses him as 'brother', possibly in realization of this.
- Paul was as an ox bound to a yoke, kicking against the goads. But it was as if he was already bound into Christ's light yoke.

## 9-5 Fulfilling The Sufferings Of Jesus

Paul had been reconciled, as have all men, by the cross. But he still needed to be converted, and this depended upon the freewill obedience of the likes of Ananias. It really is so, for Paul warned that preaching the Gospel with wisdom of words would make “the cross of Christ...of none effect” (1 Cor. 1:17). The effect of the cross, the power of it to save, is limited in its extent by our manner of preaching of it. And we can make “Christ”, i.e. His cross, of “none effect” by trusting to our works rather than accepting the gracious salvation which He achieved (Gal. 5:4). This is why Paul can say that Israel’s rejection was the reconciliation of the world (Rom. 1:15)- in that the preachers of reconciliation turned from the Jews to the Gentiles because the Jews rejected the message. We are co-workers with Him in the building up of His house (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1). He could save men directly; but instead He has delegated that work to us, and thereby limited His power to save insofar as it depends upon our extension of it. Only through our preaching can the work of the cross be made complete- and that thought is frightening.

It has been perceptively commented: “The work of Christ in one sense is complete, but in another sense it is not complete until all men have known it and been reconciled to God by it. He is dependent on men and women to take it out and to make it known. He who accepts this task of bringing the message of the work of Christ to men may well be said to complete the sufferings of Christ”<sup>(9)</sup>. Every leaflet we distribute, every conversation we start, every banknote we put to the Lord’s work...through all this we are extending the victory of the Lord in ways which would otherwise never occur. Thus Paul can say that in his work of preaching and upbuilding, he was filling up the sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24). By the cross, all things were reconciled, but this is only made operative in practice if men “continue in the faith”, which Paul suffered in order to enable (Col. 1:20-23). This is the context in which Paul speaks of fulfilling the cross. Thus Paul speaks of filling up “the afflictions of Christ” in his life (Col. 1:24), but uses the very same word to describe the “afflictions” [s.w.] which he suffered for his brethren (Eph. 3:13). The sufferings of the Lord become powerful and continue to bring forth fruit in human lives- through our response to them.

All things were put under the Lord’s feet because of His exaltation (Eph. 1:22); but now we see not yet all things put under Him (Heb. 2:8; 1 Cor. 15:24-28). The “all things” matches with Col. 1:18 speaking of the Lord being placed over the church. We are the “all things”. The great commission has the same thought sequence- because of the Lord’s exaltation, therefore we must go and tell all men and bring them into subjection to the exalted Christ. In prospect His body is “all in all” (Eph. 1:23), but the “all in all” phase will only be realized in practice at the end of the Millennium (1 Cor. 15:28). It is for us to grasp the height of His exaltation and the fact that it means that potentially, all men, all of existence, is under Him. And then we respond to this by going out and seeking to bring all men under Him.

The grace of God is manifested to the world through the preaching of the ecclesia; and in this sense, God has allowed His ability to manifest this Grace to be limited according to our effort in witness. Peter could have chosen not to baptize Gentiles; and if he had done so, he would have withheld God, like the Pharisees he would have frustrated the counsel of God (Acts 11:17). As in the Song of Solomon (1:8), the bride [the church] follows the sheep [believers] to find the shepherd [Jesus]. The sheep lead others to the shepherd. God has “manifested his word through preaching, which is committed unto me” (Tit. 1:3). Yet Paul himself admits a tendency not to preach, to hold back from giving his all to fulfil that commission he had

received to testify of the Gospel of God's grace (1 Cor. 9:16). He asks his brethren to pray that he would be able to "make it manifest" more than he did (Col. 4:4 cp. Eph. 6:20).

This is proof enough that God's manifestation of His word through preaching is limited by the amount of manifestation His preachers allow it. Through the first century preaching of the Gospel, men and women were " turned from darkness to light...that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified" (Acts 26:18). Paul read the OT prophecies of how "to whom he was not spoken of, they shall see"; and he didn't just see them as descriptions of what would ultimately happen. He realised that the fulfilment of this prophecy depended *to some extent* on our human freewill; and therefore he *strode* (against so many odds) to preach Christ where He had not yet been named (Rom. 15:19,20). And he asks the Romans to *strive together* with him in prayer (15:30)- i.e. to join him in the struggle to witness world-wide, in that they would pray for his success. It was God's prophesied will that the Gospel would go world-wide; but it required the freewill strivings of Paul to enable it, and the strivings with God in prayer by the brethren. With these thoughts in mind, bear in mind the parallels between Psalms 96 and 98:

**Psalm 96**

O sing unto the Lord a new song  
(:1)

His wonders among all people. For  
He hath done marvellous [s.w.  
'wonders'] things in the sight of  
the nations (:2 RV)

righteousness and truth (:13)

Let the sea roar and the fullness  
thereof (:11)

for He cometh to judge the earth  
(:9)

The Lord reigneth (v.10)

**Psalm 98**

O sing unto the Lord a new song  
(:1)

declare His glory among the  
nations (:3)

righteousness and truth (:3)

Let the sea roar and the fullness  
thereof (:7)

for He cometh to judge the earth  
(:13)

The Lord the king (:6)

But there are some subtle differences. Ps. 96:2,3 exhorts us: "Show forth his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the heathen". But Ps. 98:2 puts it another way: "The Lord hath made known His salvation. His righteousness hath He openly shewed in the sight of the nations". These latter words are only true in that *we* make known that salvation, and *we* declare His glory among the nations. Thus a statement in Ps. 98 that Yahweh has shewed His glory to the nations becomes an imperative for us to go and do that in Ps. 96.

The crucified Son of Man must be lifted up by our preaching before the eyes of all, so that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish (Jn. 3:14,15). "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (Jn. 12:32)- but we draw men by our spreading of the Gospel net, preaching to "all men". Thus the extent of the Lord's achievement on the cross

depends upon our preaching of it. Each of the records of the great preaching commission in the Gospels ties in with earlier passages within the same Gospel record. Mark's "preach the gospel to every creature" is to be understood in the context of the Lord's prophecy that the seed of His Gospel would be sown by preaching, and would result in creatures of all kinds coming under its' shadow (Mk. 16:15 cp. 4:32). The extent of witness we make is our choice; and according to how well we do it, so the extent of the shadow of the Kingdom gives shelter to many kinds.

## Notes

(9) William Barclay, 'The Church And Its Task' in *The All-Sufficient Christ* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews Press, 1978 ed.) p. 110.

### 9-6 Bringing People To Faith

The Lord foresaw in Jn. 17:20 that there would be those who would believe on Him "through their word" (i.e. the disciples'). Our word of preaching can bring others to faith. Our preaching leads to faith being created in the hearers. "The word of faith, which we preach" (Rom. 10:8) is the word (Gospel) that leads to faith; and a man cannot believe without hearing the Gospel, and he will not hear it unless it is preached by a preacher. Paul summarises by saying that faith comes by hearing [the Gospel] and hearing by [the preaching of] the word of God (Rom. 10:8,14,17). Paul's point is that whoever believes will be saved (Rom. 9:33)- and therefore, we must preach to all, so that they might take advantage of this blessed opportunity. In his repetitious manner, Paul builds up the argument in this letter:

- Even under the law, Israel could believe God's word as preached by Moses and have righteousness imputed to them (10:5-8)
- We preach, in essence, the very same word (10:9,10)
- Isaiah said the same: that belief of his preaching would result in justification (10:11)
- We preach the same. Whoever believes in the Lord's saving Name by baptism will be saved (10:12,13)
- Therefore preach the word, for without your doing this, people can never believe it and therefore be saved (10:14,15)
- Israel had heard the word of the cross preached in the past, so just hearing the preacher will not automatically result in faith (10:16-21). Both preacher and hearer must be aware of this. Therefore there was a need for the preachers to turn to another wider audience, i.e. the Gentiles.

Note that this passage in Romans 10 reasons that men will only hear the Gospel if there is a preacher, and yet it also states that all men have heard the Gospel, in fulfillment of the prophesy of Psalm 19 that the message would go into all the earth. But later in the same epistle, Paul says that he preached because he wanted to take the Gospel to those "who have not heard" (15:21). There must be a connection within his thought with what he wrote in chapter 10, about all men hearing the Gospel through preaching. Surely he understood that the fulfillment of the prophecy that all men will hear the Gospel is purely dependent upon our

freewill effort to preach to all men. This understanding inspired Paul to press ahead with his plans to expand Gospel work into Spain; and it should motivate us likewise.

The Father and Son have turned over the mission of saving men to the church; and they have truly turned it over. This means that if men and women reject Him because we are the face of Jesus to them, and they don't think much of it...then this is solely our fault. There is no indication that God will rush in and save us from the mess we have made of His work. He has delegated to us genuine authority and meaningful independence, just as the Levites were given a "trust" to do the Lord's work (2 Chron. 31:15,18 RVmg.). He is prepared to work with us in assistance, but we are entrusted with the work (Gal. 2:7 RV)- just as a naughty pupil may be given a responsible job to do by a teacher, and the sheer wonder of having been thus entrusted makes him perform the duty reliably. This is a thought so demanding and unnerving we would all prefer to think that we are just insignificant pawns in a game that is being played out by God against this world, whether or not we chose to participate.

### **Seeking The Profit Of Others**

In his preaching both by word and example, Paul sought " the profit of many, that they may be saved" (1 Cor. 10:33). He endured for the elects' sake, so that they might be saved (2 Tim. 2:10); others' salvation was partly dependent upon his endurance. In the context of Israel's latter day repentance we read some admittedly strange words: " (The Jews) have ...not believed, that through your (Gentile believers) mercy, they also may obtain mercy" (Rom. 11:31). Could this not mean that Israel's reconciliation to God is partly dependent on our "mercy" in preaching the Gospel to them? And now consider Peter's words to Israel: " Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that (firstly) your sins may be blotted out... and (secondly) he shall send Jesus Christ" at the second coming (Acts 3:19,20). Does this not suggest that Christ's eager desire for the second coming is limited by our preaching to Israel?

Consider how that once the Gospel is preached world-wide, then the end will come (Mt. 24:14); and how the Lord replied to the question: 'When are you coming back?' by telling the questioners to go and preach the Gospel (Acts 1:6,8), as if the preaching of the word and the timing of the second coming are related. Likewise in the Olivet prophecy, the Lord gave them some signs of His return but told them that firstly, i.e. most importantly, the Gospel must be preached to all the world (Mk. 13:10)- implying that it is spreading the Gospel world-wide, not looking for the fulfillment of signs, that will bring about His return. Surely this would associate the exact timing of the Lord's return- for which He and the Father are ever eager-with the time when we have satisfactorily spread the Gospel far enough. When the harvest is ripe, then it is harvested. The Lord has to delay His coming because of the slowness and immaturity of our development; in these ways we limit Him. And it isn't enough to think that if we merely preach world-wide, therefore the Lord's coming will automatically be hastened. It is the bringing forth of fruit to His Name that is important to Him.

Consider the great commission to go and witness world-wide. After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus was *sent* to preach blessing and forgiveness to Israel (Acts 3:26). But after His resurrection, He sent His men to preach this message. His witness became expressed through, and therefore limited by, His preachers. When they wilfully misunderstood His commission as meaning preaching to Jews from all nations, rather than taking the message to the whole planet literally, His work was in that sense hindered and His intention delayed. Remember that the Rabbis taught that salvation was impossible for Gentiles: "For the heathen nations there will be no redemption", so reads the targum on Ex. 21:30. Like us, the early Jewish

converts were influenced by their backgrounds and their limited world views. Until the Lord brought experiences to bear which, when responded to, taught them what is now the obvious meaning of His words- that we each have a duty to take the good news of Him to the whole planet.

On account of the Lord's resurrection, God has commanded all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30,31)- again, a reference to the great commission. But God's command of men to repent is only through our preaching of that message. Matthew and Mark record how the apostles were *sent* to preach the Gospel and baptize, for the *forgiveness* of sins (cp. Acts 2:38). Luke records the Lord stating that the apostles knew that *forgiveness of sins* was to be preached from Jerusalem, and therefore they should be witnesses to this.

I would suggest that John's Gospel does in fact record the great commission, but in different and more spiritual words: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you... If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (Jn. 20:21,23 NIV). These words have always been problematic for me, especially that last phrase. Can God's forgiveness really be limited by the forgiveness shown by fallible men? Yet if these words are taken as a record of the great commission to go and preach, and the ellipsis is filled in, things become clearer: 'I am sending you to preach the Gospel and baptism of forgiveness; if you do this and men respond, then the Gospel you preach really does have the power to bring about forgiveness. But if you don't fulfil the commission I give you to preach forgiveness, then the sins of your potential hearers will remain unforgiven'. Again, the forgiveness and salvation of others is made to depend upon our preaching of forgiveness. "Whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" becomes the equivalent of "he that believeth not shall be damned". Note that the Greek for 'retain' strictly means 'to hold / bind', and that for 'remit' means 'to loose'. This has evident connection with Mt. 16:19, where the keys of the Gospel of the Kingdom (which we all possess) have the power to bind and loose, i.e. to grant or not grant forgiveness. Jn. 15:8,16 also has some reference to the great commission: "...so shall ye be my disciples...that ye *should go* [into all the world] and bear fruit, and that your fruit [converts?] should abide". The eternal life of the converts is a fruit brought forth by the preacher's obedience to his Lord's commission. Likewise through the preaching of John, he turned men's hearts- the idea of repentance, being brought about by the preacher (Mal. 4:6). Note how in Lk. 16:6 the Lord's steward was entrusted with the power to forgive others' debts- showing the amount of power and authority delegated to us, and perhaps directly connectable with the Lord's statement that He had given the disciples power on earth to forgive sins.

Such is the power of our preaching, the possibility which our words of witness give to our hearers. We have such power invested in us! If we are slack to use it, the Lord's glory is limited, and the salvation of others disabled. As if to bring this home, the New Testament quotes several passages evidently prophetic of the future Kingdom as having their fulfillment in the preaching of the Gospel today:

- Is. 2:2-4 (the word of Yahweh *will* go out from Jerusalem) = the ecclesia's witness to the world today, "beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:47). This, the Lord said, was in fulfillment of the OT prophets- and He could only be referring to those like Isaiah.
- Am. 9:11,12 had its fulfillment in the work of preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-18; 26:16-18).

- Likewise Is. 54:12 = Gal. 4:27; we extend the joy of the Kingdom to our hearers.
- Is. 52:7 = Rom. 10:15.
- Is. 11:10 = Rom. 15:12.

The apparent inappropriacy or lack of context of these quotations need not worry us. It is not that they have no future fulfillment They evidently will have, at the Lord's second coming. But God sees that which shall be as already happening; His perspective is outside of our kind of time. The ecclesia's preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom to the world is effectively a spreading of the Kingdom to them; in that those who respond properly will ultimately be in God's Kingdom. But God sees through that gap between their response and the final establishment of the Kingdom; He invites us to see it as if we have spread the Kingdom to them. As we present the Gospel to men and women of all races, we are enabling the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. The more we preach, the more glorious is their fulfillment This is the power of our Gospel and the preaching of it. Let's not treat it as something ordinary or optional or to be fitted in to our spare time.

Further, let's not assume that missionary work is something to be left to others, or only done if there is some special call of God to us. The need of this world *is* the call! And God's way of working is to leave this work to our initiative. Perhaps the simple reason why so many after the time of Jesus lived and died never knowing the Gospel was simply because we didn't take it to them, as we potentially could have done. Looking at those maps of Paul's journeys as they are in the backs of many Bibles, it's easy to think that somehow it all just happened, that he was different, because God told him to do all that. But that's not actually the case. Most of the time, he decided where to go and how long to stay and how to go about the mission of spreading the Gospel throughout his world. Consider the kinds of phrases he uses about his travel plans:

"I shall come soon, if the Lord will" (1 Cor. 4:17-19)

"If it should seem worthwhile for me to go as well, they shall go with me" (1 Cor. 16:3)

"You can help me on my way wherever I go next" (1 Cor. 16:6)

"I had intended to come first of all to you... I meant to visit you" (2 Cor. 1:15)

"It was out of consideration for you that I did not come again to Corinth" (2 Cor. 1:23)

"I made up my mind that my next visit to you..." (2 Cor. 2:1)

Paul was "prevented all this time" from going to Rome (Rom. 15:22)

"I am hoping to come to you before long" (1 Tim. 3:14)

2 Cor. 2:13 speaks of Paul's restless desire to push on in his travelling.

My simple point is that Paul's missionary work involved a large number of freewill choices from him. He saw his calling, and yet he speaks as if we too are called to spread the Gospel in the same way as he was in essence, within the confines of the choices and situations God has

put us in. The initiative is with us. All this means that *how* we plan to preach and care for others *does* need to be considered. Time and again, God works through humanly devised good strategies (Josh. 8:1,2; Neh. 4:9 etc.). But I love the way Derek Kidner puts it: "Scripture approves of strategy when it is a tool rather than a substitute for God" (1).

## Notes

(1) Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (London: Tyndale, 1968) p. 168.

### 9-7 The Limitations Of Pastoral Work

The various parts of the one body *supply* strength to the rest of us (Eph. 4:16). But the very same Greek word rendered "supply" occurs in the Phil. 1:19, about the *supply* of the spirit of Jesus Christ. How does He *supply* our need and strengthen us? Through the very human members of the one body. Which is why we so desperately need them, and to walk away from them, reasoning that they 'give nothing', is in a sense to turn away from the supply of the spirit of Jesus.

Paul speaks in 2 Cor. 11:2 of 'presenting you' at the last day- he uses the same Greek word in a context of 'standing before' the judgment seat (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 4:14). Christ will present us to Himself at judgment day, as an unspotted bride / church (Eph. 5:27)- but Paul perceived that Christ will achieve this by working through people and pastors like himself. Paul aimed to "present" [s.w.] every man perfect in Christ by warning and exhorting them (Col. 1:28). We will present ourselves (2 Tim. 2:15 s.w.) to Him at the judgment; but He presents us, and others who have laboured for us will present us, because Christ will have worked through them to present us to Himself unspotted. The cross results in the suffering Lord being able to "present us holy and unblameable and unreprovable in his sight" at the day of judgment (Col. 1:22; Eph. 5:27). Having said that, Paul goes right on to say that his goal is to "present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:22,28; 2 Cor. 11:2). The sufferings of Jesus were not lost on Paul. He understood that he likewise must share in them, in order to "present" his brethren acceptable at the last day. For Paul, the events of Calvary were not far away in time and place, a necessary piece of theology... They compelled him to act, to stay up late at night preparing something, to pray, to live the life of true concern for others, to warn, encourage, write, endlessly review his draft letters to get them right, search through Scripture for relevant guidance for his friends... this was the life begotten in him by the cross. As the Lord died to present us "perfect", so Paul laboured to present us perfect. And neither the Lord Jesus nor Paul are mere history for us. This is all our pattern... In one sense, we present ourselves before the judgment seat (Rom. 14:10 s.w.; AV "stand before"). In other ways, we are presented there by our elders, e.g. Paul; and yet above all, we are presented there spotless by the Lord's matchless advocacy for us. And of course the essence of judgment is being worked out right now, as we daily present ourselves to the Lord, as the bodies of the animals were presented to the priest for inspection before being offered (Rom. 12:1). We are presenting ourselves to the judge right now.

Paul speaks of how he had received, as it were, a measuring line which enabled him to preach in certain areas, including Corinth. When the spiritual growth of the Corinthian converts was complete, then his measuring line would be extended, and the Lord would allow him "to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you" (this is how I would interpret 2 Cor. 10:6,13-16 RV). This teaches what many of us have observed in practice in the work of the Gospel: the Lord's blessing only attends our efforts to further the Gospel if real spiritual fruit is being

brought forth in those already converted. Thus according to the freewill response of believers to the call of true spirituality, the call of others to the Gospel can be limited.

We each have our "line" or area of preaching possibility allotted to us personally by the Father [and not by any committee!]. That area may not be merely geographical- there are people brought into your life to whom God intends you to witness. Always have some literature on hand to give them, and be aware that nobody you meet is a chance encounter. In Gal. 2:7,8, we read that Peter was given a ministry to preach to Jews, and Paul to the Gentiles. But in Acts 15:7 Peter says that God used him to take the Gospel to the Gentiles- and the implication of 1 Peter is that he had made many converts in Gentile areas of Asia Minor. The reconciliation of these statements may be that God changed things around- Peter's ministry to the Gentiles was handed over to Paul, and Paul's initial work amongst the Jews was not for him to continue but for Peter. And so the Father may work with us, too. My simple point is that we are each given our group or area of potential responsibility for preaching, and we should be workers together with the Father and Son to achieve what they have potentially made possible for us. And we each, in God's master plan, have an area of opportunity opened up to us for us to preach in, and this area may be changed, reduced, moved or expanded according to our freewill response to God's desire to use us.

For related reasons, we can also limit God's plans to save others in the ecclesia by our attitude to them. We can make others stumble from the path to His salvation. Baasha made other people sin and thus provoke God to anger; his own sin and that of the people are described in identical language, to portray how he influenced them (1 Kings 16:2,7). If the two and a half tribes had discouraged the rest of Israel, then none of them would have entered the promised land: "If ye turn away...he will yet again leave *them* in the wilderness, and ye shall destroy all this people" (Num. 32:15). If someone gives in to false teachers, then the Truth doesn't continue with others (Gal. 2:5). If parents didn't circumcise their children, then they made their sons break covenant with God (Gen. 17:14)- they made others excluded from the covenant by their decisions and laziness. If a brother doesn't show pity to his fellow brother, this can make the afflicted brother "forsake the fear of the Almighty" (Job 6:14 RVmg.). "Give none offence (i.e. cause of spiritual stumbling), neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many that they may be saved. Be ye followers of me (in this), even as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1; the chapter division is wrong). Paul saw that if he gave offence, he was not seeking their salvation. Like Paul, the Lord Jesus didn't please Himself by being selfishly concerned with His own salvation, but pleased his neighbours for their good unto their eternal edification (Rom. 15:2,3).

We can't be brethren in Christ who have no effect on the rest of the body. We all have an influence on others. Our behaviour, however passive, has a powerful effect on our brethren. We are all members of one body. Job pointed out that the words of another can assuage grief in a way that ones' own self-talk simply cannot (Job 16:5,6). On the contrary, a whole community can be cursed for the sake of one man's sin, even if he later repents (2 Kings 24:3,4). The fact we can be guilty of causing others to stumble means that we can limit God's gracious plan for them. By refusing to preach to the Gentiles, Peter was 'making common' what God had potentially cleansed (Acts 10:15 RV). We can spiritually *destroy* our brother, for whom Christ died (Rom. 14:15); we can undo the work of the cross for a brother who would otherwise be saved by it. We can make others sin (Ex. 23:33; 1 Sam. 2:24; 1 Kings 16:19). There is an urgent imperative here, to really watch our behaviour; e.g. to not drink alcohol in the presence of a brother whose conscience is weak.

God somehow arranged things within His purpose so that Zedekiah's repentance would have enabled the salvation of all Israel (see the 'thee...ye' passages in Jer. 38). But his failure to repent meant that judgment came on His people. What this shows is that there are times and places where God is willing to save people for the sake of the spirituality of a third party, but if he or she fails in this, deliverance doesn't *necessarily* arise from another place, as it would have done in Esther's time. Eliphaz perceived all this when he told Job that a truly righteous man can "save the humble person. He shall deliver even him that is not innocent: yeah, he shall be delivered through the cleanness of *thine* hands" (Job 22:30 RV). And this was proved true later on- for Eliphaz was saved due to Job's mediation for him.

The Kingdom was once described by the Lord as a time when all those in the ecclesia who cause others to stumble will have been thrown away into condemnation (Mt. 13:41). Yet in some things we all offend others (James 3:2). Our places in the Kingdom will therefore be by pure grace alone; but we must respond to this wonder by *trying* as earnestly as possible to only upbuild and not to stumble our brethren. A personally 'righteous' believer may well be excluded from the Kingdom for the effect he has had on others. Both God and the pastors of Israel are described as having 'driven out' Israel from their land (Jer. 23:2,3,8); the pastors' sin resulted in all the people sinning and deserving judgment, and God worked with this system, confirming His people in the evil way they had taken. There is no doubt that we can be counted responsible for making another brother sin, even though he too bears responsibility for that sin. The man who commits adultery causes his ex-wife to commit adultery too, the Lord observed (Mt. 5:32). Her sin remains her sin, but he too is guilty. Prov. 5:15,16 (NIV) teach likewise: that a man should drink the waters of his own well, i.e. take sexual fulfilment from his own wife, otherwise his waters (i.e. the sexuality of his wife) will overflow into the streets for all and sundry. She will turn to other men due to his unfaithfulness. Sin thus has so many aspects. We may reason that if we fail to upbuild a brother, or preach, then God will somehow do it anyway. But this doesn't seem to be the spirit of Ez. 3:18: "When...thou givest him not warning...he shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thy hand".

Quite clearly, the efforts of parents on behalf of their children can affect the eternal destiny of a third party. Prov. 23:13,14 speaks of how we can save a child from the [eternal] grave by correctly disciplining and teaching him. Indeed, the Proverbs have so much to say about how parental influence can affect a child's eternal destiny.

### ***We Can Save Our Brethren***

It is of course true that in some ways, we are ultimately responsible for our own salvation; our brethren can't really help us, if we wilfully chose to rebel against our calling. And yet there is reason to think that up to a certain point, our prayers and pastoral concern for our brethren can save them, whereas without our effort they would not be saved. Reflect on 1 Jn. 5:16: "If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask [in prayer], and he [God] shall give him [the prayerful brother] life [eternal life, in the Johannine context] for them that sin not unto death". This seems to be a fair paraphrase. If it isn't, what does this passage mean? James 5:15,20 say the same: "...the prayer of faith (uttered by faithful friends) shall save the sick (struck down with sickness as a result of his sin, which seems to have happened in the first century, cp. 1 Cor. 11:30; Acts 5:5)...and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed...he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins". Behold the power of freewill effort for others:

For the sake of our prayers, in some cases sins of others can be forgiven when otherwise they wouldn't be. For the sake of our conversion of our erring brethren, they can be saved from eternal death and have their sins covered. The Lord's prayer says as much- we ask God to forgive us *our* sins; not 'me my sins'. Likewise only once Israel had passed a certain level of sinfulness was Jeremiah told to cease prayer for them (Jer. 7:16 cp. 11:14). Until that point, God seems to have been willing to read Jeremiah's prayer for them as their prayer (his "cry" was seen as theirs). And Ez. 14:14,18 imply the same- Noah, Daniel and Job could have delivered Israel up to a certain point, but they were so hardened in sin at Ezekiel's time that even those men wouldn't have saved a nation which otherwise, for a lower level of sin as it were, they could otherwise have saved. If we have any grain of love in us, we will likewise dedicate ourselves to fervent prayer for our brethren, seeing it does have effect and validity within certain boundaries. Elders are especially responsible here. They can shut up, or open, the Kingdom to men. They watch "in behalf of" the souls of the ecclesia (Heb. 13:7 RV). Their very examples can influence the flock positively or negatively- for "like priest like people" is a Biblical idea. When the leaders "offered themselves willingly", so did the people (Jud. 5:2,9).

"When Jesus saw the faith of *the friends* , He said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, *thy* sins be forgiven *thee*" (Mk. 2:5). That man was healed for the sake of the faith of others. The widow woman's son was resurrected because God heard Elijah's faithful prayer (1 Kings 17:22); and thus Heb. 11:35 alludes to this incident by saying that through faith- in this case, the faith of Elijah, a third party- women received their dead raised to life. The Centurion's servant was healed for the sake of *his* faith; Jairus' daughter was healed because of *his* faith (Mk. 5:36). Hence the Lord told them to believe and stop wavering, so that she would be made whole, or "saved" (Lk. 8:50). This comes straight after the Lord's commendation of the woman with "an issue of blood": "Thy faith hath made thee whole [or, saved]" (Lk. 8:48). It's as if the two healings are similar in their result- being made whole, or saved- and both required faith. But the woman's own personal faith which led to her healing is paralleled with the faith of the family of the girl who was resurrected. The mother of another sick girl got healing for her daughter: "For this saying [of faith and understanding] go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter" (Mk. 7:29). Many weren't healed by the disciples because they lacked the level of prayer and faith required (Mk. 9:29). Peter commented upon the healed beggar: "By faith in his name has his name made this man strong" (Acts 3:16 RV). But whose faith was Peter referring to? The beggar appears to have just been opportunistically begging for money from Peter (Acts 3:3). It was surely by *Peter's* faith that the man was healed, and not by his own faith. For Peter didn't invite the beggar to have faith in anything. And Peter explains to the Jews that he had made the man to walk not through his own power (Acts 3:12). So here again we have an example of a third party being healed as a result of another man's faith. Hezekiah obtained forgiveness and acceptance for those who kept the Passover "otherwise than it was written"- thanks to his prayer (2 Chron. 30:18). In Hezekiah's time, all Israel had to repent to avert total destruction- but even though they didn't, the prayer of Hezekiah saved the nation (Jer. 26:13,19). All of Jerusalem would have been forgiven if there was even one that truly executed judgment, after the pattern of Phinehas (Jer. 5:1- or is this a reference to Messiah?).

And the other way round, it was Zedekiah who personally 'burnt' Jerusalem- it was his stubbornness which lead to the city's destruction in the sense that had he repented, the sinful city could have been saved (Jer. 38:23 RVmg). Thanks to Solomon's prayer, and *if* he had been obedient, all Israel would have been blessed and experienced Yahweh dwelling amongst them (1 Kings 6:12,13). Moses prayed for God to forgive Israel; and He responded: "I have pardoned, according to *thy* word" (Num. 14:20) rather than according to their repentance and

prayer. Indeed it would seem from Heb. 11:28 that Israel were delivered from the Egyptians due to *Moses*' faith in the Christ whom the sprinkled Passover blood pointed forward to. Jethro perceived the vital effort of Moses in Israel's salvation when he advised: "If thou shalt do this thing...then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place [Canaan] in peace" (Ex. 18:23). Due to Moses' prayer, "the Lord repented of the evil which he had said he would do unto his people" (Ex. 32:14 RV). Yet these are the very words of Jer. 18:8- if a *nation* repents, then God will repent. But in this case, God accepted the singular prayer of Moses. Likewise Peter told the lame man: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk"; but the healing was because of *Peter's* faith in Christ's Name (Acts 3:6,16). The Jerusalem Bible makes this apparent: "It is the name of Jesus which, through our faith in it, has brought back the strength of this man". The RV has: "By faith in his name hath his name made this man strong"- as if the power of the name of Jesus is waiting to be activated by human faith.

It is also worth reflecting how Ps. 132, which was written after David's time (:8,10), includes a prayer to God to reward David for all his afflictions (:1). Even after a man's death, faithful men prayed for his salvation; so it seems. This needs some reflecting upon as to its implications. 2 Tim. 1:16 records Paul praying that the Lord would *give mercy* to the house of Onesiphorus; yet the same phrase is used in v. 18 about receiving mercy at judgment day. Here it seems that the whole household of Onesiphorus is to be granted mercy, at that day, because of his faithfulness. Does this imply that some will be in the Kingdom only due to the efforts of a third party? Thus the husband can save his wife...Noah saved his family. The spirituality of those in the land could affect the fate of the others in captivity (2 Chron. 30:9- and these words are applied to us in James 4:8). Indeed, if *Judah* had turned back to the Lord fully, then the 10 tribes who about 10 years previously had been taken into captivity in Assyria, they would have found "compassion before them that lead them captive, so that they shall come again into this land" (2 Chron. 30:9). But they became 'the lost 10 tribes' because Judah didn't respond as fully to Hezekiah's reformation as they should have done.

Thanks to David building an altar at his own expense and asking God to kill him and his family, God stopped the plague upon Israel (2 Sam. 24:16,17- the stretched out hand of God in destruction was what David asked to be upon him and his family). Israel were suffering the effect of their own sin, in not paying the temple tax (Ex. 30:11-16); but in the spirit of Christ, David was willing to die for them. And his dominant desire was counted as if it had been done, and thanks to his self-sacrificial spirit, the people were saved when they personally were unworthy. The wrath of God can be turned away by the actions of those He is angry with (Num. 25:4; Dt. 13:15-17; Ezra 10:14; Jonah 3:7,10; 2 Chron. 12:7; Jer. 4:4; 21:12). And yet that wrath can also be turned away by the prayers of a third party (Ps. 106:23; Jer. 18:20; Job 42:7). This means that in some cases, our prayers for others can be counted as if they have repented. We can gain our brother for God's Kingdom (Mt. 18:15), as Noah saved his own house by his faithful preparation (Heb. 11:7). Through *our personal* dying to the flesh, the life of Christ is manifest not only in us, but is made available to others: "Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are alway delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you" (2 Cor 4:10-12). The life that is even now made manifest *in us* is also made available to work in others because death to the flesh has worked in us personally.

Thus we can as it were do the work of the Saviour Himself, if we truly live as in Him. In this spirit, *Moses*' faith in keeping the Passover led to *Israel's* salvation, they left Egypt *by* him

(Heb. 3:16; 11:28); and when Aaron deserved death, he was redeemed by Moses' prayer on his behalf (Dt. 9:20). Moses' prayer, with uplifted hands, resulted in Israel's victory over Amalek; without his prayer, and the intensity of it, there would have been no victory for them. However, he had to learn this lesson; for God first of all taught him that if he explained the power of God's Name to Israel's elders, then they would hearken unto him (Ex. 3:18). But they didn't hearken unto Moses (5:20), because he didn't bother expounding the Name to them. Therefore he did explain it to them (6:1-9 = 3:14-17); but then again they refused to hearken to him (6:9 cp. 3:18). He learnt that what was proclaimed by God as possible all the same depends on human effort. And this lead him on even further, to realise that through his spirituality, he could bring salvation for others.

### ***“Building up yourselves”***

Jude 20,21 exhorts us: “building up yourselves...keep yourselves in the love of God”. The use of the plural ‘yourselves’ rather than a singular ‘thyself’ suggests that we are to understand this as meaning that we should build up our community, keep each other in the love of God. Jude had begun by exalting that we are “sanctified by God the Father, and preserved [s.w. “keep yourselves”] [by God] in Jesus Christ”. His conclusion is that we are kept / preserved by God in Christ *insofar as* we, the ministers of Christ, keep / preserve each other. The Greek for ‘building up’ occurs in Eph. 4:16: “From [Christ] the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, *maketh increase* [builds up] of the body unto the edifying of itself in love”. The body builds itself up, *if* each part contributes. If they don't, then there is no building up. Using the same figure, 1 Cor. 3:10-14 speak of us building up God's house, the believers, on the foundation of Christ. And we will be judged for the quality of what is built- our final judgment will be a reflection of the quality of our brethren, in that their spirituality is partly determined by our efforts for them. But Col. 2:4 uses the same word to say that we are built up “in [Christ]...as [according as] ye have been taught...beware lest any man spoil you [through false teaching]. The life of fellowship with our brethren in Christ is what builds us up, if we teach each other the right things. But false teaching means that the house of believers will not be built up. This would have been especially so in ecclesias of largely illiterate members. The point is, we are all builders, each part has something to contribute, and the doing of every ecclesial service must be consciously to the end of building up one another.

The builder of God's house is ultimately God, the builder of all (Heb. 11:10). We are God's building (1 Cor. 2:9). But we are also Christ's building, in that God has delegated this work to Him. And yet we build each other up (Rom. 14:19; 15:2), Paul was a master-builder (1 Cor. 3:10), the body builds itself up (Eph. 4:16). As God has delegated the building to Christ, so He has delegated it to us. The Ephesians were built up on the foundations of the apostles' work- not that they are the foundation, for no other foundation can there be except Christ (Eph. 2:20 cp. 1 Cor. 3:11). The building up of those early brethren was on account of the work of the apostles. They were the foundation, they were ‘Christ’ to those brethren and converts. Hence they are called the foundation, whereas Christ is the only foundation. This is how far His work has been delegated to us. Without the work of the apostles, if they had been lazy or spiritually selfish, there would have been no Ephesus ecclesia, nor spirituality within it. Quite simply, we *are* a function of the efforts our brethren and sisters make to build us up.

The Lord Jesus, as the Head, *ministers* nourishment to the body (Col. 2:19). But how? The same word is used in the parallel Eph. 4:16: every joint of the body *supplies* (s.w.) the rest of

the body with nourishment. The Lord's work of ministering to us is articulated through us His servants. This is why faith can die in individuals and ecclesias, simply because brethren and sisters are not ministering strength to others. We should seriously consider our words, spoken and written, our motivation, whether or not we challenge a brother or sister over something, the direction of our conversations...for we can obstruct the grace and nourishment of Christ by our raising of that which pulls down rather than builds up. Likewise Col. 2:19 says that God gives increase to the body; but Eph. 4:16 uses the same Greek in saying how the body makes increase of itself in love. It occurs again in Eph. 2:21: "all the building fitly framed together *groweth* unto an holy temple". This is all so weighty in its implication. Our duty is not merely to retain a correct understanding of certain propositional truths, and ourselves live a reasonable life. The welfare of all others in the body has been delegated to us. Their salvation and perhaps their eternal rejection lays in our hands, to some extent.

Jude further catches the spirit of all this when he writes: "...praying in the Holy Spirit...of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire" (Jude 20-23), just as the Angel had pulled Lot from the fire (Jude 7)- in this sense, Jude seems to suggest, we can do God's work for him. Likewise we must "make a difference" concerning some, just as the Angels "contended" [s.w.] for men (Jude 9 cp. 22). The fire of condemnation at the judgment is in a sense already kindled, as the Lord Himself had taught (Lk. 12:49). The weak brother condemns himself by his way of life, and falls into condemnation even now, before the judgment (James 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:6; Tit. 3:11). We see this, and have the power in some cases to save the brother by pulling him out of that fire of condemnation. Surely the point is that we can save our brother from condemnation at judgment day by what we do for him now.

Abraham saved Lot out of Sodom by his earnest prayer for him; and there is ample reason to think from the Genesis record and his subsequent reaction to the Angel's invitation to leave that Lot of himself was simply not strong enough. Without those prayers and the concern of Abraham read by God as prayer, Lot may well have been left to suffer the condemnation of the world he preferred to live in. And yet Lot fleeing from Sodom is used in the NT as a type of our latter day exit from the world at the Lord's coming. Is this not to suggest that the latter day believers will be saved only by grace, they will not be strong and ready to leave; and their salvation will only be on account of the prayers of the faithful? Lot was not without spirituality; but he was simply swamped by the pull of the world in which he had become entangled, not to mention his unspiritual wife. He was the type on which one could have compassion, making a difference, and pull out of the fire. Indeed, it could even be that Jude's words about pulling a brother out of the fire may be a reference back to Lot being pulled out of the fire that came upon Sodom. Those in his position sin a sin which is not unto death only in the sense that we can pray for them, so that their sin will not lead them to condemnation. But only in this sense is sin not unto death; for the wages of sin, any sin, is death (Rom. 6:23). But in some cases this sentence can ultimately be changed on account of our effort for our brother.

Whilst the way I have expressed all this may seem radical, it is surely apparent that it would be pointless to pray for our brethren if in fact those prayers have no power at all, and if ultimately we are all responsible for our own spiritual path. There is in all this an incredible and most urgent imperative. This is why Paul bowed his knees in prayer for the Ephesians, knowing that his words could really increase and enrich the quality of their relationship with God, if not their very salvation (Eph. 3:14-19). If my prayers can influence your eternal destiny, if they can lead you from condemnation to the eternity of God's Kingdom: then I

must, if I have any gram of love and care within me, dedicate myself to prayer for you. And you, likewise, for me. Prayer for others' spiritual well-being becomes no longer something which is 'tacked on' to our tired, repetitious evening prayers. The preparation of exhortations, comments on the daily readings, all the host of pastoral work which we all ought to be doing for each other in some ways: these things no longer should be seen as the repetitious duties required to keep the show on the road. There is an urgency and vitality about these efforts to upbuild each other. For we are dealing with nothing less than the eternal destinies of others. Even if they are apparently spiritually strong, all the same, our prayers for them make a difference. Paul asked his brethren to pray for him "that I may be restored to you the sooner" (Heb. 13:19). The Lord Himself seems to have asked the disciples to add their prayers to His in asking the Father to send forth more labourers into the over-ripe, unharvested fields (Lk. 10:2), which, by implication, He alone couldn't satisfactorily gather. Paul prayed that others would bring forth fruit (Col. 1:9,10), and he tells the Philippians (Phil. 4:17) how he is willing to accept donations from them, because he wanted them to bear fruit. We can help others please God- by our prayers for them, and by giving them the opportunities to bear fruit.

### **Hastening The Divine Program**

The RV brings out a significant nuance of the Greek text at Mk. 14:29: "When the fruit allows, immediately he sends forth the sickle, because the harvest is come". The 'sending forth' of the sickle is to be connected with the sending forth of the Angels at the Lord's return (Mt. 13:41). But this moment depends upon 'when the fruit *allows*'. The timing of Christ's coming is dependent upon the harvest being brought forth- both in personal spiritual development of the last generation of believers, and in the harvest of converts in literally all the earth. This same principle of fruit 'allowing' events in God's program is reflected in how Paul perceived his missionary work. He says that if he "satisfied" by the fruit of the converts in Rome, then he could move on to preach in Spain, if he could seal the spiritual fruit of unity between Jewish and Gentile converts in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:24 RV). This is the spirit of 2 Cor. 10:15, where Paul told the Corinthians that "when your faith is increased", then the measure or extent of his missionary work could be geographically expanded.

### **9-8 The Unlimited Christian Potential**

And so we have seen the total freewill of man, and God's way of accommodating Himself, even limiting Himself, within this- so that our freewill remains total. And we have seen that what was enabled by the cross, we can limit in its power by our preaching and pastoral work. The Lord died that He might break down the barriers between His people, and create one new body in Him. The Corinthians were reminded of this, and yet Paul had to remind them that there *were* divisions amongst them; they had limited the wonder of what Christ had achieved, so that it became a victory with no practical effect. And yet although sects and divisions should not be within the one body of Christ, in another sense there must be such sectarianism that they which are approved may be "made manifest" by their response to it (1 Cor. 11:29)-in anticipation of how we will all be "made manifest" (s.w.) at the judgment (Lk. 8:17; 1 Cor. 3:13). In this we see the Divine ecology; nothing is wasted. There must not be divisions; but even when they do occur, they are used by God in order to manifest the righteous and the principles of true spirituality.

We began by saying that our genuine choice and freewill is only one aspect of the final, now incomprehensible picture of God's ways. His predestination, His foreknowledge, His will

working over and above that of man, His Sovereign right to work as He pleases; none of these aspects can be omitted from the ultimate equation of God's ways. All we know is that it all works out for good (and this is a wonderful thing) in the last and ineffable equilibrium. For each of us personally, salvation is at the very end by pure grace, not works- either our own, or the benefit of those of others. The utter purity and totality of that grace needs constant meditation. But what I am saying is that within all this, God invites us to understand that we have total freewill, and through our efforts of faith and action we can influence, eternally, the progress of His purpose and the salvation of others. I know I am contradicting myself here. We, as men, will find no paradigm, no trite philosophy or form of words, to reconcile these two divergent strands. It is one of those irreconcilable paradoxes which the believer is given to live with. The more we reflect upon it, the more irreconcilable it is.

By your efforts, you can bring men to salvation, both by preaching to them and then devoting yourself to their care, by prayer and good works of brotherly concern. When you flag in your bill distribution, shy away from that witness you could make, hesitate in that generous impulse to the Lord's work...remember that if you hold back, the Lord's work in that sense is held back. By holding to the Faith, doctrinally and in what it all means practically, you will save both yourself and others (1 Tim. 4:16). And if you neglect to do this, if you let that clawing laziness of our nature hold you back- both your salvation and that of others, not to mention the glorification of Almighty God, will be limited and even made void. And yet, on the other hand, works have no ultimate value before an all-powerful and all-gracious God. These things are wondrous. They are beyond our finest intellects. But the response to realising our total freewill and the total, gracious salvation of God without works is very practical. We need to analyze the success of our efforts, knowing that the more effective we are, the more we will fulfil and glorify the Lord's sacrifice. Perhaps this is why Luke gives progress reports on the early Christian mission in quantitative terms, as if analyzing the success of the work and possibly suggesting how it could be done even better (Acts 2:41,47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1,7; 9:31; 13:43; 14:1; 17:4,12; 18:10; 19:26; 21:20). For us, for you and me: think how you can reach out to more men and women, talk to them, distribute leaflets, place newspaper adverts, tutor students, pray long and earnestly and on your knees for your brothers and for your sisters, write to them, warn them, 'phone them, comfort them, visit them, care for them in their distresses and loneliness, think ahead to their likely needs, spiritual and material, feel for them, be with them in spirit, give to them, go out to save them... for in doing all these things, you will save both yourself and those who hear you (1 Tim. 4:16).

Paul is perhaps one of the greatest examples of living out our Christian potentials to the full. Paul's missionary journeys as they lay neatly plotted on the maps in the backs of our Bibles were a reflection of his free will choice to serve the Lord as He did- the itineraries weren't sent down from Heaven for him to fulfil. The following passages reflect this: "I shall come very soon, if the Lord will" (1 Cor. 4:17-19); "If it should seem worth while for me to go" (1 Cor. 16:3); "You can help me on my way wherever I go next" (1 Cor. 16:6); "I had intended to come first of all to you... I meant to visit you on my way... you would then send me on my way to Judaea" (2 Cor. 1:5); "I am hoping to come to you before long" (1 Tim. 3:14); "It was out of consideration to you that I did not come again" (2 Cor. 1:23); "I made up my mind that my next visit to you..." (2 Cor. 2:1). Rom. 15:22 reflects his frustration at the delays and changes to his plans which he endured; and 2 Cor. 2:13 indicates his restless determination to push on.

As a final thought, consider Is. 66:2: “All these things hath mine hand made... but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word”. The contrast is between what God has made, and the man who trembles at God’s word. It’s as if God is searching for something which He Himself has not created, in the sense that He created the physical world. Perhaps the implication is that when a human being responds to the word of God, then there begins a totally free creation by the believer in his or her own life. God in one sense is the author of the new creation of human hearts- and yet the parallelism in Is. 66:2 seems to imply that the difference between us and the natural creation is that we are in some sense not created by God in that same way, but rather have we allowed God’s word to mould us as, and to respond to that word, in ways which we have control over... and thus we offer ourselves to God as a creation which we have made, and in which He thereby takes extra pleasure.

Of course, we have emphasized, purposefully, just one side of a difficult, irresolvable equation. We have stressed human responsibility and possibility. And yet we must factor in God’s sovereignty, His working of His will. D.A. Carson comments in words of great insight into all this: “The sovereignty-responsibility tension is not a problem to be solved; rather it is a framework to be explored”<sup>(1)</sup>. The somewhat sad picture of the loving Father dividing between his sons “his living” (Lk. 15:12), for them to go off and make what they will of, to either squander in the world or selfishly and self-righteously hoard to themselves, is a picture of the vast and genuine delegation to us by the Father.

#### Notes

(1) D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty And Human Responsibility* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981) p. 2.

### 9-9 Expanding Our Horizons In Christ

When Nicodemus asked “How can a man be born [again]...?” (Jn. 3:4), he wasn’t being facetious. He was asking a genuine question, which we’ve all had in one form or another. Can a person really totally change? Aren’t the influences of our past life, our humanity, simply too great to break totally? Aren’t there human ties that bind, bind so closely that they can never be completely thrown off? “Truly truly I say unto you”, the Lord replied, ‘Yes’. There is a doctrine of a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), whereby we really can be made new people. This is a ladder to reach to the stars. We can overcome sin, bad habits and thought patterns. We may well think that we can’t; the way was set, the die cast, the destiny mapped out, the genes determined; our background, upbringing, life path was as it was, and so we are as we are. But we *can* be made new. Sin need no longer have dominion over us, as Paul says in Romans 6; or as early Genesis put it, “you shall rule over [sin]” (Gen. 4:7). But most people fail to see beyond the very limited horizons of both their nature and their immediate life. Earth’s curvature means that we can’t see beyond horizons; but we can, if we wish, *know* what is there. Yet many can’t see beyond the 9-5 existence, the group at work, the family, their social circle; the very narrow limits of human possibilities, as they perceive them. I meet people who learn the Gospel well, but chose not to be baptized; or those who are baptized but never grasp the reality that they personally will be in God’s Kingdom, will live for ever. They can’t grasp the personal reality of it all. And God recognizes our problem. Of all the myriad ways He could have chosen to achieve human salvation, He chose the most public, dramatic, painful, costly way possible- the death of His only and beloved Son on a cross, 2000 years ago, on a day in April, on a Friday afternoon just outside Jerusalem. Why?

To impress upon us as powerfully as possible that He is for real about saving us; that if we will believe it, we will be there in His eternal Kingdom. It's for this same reason that the cosmos is so huge; that earth's life forms are so many- when God's plan was to give His Son to save only [some] humans, on this planet earth. The colossal scale is surely to demonstrate the awesomely intense focus of God's love upon *us*.

**Trading                      Our                      Talents**

Most who read these words do believe the good news of God's Kingdom; with albeit trembling hands we've signed up to it. And yet we're still bound by our narrow vision, our short term horizons. We are made in the image of God; there's a huge human potential in each one of us to do great things for God. Our pound really can gain five pounds (Lk. 19:18). We are each given talents to trade with, according to our individual ability (Mt. 25:15). We are each wonderfully unique, and have unique potentials set up by God in advance. There are good works for you and I to do, which were before ordained that we should do them (Eph. 2:10). Paul in 2 Cor. 10:14-16 seems to reason that each of us has been given a rule, a marked out area of operation; and he sought to focus upon his rather than work in the 'area' of another. Whilst Paul in the context is speaking of his desire to take Christ to geographical areas 'beyond' where anyone had yet preached Him, the basic principle surely applies to all areas of spiritual endeavour. Whilst we're not to be merely parochial, the well hacked idea of 'my corner of the vineyard' has truth to it. Each of us has received his or her own grace, or gift- not to keep to ourselves, but in order to minister it to others (1 Pet. 4:10). To "be there" for someone, at a specific time and place. We are to "gain" more for the Lord on the basis of what He first gave us. The Greek word translated "gain" is elsewhere usually used about gaining men and women for Christ- a wife 'gains' her unbelieving husband (1 Pet. 3:1); Paul sought to 'gain' people for the Lord (1 Cor. 9:19-22); we 'gain' a lost brother by pastoral effort with him (Mt. 18:15). Be that going for a coffee with him, sending an email, trying to imagine his feelings and approaching him appropriately. Significantly, the other usages of this word translated 'gain' are about the folly of gaining material wealth, even gaining the whole world. We can't be successfully about the Lord's business, of gaining folks for Him, if we are selling our soul to gain material things. That's the point. We were "delivered" talents by God. It's the same word used about how the Lord Jesus exhaled His last breath on the cross; how "that form of doctrine" was 'delivered' to us before baptism (Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 15:3; Jude 3). We can't say we have no talents. Christ died for you, for me; He bowed His head towards each of us personally and gave us His last breath.

Seeing things like this, we should almost despise the worldly advantage and wealth acquisition which is the end of the horizon for most people. In Mt. 19:16 the disciples heard the Lord assuring His people that those who follow Him will "*have* eternal life", enter the Kingdom, enter into life, etc. But having heard all that, Peter asked: "We have left all... what shall we *have*?" (Mt. 19:27). The irony of it all is tragic. They'd just been promised they would "have" eternal life. But that wasn't enough. Their focus was very much on this life; what shall we have *here and now*? They couldn't see very much beyond the present, past the curvature of their earth. Ruth's unnamed relative could have been her redeemer; but when he realized he would have to marry her and have children, and split up his fields into more strips so as to give those children an inheritance along with that of his existing children- he pulled out. He wouldn't 'mar his inheritance'. He saw ahead to his death, to the next generation. His horizon was 20 years at most. But Boaz who didn't think like this established his spiritual inheritance eternally, and is therefore mentioned in the Lord's genealogy. Whilst the short sighted man passed off the page of history anonymously; his name wasn't preserved.

So many of the parables build up to a final climax which is the essence of the point the Lord was trying to get across; and this ‘end stress’ is also seen in the talents parable. The warning is not to be like the man who didn’t have the vision to do anything with his talent, but buried it and returned it unused to the Lord. This perhaps is our greatest temptation in our postmodern age of passivity, of staring at computer screens and clicking a mouse. “Lo, there You have what is Yours” suggests an air of confidence in this man; he really didn’t get it, that he was asked to trade what he’d been given. There was a popular rabbinic story at the time of Jesus, preserved for us in the Sohar Chadash, fol. 47: “A certain king gave a deposit to three of his servants: the first kept it; the second lost it; the third spoiled one part of it, and gave the rest to another to keep. After some time, the king came and demanded the deposit. Him who had preserved it, the king praised, and made him governor of his house”. The Lord is purposefully alluding to this parable, and deconstructing it. Passivity, ‘holding on to the faith’ in a passive sense, is what may be glorified in human religion; but it’s exactly this attitude which will be the ground of condemnation.

Perhaps we have never thought of being generous to someone else [even if it’s a few pennies from our poverty]; of actively telling an acquaintance about the Gospel; of doing acts of kindness for someone ‘out of the blue’, thinking up something nice for them which will make them feel ‘Wow!'; doing mission work; reconciliation with our enemies; seeing beyond our immediate emotions of hurt, pleasure, anger, passion. When we step out in faith and do these things, we start living a totally new kind of life. We find God setting us up with situations, working with and through us- and we feel it. We will see beyond the steely silence of the skies to know the reality of Angelic existence. One of my favourite Bible stories is that of Elisha and his frightened servant. Elisha asks God to open the man’s eyes so that he might see the Angelic armies surrounding them; Elisha [and I so love this] didn’t ask for his own eyes to be opened to see them; he was so certain they were there.

## Potential

One of God’s greatest tragedies must be all the potential He has set up, which we don’t use- the plans He’s made possible, which are left unfulfilled because we don’t rise up to it. Ez. 40-48 describe a great temple which the returning exiles could have built; but they didn’t. Most didn’t even bother returning from Babylon; those who did traded with the Gentiles, married their women, and built their own houses rather than God’s. Zech. 6:15 says the same in the context of this temple being built: “And this shall come to pass, if you will diligently obey the voice of the Lord”. Israel could’ve had honey out of the rock; but they got only water (Ps. 81:16). They could have had peace and serenity when under attack- “but you would not”(Is. 28:12; 30:15). There may be people in your neighbourhood, in your life, who would come to the life eternal if you engaged them about the Gospel. There may be specific victories over personal failures which have been potentially enabled by God, in great detail. Reconciliation with our separated brethren can be achieved; because potentially the enmity is slain, we are already reconciled in one body by the cross (Eph. 2:16). It’s for us to live this out in practice. We can move away from the tribal, jungle mentality that ‘my enemy’s friend is my enemy’- if we see and believe how God loves them too as His dear children. We justify our narrow horizons, our defeatist mentality, by implying that these things aren’t God’s will. But think of the man who came to the Lord with his sick child and asked: ‘If you can do anything... help us’. The Lord turned the terms of the request right around: ‘If you can believe, all things are possible to him that believes’ (Mk. 9:22,23). It is us, and not the Lord, who have our finger on the button, our hand on the dial, to control [as it were] how much He does, the extent of His working.

## Our

## Responsibility

Whilst in the final algorithm of Divine working “God requires not help from man”, we must still understand that what we do does make a difference. A huge and crucial difference. God has structured His working so that *we* are described as saving people, or stumbling them. If we don’t share the Gospel with people, they won’t hear it. This gives a huge importance to every minute we live on this earth, every resource we expend. We can do so much with it. And we can waste, fritter away, our time and lives all too easily.

‘Disciple’ is a big word for a toddler. And so the Toddler’s Bible which I read to Evija describes the call of the disciples like this: “Jesus asked His friends: ‘Would you like to help me?’. ‘Yes!’ they said, ‘We’ll help You!’. So they became His helpers. Do you want to be one of Jesus’ helpers, too?’”. When Evija seems to nod in earnest agreement, I look into her eyes and tell her: ‘We’re very very little, just little people, aren’t we. But we *can* help Jesus; so let’s be Jesus’ helpers’.

## 10. The Child In The Midst: Simplicity In Preaching

What follows is a straight appeal for a simple approach to the Gospel. Not a *simplification* of God’s Truth, a watering down of doctrine, a replacing of God’s black and white with a humanised, mushy, blurred version of spirituality...but all the same, a simple and direct attitude to the Gospel. Not only in our presentation and preaching of it, but more importantly in how we personally respond to it and perceive it. For my sense is that we turn away from the right-between-the-eyes message of the Lord, we cast only a sideways glance at the horror of His cross as we break bread, shy away from the sense of the eternity that lies before us, awkwardly avoid the implications of salvation by pure grace; pass too quickly by the depths of our own failures, and the crying desperation of the world around us; and our witness to the Lord and His Truth can therefore become equally stilted and indirect. We can come to focus on just a few aspects of it which personally fascinate us (e.g. the witness of prophecy), with the result that our witness to men and women lacks the compulsive and yet demanding character of that made by the Lord and our early brethren. We thereby fail in our witness, and that failure makes us yet more inward rather than outward looking. These tendencies are equally true for all readers; from Westerners accustomed to preaching methods that bring little response, to isolated new converts in almost every corner of the globe, discouraged by their efforts producing apparently no fruit.

The poor and the simple minded need exhortation to a simple approach to God’s Truth just as much as the phlegmatic intellectual. Constant lack of cash, endless worry about material things to the point of distraction from spiritual things, taking deep offence with other brothers and sisters over trivial matters...such are the problems that confront the poor of this world who turn to the Truth of Christ. Constant reductionism of the Truth’s doctrines, philosophising away the demands of Christ and the life of cross-carrying, rationalising away everything until one is left with pretty well nothing...these are the problems that face the ‘wise of this world’ who come to know the Man from Nazareth. The Bible uses ‘simple’ and ‘wise’ in two senses. There are the ‘simple’ who have a simple, single-minded, uncluttered faith; and there are the ‘simple’ who refuse the instruction of God’s word. There are the ‘wise’ who are wise in this world but foolish spiritually; and the truly ‘wise’ from Divine wisdom. The Lord took a child and set him in the midst of those rough fishermen and tax collectors. He said that they must become like that child; and further, they must receive that child as a representative of Himself, and thereby, of God Himself. In probable allusion to this, Paul teaches that in malice we should be children, but in understanding: men (1 Cor.

14:20). The child in the midst of men, wide eyed, simple and sincere amidst men full of cynicism and human wisdom and self-righteousness and the gruffness of the flesh... This was a symbol of every true believer, of the Lord Himself, and of Almighty God, as they were and as they are in the midst of a world and even a brotherhood that, like the disciples, so often stares on uncomprehending. The aptness was not in the child's humility [if indeed a child can be humble], but in the purity of the innocence and sincerity and unassuming directness.

### ***Basic Statements***

For all of us, we can miss the colossal import of basic statements. John's writings use a very small vocabulary, but present the deepest ideas <sup>(1)</sup>. The parables are simple stories, and yet they search each truly sensitive hearer to the heart. Time and again we read the same statements in the Bible, subconsciously assuming we know what they mean, skipping on and on until the end of the chapter, happy in our apparent understanding and assent to what we think we are hearing. But we can miss the most elemental teaching, totally. And the more familiar we are with the Bible text, the more years we have read from the same Bible edition or version, or even the same physical Bible, the more likely we are to do this [I'd suggest making an occasional change of Bible to help get out of this rut, or read in another language if you can]. Recently I was reading Mt. 5:23. I'd always read this, or perhaps glanced over it, as saying that I shouldn't offer my gift on the altar if *I* had something against my brother, but I should reconcile with him; but seeing *I* have nothing against anyone, well I can just go on in serving the Lord. There may be others who have a problem with me, but then, that is for them to sort out with me. But no. The Lord is saying: 'If your brother has something *against you*; if the fault is *his*...then *you* take the initiative and try to reconcile it, before doing anything else'. Reading from childhood, I'd never really read it that way. The simple words had just washed over me. But that's clearly what He is saying. And I wonder how many of us have read it like that. Another example would be in the way the Centurion says that he is a man *under* authority- not *in* or with authority, as I had subconsciously read it. And by so saying, He was perceiving that the Lord Jesus was likewise empowered with authority from someone else-i.e. God.

Or take Abraham. God clearly and simply promised to make a great nation out of him. But there was a time when his faith in this wavered, and he lied about his wife Sarah, exposing her to great risk, because he feared losing his life more than his wife. She was his half sister (Gen. 20:12), and so he said she was his sister, not his wife...we are left to imagine the complicated thought processes and contorted reasoning that took place within him before finally doing this. He could justify it, apparently. But he would have been better holding to a simple faith in God's clear statements.

We must give each word of God its weight. The Lord often taught this in the way He would use the OT. Consider how He adduced the future resurrection of Abraham from the statement that God *is* the God of Abraham... We need to clear our minds before we read, and pray briefly before our daily reading for a mind sensitive enough to understand and accept. And read our Bible readings *slowly*. And try to get in the habit of repeating Bible verses to yourself as you go about the daily grind, thinking through their real message for you. Take, for example, the clear teaching of Jesus about a man looking upon a married woman with the intention of purposefully imagining sexual fantasy with her. He says that this *is* adultery. But in our private and ecclesial judgments, of ourselves and of others, is this really what we hear Him saying? Or take the Bible's clear prohibitions of homosexuality. Yet there are many bearing the name 'Christian', Bible readers, who will give the most detailed justifications of

their doing these very things which the Bible clearly prohibits. Through lots of very detailed reasoning and faulty Bible exposition, they justify virtually anything; just as some ‘Christians’ will use the Bible to justify taking part in wars of aggression against others. We must *keep simple*. Live by principles. However simple we may consider ourselves, our nature is very skilful at justifying us in doing whatever we want to do. It works in a complex way. None of us are so simple minded in this sense. We all know from our own experience with temptation that we can justify *anything*. Every way of man can seem right in his own eyes because of this feature of our nature (Prov. 14:12; 16:25; 21:2).

The wilderness temptations show the Lord struggling *deep within His own mind* not to misapply Scripture; we see there the complexities of our humanity. He knew the Bible, it wasn’t so simple as Bible knowledge stopping temptation; conversely, it actually played the major part in it. To turn stones to bread or to rely on Angelic protection weren’t in themselves wrong; but to do so would have meant the Lord fulfilling the contemporary expectations of what Messiah would do in His Kingdom, and thereby He would have somehow given in to the final temptation: to establish a Kingdom without the cross. His flesh worked in such a complex way, but He responded by reciting to Himself the clear precepts of Scripture. And He was tempted just as we are (Heb. 4:15).

### ***“The simplicity that is in Christ”***

Paul considered his Corinthian converts to be a virgin, engaged to be married to the Lord Jesus. Yet he feared that as the snake tempted Eve, so their minds should be corrupted from “the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3). We must be wise to that which is good, and simple concerning evil (Rom. 16:19). Paul compares the simplicity that is in Christ to being a virgin. It’s hard to be a virgin in this hard world, knowing as we do the ways of the flesh. I recently heard a young woman describe herself as a ‘born again virgin’, and so can we all be. It is *shame on us* if in our conversation we respond to the perverted sexual innuendoes of the world around us. Good for us if we are seen as naive by our workfellows. The Corinthians had known plenty of this kind of thing; and yet Paul considered them as innocent virgins walking in a corrupt and enticing world. It’s not that any of us are naive; we know what they are talking about. But rather we walk as in Christ, and through His wisdom we become simple to the apparent subtleties around us. It is one of Satan’s characteristics that he is apparently ‘deep’ and sophisticated (Rev. 2:24). The snake likewise used complex reasoning to deceive Eve. The world around us and our own natures will justify anything, both from the Bible and from a human sense of logic- if we allow ourselves to stray from the simple principles of the Gospel. This is why when these principles are repeated at Bible schools and ecclesial meetings, it is not for us to ‘turn off’, thinking we know it all. These things are the bedrock of our faith.

When we are seriously ill or in great calamity, we focus upon very simple ideas. God truly loves me and cares for me. My Lord Jesus will come again. He will raise me. Judgment lies ahead, but He wants me in His Kingdom. He died for me. He has a plan for me. He loves me and wishes only my eternal good. Hezekiah was driven to this when he was terminally ill. Afterwards he felt as a little child, and concluded: “by these things men live...”. Yet we are all terminally ill, if only we would know it. Paul quotes from the experience of Hezekiah at this time and says that this should be the keynote of our witness (2 Cor. 4:13 cp. Ps. 116:10). He was “delivered from death” and therefore promised to walk before the Lord “in the lands of the living”, believing in salvation and therefore speaking to those lands of it (RV). We all face the day when we shall be as water spilt on the ground, that cannot be gathered up; when

the delicate, beautiful chandelier of human life will come crashing to the ground, when the rope holding the bucket snaps, and it falls into the well. In all these Biblical images of death, we face the tragic irreversibility of it all. Our bodies are already riddled with the cancer of inevitable decay. *Today*, while it is still today, we must focus ourselves upon the vital and essential realities of our faith, and away from all the peripheral issues upon which our flesh would far rather dwell.

### ***The Preaching Of The Gospel***

The basic message of the Gospel is so simple. The complicated parts are clearing away human philosophies. There is one God: period. But as with all human religions, an apostate Christianity has shrouded this glorious truth in the language of ‘mystery’, giving the preacher of truth a hard job to clear away all the philosophical misconceptions which many have, before they can accept the simple Biblical proposition: “there is but one God, the Father”. This is why it is so much easier to preach to an atheist [although there are precious few of them left, with the opening up of China and the ex-USSR]. And this is why simple, direct preaching of Gospel truths is always the most successful. ‘Where do we go when we die?’; ‘Jesus Christ: God or Son of God?’; ‘The devil is inside you not outside you’; ‘Jesus is coming: are you ready?’. These were the adverts that caught the eye of many readers of these words in the days when you were searching for Truth. And so let us continue. Don’t water it down, get indirect or philosophical. We must ‘rightly divide’, or cut straight, the word of truth in our preaching of it (2 Tim. 2:15). The LXX uses the same word in Prov. 3:6: “He will make straight your paths”. We are to offer people a clear, straight way to the Kingdom; to span that gulf between the word of God and the mind of man.

### ***Ecclesial Life***

Paul writes that we should be simple concerning evil, in the context of warning the new converts about the danger of brethren who would cause division (Rom. 16:17-19). Our recent history proves the point of this: until a few years ago, there was a major division in the brotherhood, especially in the mission field. I along with others used to go through all the pros and cons for unity, and just give up. It was all so complicated. But then a group of new converts in various parts of Africa simply said: ‘We’ve had enough. We all believe the Truth. We are going to break bread together. There is only one body. So we all ought to be united, seeing we believe the same things’. Thanks to their ‘simple’ faith in basic principles- not naivety, nor simplistic thinking- the division was largely ended for many of us who lived far away from them in Europe. As new communities of converts develop, often tensions and divisions arise. There are some who would glorify these things as serving God’s truth. But be simple to such evil, Paul says. If (and only if) we all believe the same Truth of the Gospel- we all ought to be together, whatever historical or human factors there may be between us. But that’s too simple for many of us. We complicate the simple basis of unity and fellowship which there is in the Scriptures. ‘If we fellowship x, then y might happen; if we disfellowship z then we’ll get out of problem a’...and so the complexity multiplies itself, and the body is divided.

Sadly, brothers and sisters often don’t say what they really think. We all have a strong tendency to say one thing or act in one way in the presence of some, and quite differently before others. We see it in our brethren, but often fail to recognise we are also guilty. This ought not so to be. The child in the midst was wide eyed with open sincerity. And so should we be; not fools, but all the same open hearted. This way, so much of the politicking and

manoeuvring that can so easily creep into the gatherings of believers will be avoided. The Lord taught that hypocrisy was like leaven- once it begins in a community of believers, it so easily spreads and engulfs all (Lk. 12:1-3). In this context He went on to say that “there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed....whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light”. It is so easy, and we have all done this, to say something about somebody, and ask our hearer not to repeat it. But even in this life, as well as at judgment day, what is spoken in the ear comes out on the housetops. In discussion about fellowship matters, divorce etc. we can so easily say one thing to one group of brethren and something quite different to another. But this, the Lord taught, is hypocrisy. Let us decide our principles and live and speak by them, in humility and sensitivity and simplicity. Because all will be revealed, both in this life and in the coming day of judgment, we ought to be without such hypocrisy. Paul dealt with a very difficult situation in Corinth by being totally open hearted, when his natural sense must have been to be very cagey with them (2 Cor. 6:11). Indeed, some of his most revealing autobiographical passages are found in 2 Corinthians, as he opens his heart to them. And he encouraged them to likewise *openly show before the ecclesiastis* their love for others (2 Cor. 8:24 s.w.). He surely had in mind the Lord’s teaching that our light should shine before others, because all things will ultimately be brought into the open (Lk. 8:16,17). This doesn’t just refer to preaching; it refers to an open shining out of whatever spirituality we have, to everyone.

### ***Prayer***

The Lord in Gethsemane took a long time to pray the simple words: “Father, if ....”. It was long enough for the disciples to fight a losing battle against drowsiness and fall fast asleep (the Greek implies). But how do you pray? With simple, staccato words and phrases like His? Or do you desperately seek for words, any words, just to make it seem you prayed, trying to be like the more mature brethren you hear praying at gatherings? Or after many years of prayer, can I ask, are you just churning out the same old phrases and ideas, with little meaning put into the words...? If the Son of God Himself prayed in such simple terms, surely we ought to likewise. He was and is “harmless” (Heb. 7:26) in His priestly mediation; the same word is translated “simple” in Rom. 16:8. He was an intellectual beyond compare, morally and dialectically He defeated the most cunning cross-questioning of His day; and yet He was a working man surrounded by masses of daily problems. But He was and is “simple” in the sense of single-mindedly committed to His priestly work. We are on earth and God is in Heaven, and therefore our words should be few (Ecc. 5:2). Not few in the sense that we don’t pray for very long, but few in terms of their simplicity and directness. The Lord warned us against the complicated prayer forms of the Pharisees; and asked us to *mean* our words of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ rather than use more sophisticated assurances. The heart is deceitful and so wicked we cannot plumb its depths (Jer. 17:9); and yet the pure in heart are blessed. This must surely mean that the “pure” in heart are those who despite the intrinsic self-deception of the human heart, are nonetheless “pure” or single hearted in their prayer and motives and desire to serve God.

Each statement of the apparently simple model prayer needs careful reflection. He told the disciples in Gethsemane to earnestly pray the simple saying: “pray not to fail in the test” (Mt. 26:41 cp. 6:13). The prayer that they could gabble mindlessly must be prayed with intense attention to every phrase.

## **Generosity**

I've always sensed that the more complex a person, the harder it is for them to be generous. But we are all commanded to be generous to the Lord's cause, knowing that nothing we have is our own. And I am not only talking to wealthy brethren. *All* of us have something, and all of us can give something to our brethren. Consider how the poor believers of the first century such as Corinth [amongst whom there were not many rich or mighty, Paul reminds them] collected funds for the poor brethren in Judea. There is a Greek word translated "simplicity" which occurs eight times in the NT. Five of these are in 2 Corinthians, written as it was in the context of Corinth giving funds for the Jerusalem poor. Consider how the word is translated:

- Paul had "*simplicity* and Godly sincerity" (2 Cor. 1:12)
- They had "*liberality*" (2 Cor. 8:2)
- "*Bountifulness*" (2 Cor. 9:11)
- Their "*liberal distribution*" (2 Cor. 9:13)
- He feared lest they be corrupted from "*the simplicity* that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3).

Evidently Paul saw a link between generosity and the simplicity of the faith in Christ. It doesn't need a lexicon to tell you that this word means both 'simplicity' and also 'generous'. The connection is because the basis for generosity is a simple faith. Not a dumb, blind faith, glossing over the details of God's word. But a realistic, simple, direct conviction. This is why Paul exhorts that all giving to the Lord's cause should be done with "simplicity" (Rom. 12:8- the AVmg. translates 'liberally'). Give, in whatever way, and don't complicate it with all the ifs and buts which our fleshly mind proposes. Paul warns them against false teachers who would corrupt them from their "simplicity"- and yet he usually speaks of 'simplicity' in the sense of generosity. Pure doctrine, wholeheartedly accepted, will lead us to be generous. False doctrine and human philosophy leads to all manner of self-complication. Paul was clever, he was smart; but he rejoiced that he lived his life "in simplicity...by the grace of God" (2 Cor. 1:12). If our eye is single (translating a Greek word related to that translated 'simple'), then the whole body is full of light (Mt. 6:22)- and the Lord spoke again in the context of generosity. An evil eye, a world view that is not 'simple' or single, is used as a figure for mean spiritedness.

Rightly or wrongly, it has been commented: "The poor can respond to the call of the Gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything" <sup>(2)</sup>. The fact is, before God we are all desperately poor, if only we would know it. We came into this world with nothing and can carry nothing out. In Isaiah's image we are as ragged prisoners in dark cells awaiting death, but set free by the light of the Gospel. . We are all, in a sense, 'fatherless' and 'widows'. This is why Israel were given specific instruction to take care of such (Dt. 14:29) for in so doing they were to recognise their own needs. Realising this, knowing it deep within the fibre of our beings, we ought to be able to respond with the simple abandonment and "uncomplicated totality" of the desperate.

### **The Child In The Midst**

The simplicity of the Gospel is epitomised in the cross. There the love of God, His desperate enthusiasm for our salvation, was poured out before the eyes of men. Both then and now, they explain it all away, their theology covers it over, their philosophy takes away the pain and power of it. Their selfishness stops them responding to it. But Paul determined to know nothing, save Christ and Him crucified. Not the ecclesial politics of Corinth, not his own internal pain and desire for self-justification; but the crucified Christ alone. He had to ‘determine’ (Gk. *krino*) to do this; it didn’t come easily, as it doesn’t to us. *Krino* is usually translated ‘to judge’. Paul had to weigh it all up, and consciously decide to know nothing but the crucified Christ in his attitude to the issues in Corinth. Acts 2:46 (NKJV) records how the early brethren broke bread with “simplicity of heart”; and we likewise, in our memorial meetings and in our lives, must unswervingly focus upon Him and the colossal import of His cross.

I once heard an old brother describe how he lost his wife in an air raid. His story, told as part of an exhortation, went like this: ‘It was a Saturday evening when I returned home, to find our place in ruins. I dug through the rubble, all that night, searching for her body. The impression I have now as I look back on it is one of such great simplicity. I recall my hands were bleeding; and I thought ‘His hands bled too’. I thought of her body, and I thought of His. I had short phrases from Scripture going through my mind: Thy brother shall rise again. Sorrow not as others. I am the resurrection. And the life. Even now. At around 10 o’clock on the Sunday morning I realised I could do no more. Although I had been baptized only a short time I felt automatically that I must be at the meeting for the memorial. I walked through the quiet streets to our meeting place, there was no transport moving at all, and was pleasantly surprised that quite a few others had also walked there. I came in late, and sat at the back. I must have looked awful, but I didn’t want to say anything to the brethren at that time. I sat there and heard the words of the brother exhorting, and so, so gratefully took the bread and wine. I can remember gripping the plate and gripping the cup, and thinking nothing else apart from: It’s all true. This is the Truth. Afterwards I quietly shook hands with a few brethren and then left’. He sat there as the child in the midst, and so should we, if we likewise know our desperation and the reality of our redemption.

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### **Notes**

(1) John uses distinct 1011 words out of a total of 15416 words. Mark by contrast has a vocabulary of 1345 words out of a total of 11242 words. Hebrews has 1038 distinct words out of a total of only 4951. The letters of John compare similarly; the three letters have a vocabulary of 302 distinct words out of a total of 2601. Yet Galatians has 2229 words with a vocabulary of 526; Ephesians has a ratio of 2418 / 529; and Titus 658 / 303. Source: Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: S.C.M., 1989). Not only is John’s vocabulary limited; his letters give the impression of being somewhat unarranged, perhaps rather rough in style because they omit any formal greeting or ending; and the Greek has been called “elementary and repetitive”.

(2) Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 2002).

## **11. A World Waiting To Be Won: The Latter Day Expansion Of The Gospel**

Quite simply, the power of eternal death and eternal life has been committed to us. The Gospel must go into all the world, and then must the end come. Clearly there is to be a worldwide witness to the true Gospel; and in the rapid growth of the our ministry in the last few years, we are seeing this. But if we don’t play our part in this, it won’t happen. The whole

work depends upon our collective prayers and goodwill; and upon local brothers and sisters preaching in their own areas, especially translating what literature they can into their language...and the solid financial support of the Western brotherhood. Without all these factors, not a fraction of the work achieved would have been. Our converts have been made in the following countries [and probably others], where only a few years ago there were none; and this is all in addition to all those many countries where the brotherhood already exists:

Afghanistan

Albania

Armenia

Azerbaijan

Bangladesh

Belarus

Bolivia

Brazil

Burundi

Cameroon

Cayman

Chad

China

Congo

Croatia

Czech

Estonia

Ethiopia

Georgia

Hungary

Iran

Israel

Japan

Jordan

Kazakhstan

Kyrgyzstan

Latvia

Lebanon

Lesotho

Lithuania

Macedonia

Moldova

Mongolia

Morocco

Mozambique

Namibia

Pakistan

Poland

Romania

Russia

Rwanda

Serbia

Solomons

Sint-Maarten

Sri Lanka

St. Lucia

Sudan

Swaziland

Tunisia

Turkey

Turkmenistan

Ukraine

Uzbekistan

Vanuatu

Vietnam

And the fascinating thing is, that within many of these nations there are a variety of different peoples who have responded to the Gospel. Thus within Russia alone, the last ten years have seen Bashkorts, Chechens, Jews, Tatars and Udmurts baptized- as well as ethnic Russians. Within South Africa, where there have been white believers for over a century, there has been a sudden outbreak of baptisms amongst many of the African peoples living there: Ndebele, Sootho, Tsonga, Tswana, Xhosa and Zulu , along with refugees from Angola, have all been baptized in recent years. And when I was a child, I thought ‘India’ was a country where they spoke ‘Indian’. But it is comprised of 1 billion people, divided amongst many different ethnic groups, many of which have responded to the Truth in the last 10 years.

And as we go to press, we are expecting the first baptisms soon in Egypt, much of South America, Iraq...And moreover, for the first time we have received response to our preaching from hitherto ‘closed’ countries: Ethiopia, Bosnia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria, Lesotho, the very far north of Russia, within the Arctic circle, the frozen northern Sakhalin islands, Paraguay, Ecuador, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan... even a request from a woman whose address is *Poste Restante*, Grozny P.O., Chechnaya. The stamps torn off envelopes by mission workers are now truly from all the world. Indeed, through internet preaching and the way English is becoming a world-wide language, our message is at least being viewed by men and women in literally every country under heaven. Correspondence courses and *Bible Basics* are now available or being produced in over 40 languages, due to the work of dedicated local brothers and sisters and Western support- for which we in the field sincerely thank God.

The rate of growth can’t continue- because the world is a finite place. We may or may not have a long way to go, depending on how the Lord judges the extent of ‘witness’ to have been made. Therefore this upsurge in response to our preaching is perhaps the surest sign that the Lord’s return is imminent. There *is* interest in people absolutely *everywhere*, from all social and racial groups- even if our Western style preaching has become mismatched to that interest. The Gospel *is* going to all the world. Not only to every nation, but to every type of person. Even in the West, men from prisoners to the highest business executives are now being baptized; and women from prostitutes to politicians. There is repeated Biblical emphasis that “all men” will hear and respond to the Gospel (Jn. 1:7; 5:23; 12:32; Acts

17:30,31; 1 Tim. 2:4). It can't mean 'every man, woman and child who ever live'; for many have lived and died knowing nothing of Christ. It must surely mean that a few of 'all [types of] people', ethnically, linguistically, socially, in terms of personality types...will be saved; just as there were representatives of all types of animal gathered into the ark [a type of baptism into Christ, as Peter informs us]. If the rain is a type of the second coming, it follows that before that time, all types of animal, clean and unclean [which Acts 10 interprets as Jews and Gentiles] must be gathered into the ark of Christ. And now in this 21st century, as we come to the end of human history, *all* types of people are realising deep within them that something is up with this world. They are starting to feel their desperation, for all their show of hedonism. There are far more believers in God today than there were 50 years ago. That's a fact. Never say or think that people 'just aren't interested'. Some of them are, indeed more and more of them are, and they are *desperately* interested. Men and women are somehow turning to Him, but lack the knowledge. And if we go on with this work, the end will shortly come. Please, *please*, for all the reasons outlined here, play your part, do your bit, in extending the Lord's glory in this way, and hastening unto the coming of the Lord. The body of the Lord Jesus has been "day by day fashioned, when as yet there was none of them" (Ps. 139:16 RV). For 6,000 years providence has been at work preparing the people who are now being called into the body. The world has been prepared. It's waiting for the preacher to win it.

The great commission comes in the context of the Gospel records labouring how the various believers all 'went' or were told to 'go' with the message to others. This 'go-to-them' spirit is what should energize us; and yet in so many church discussions, preaching is pictured as making the church attractive to the outsider, e.g. by making the Sunday morning service more attractive. This 'come-to-us' mentality stands in stark contrast to the 'go-to-them' spirit of the great commission and the early church.

#### Appendix: Some Objections Considered

The usual objections and fears to going 'into the mission field' hinge around fears of not being able to cope with the new language or country. A survey was done of why missionaries returned from the field prematurely<sup>(1)</sup>. Significantly, those very reasons which are the biggest fears, turned out not to be issues in most cases. Rather, the issues centred around 'politics' within the church, problems in relationships and attitudes. These are the very things which stand a good chance of being ironed out *before* the missionary leaves. And it's why so much of what I have to say in this series of studies is about developing the right attitudes and relationships. The survey results are worth quoting- and reflecting upon:

- 1 Inability to maintain a satisfactory devotional life when separated from other sympathetic believers.  
8.0%
- 2 Inability or unwillingness to submit graciously to the discipline or directives of supervisors or senior missionaries.16.5%
- 3 Inability or unwillingness to work in harmony with fellow missionaries.17.0%
- 4 Inability to suppress a feeling of superiority to natives or native workers, or inability to express an attitude of complete sympathy for same.13.0%

5 Friction or lack of harmonious co-operation between husband and wife to the extent that the effectiveness of the work was impaired.8.5%

6 Inability to adjust to new life or “cut” homeland ties.4.0%

7 Health failures, psychosomatic or psychoneurotic.2.0%

8 Incapacity or unwillingness to formulate and carry out a definite or satisfactory daily detail of operation.11.0%

9 Carelessness or evasiveness in the preparation of financial or operational reports.4.5%

10 Inability to maintain a satisfactory standard of personal or household tidiness to the extent that there was a reflection on the work of the mission and

11 Sex problems.7.0%

12 Inadequate scholastic work or inability to utilize knowledge in a practical manner, such as inability to master a foreign language. 2%

#### **Notes**

(1) Gordon Fraser, ‘A Survey Of First Term Missionary Casualties’, *Biblioteca Sacra* Vol. 115 No. 457—Jan. 1958, p.47.

## 12. Christian Self-Perception

With nothing less than a touch of genius, David Levin wrote: “Identity holds the most strategic position in our minds, and will have more impact on our behaviour than any single belief or bit of information. We can think of ourselves as “*a child of God*,” or “*a disciple*.” Or, we can think of ourselves as “*a loser*,” or as “*a victim*.” Our identity shifts slowly, and is far more than the sum of what we do and where we do it. Someone once remarked, “*We are human beings, not human doings*.” Whatever we think of ourselves will guide our lives. God sees us at this level, as He does not measure our behaviour or even our attitudes separately. He only sees a whole: a sheep or a goat. There’s no such thing, in God’s eyes, as “*a pretty good goat*,” or a “*not-so-good-sheep*.” He judges, completely and ineffably, at the identity level. Either we are disciples, or we are not. Identity is the most important force in determining our lives. Even more important, God’s assessment of our identity will determine our eternal destiny”<sup>(1)</sup>. And the Lord Jesus came to proclaim “the opening of the prison”, or “the opening of the eyes to them that are bound” (Is. 61:1 RVmg.)- He came to open blind eyes, to change the self-perceptions which imprison most of humanity. The Israelites were seen as grasshoppers by their enemies- and so this is how they came to perceive themselves (Num. 13:33). Prov. 23:7 RV observes: “As he reckoneth within himself, so is he”. We are defined by our own self-perception. We must come in the end to perceive ourselves from God’s perspective and not according to how men perceive us. We must see ourselves from outside ourselves, and thereby “guide thine own heart in the way” (Prov. 23:19).

We are to live out in practice what we have been made in status by our gracious Father. The very fact He counts us as in Christ, as the spotless bride of His Son, must be both felt and lived up to by us. The way He counts us like this is a wonderful motivation to rise up to it all. Consider how God told Israel that *if* they kept His commandments, *then* they would be His “peculiar treasure” (Ex. 19:5). This conditional promise is then referred to by Moses as having been fulfilled- Israel became His “peculiar treasure” by status even though they did *not* keep His commandments (Dt. 7:6; 14:2 s.w.; Ps. 135:4). Moses concludes by saying that “the Lord hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people [s.w.]...*that thou shouldest keep all his commandments*” (Dt. 26:18). See what’s happening here. God said that *if* they were obedient, *then* they would be His special people. Yet He counted them as His special people even though they were not obedient. And He did this so that they would be so touched by this grace that they *would* be obedient.

Consider how we perceive baptism. Some will say ‘I became a Christian on [20.11.83]’, or ‘I became a member of the XYZ ecclesia on ...’. They mean, that’s when they were baptized. Others will perceive it as: ‘I was baptized into Christ on 20.11.83...I accepted the Truth on...I committed myself to the Lord’s service on...I came to Christ on...’. None of these are wrong. They are all true. My suggestion, and my own perception of my own baptism, is that it was a personal joining with the Lord Jesus Christ. This, it seems to me, must be the

central perception which dominates our self-awareness. The human side of it-the name of the group or ecclesia- is true, and needs in some contexts to be ever remembered, but it is only the human side. The church, the ecclesia we joined...all these things will fade away, as time takes its course. But the essence will eternally remain: that we are in Christ, we share in His life and live it out, seeking to act as He would in every situation we face, and this is the life we will eternally live by His grace.

### ***Present Salvation***

It could appear that I am saying ‘It’s not so important what we believe’. No, I don’t mean that at all. We should be proud of our brotherhood and of our little part in it. What I’m saying is that first and foremost, we are God’s children. The height and depth of who we *are* right now, and who we will be, is such that it makes *all* else, including the fact we bear the name of some particular church, of very much secondary importance. Many a town and village has its share of small time Protestant religions- JW’s, Adventists, Baptists. May it not be that we perceive ourselves as just another such group, and nothing else; just another ordinary guy who wants God in his life, who has a religious conscience which is salved by baptism and attending church meetings. We are saved, in prospect, here and now. We have been translated into the Kingdom (Col. 1:13), we have been saved (2 Tim. 1:9), on account of being in Christ we not only died and resurrected with Him in baptism, but also afterwards ascended with Him and are as it were in heavenly places with Him (Eph. 2:5,6); our life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). We are in the process of receiving a Kingdom (Heb. 12:28 Gk.). “We have eternal life” (1 Jn. 5:13). We need to take a long, careful look at this question. You are in Christ; you *will* be there, in the Kingdom. In a sense, you *are* there. Me? Really *me*, I will be there? Yes, that’s what these verses teach.

Perhaps you work such long hours you have little time to think, perhaps children demand all your attention. Perhaps the problems of your own personality grip your mind as you struggle with them subconsciously, every waking minute. But please. Make some time. Just 5 straight minutes alone. To think through the above verses. That because you were baptized into Christ and continue in Him, and have not rejected His grace, you *will* be there, and in a sense, you *are* there. We are constituted a Kingdom of priests *now* (Rev. 1:6; Ex. 19:6 cp. 1 Pet. 2:5,9). Take time to think it through, to the point that you feel that little gasp within you. Brethren, this is no philosophy we have believed, no piece of intellectual fascination we stumbled across along life’s way. This is the Truth, the eternal and saving Truth. A man cannot face these things and not have a deep impression of the absoluteness of the issues involved in faith and unbelief, in choosing to accept or reject the work of the struggling, gasping Man who hung on the stake to achieve it. It truly is a question of believe and be saved, or reject it and perish. And we have believed. We are not of them who draw back, who throw it all away and end in the gutter, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul by grace (Heb. 10:39). We perceive ourselves [as we walk down the street or play with our children, or as we lay awake at night staring at the ceiling, at the light shade, lost in introspection...] as winners, as more-than-conquerors,

as those who will be there, as those who are there, those on the way there. On the other hand, if we perceive ourselves as losers, this is who we will be. Israel felt that “we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight” (Num. 13:33). According to how they felt that the world perceived them to be, so they felt themselves to be. As it happened, they were wrong; the Canaanite nations were terrified of them, according to Rahab’s inside account. If Israel had perceived themselves as those made strong by the Lord, more than conquerors, so indeed they would have been. Self-perception was and is vital for God’s Israel.

The Lord bid us cut off the hand or foot that offends, and thus enter into life halt...blind, rather than be condemned in Gehenna (Mt. 18:8,9). It sounds as if ‘entering into life’ means entering into the Kingdom; and so it can do, for this clause is set as the antithesis for being condemned at the last day. Yet it is hard to imagine us entering the Kingdom somehow maimed, and in any case then we will not need to be without what causes temptation. The figure rings more true to our lives today; if we cut off our flesh *now*, we will live the rest of our mortal days somehow lacking what we could have had. In this case, we enter into life right now, insofar as we cut off the opportunities of the flesh. Jesus told another man that if he would enter into life, he must keep the commandments (Mt. 19:17). Insofar as he kept those commands, he would right now enter into life. We are entering into the experience of the real life, the “eternal life”, right now! Likewise the camel must shed its load of riches and goods, so that it can pass through the gate into the Kingdom. But we are doing that right now! We will pass through the gate into the Kingdom when the Lord returns (Rev. 22:14), and yet through shedding our materialism, we do it in prospect now. John puts it more bluntly and yet more absolutely: now, through the life of faith, we have the eternal life, in that we begin to live now the type of life which we will eternally live. We receive the Kingdom of God here and now, in that we receive the Gospel of the Kingdom; and if we accept it as a little child, we begin to enter it, now- in that the lives we live determine whether or not we will enter it at the Lord’s coming. We are on our way into life! We have received the Kingdom, our names were written from the foundation of the world, and only our falling from grace can take that away. This is almost too good news to believe.

### ***Imputed Righteousness***

How can it be? Throughout Romans, the point is made that the Lord *counts as righteous* those that believe; righteousness is *imputed* to us the unrighteous (Rom. 2:26; 4:3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,22,23,24; 8:36; 9:8). But the very same Greek word is used of *our* self-perception. We must count / impute ourselves as righteous men and women, and count each other as righteous on the basis of recognising each others’ faith rather than works: “Therefore we conclude [we count / impute / consider] that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law... Likewise reckon [impute] ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord”. (Rom. 3:28; 6:11). We should *feel* clean and righteous, and act accordingly, both in our own behaviour and in our feelings towards each other. Border-line language and expressions,

clothing with worldly slogans, watching violence and pornography...these are not things which will be done by someone who feels and perceives him/herself to be clean and righteous, “in Christ”. The mind of love imputes no evil to others, as God doesn’t to us (1 Cor. 13:5; AV “thinketh no evil”, s.w. to count / impute in Romans). And again the word occurs in 2 Cor 3:5: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to *think* [s.w. impute] any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God”. We *are* able to count / feel to ourselves as righteous; for God has counted us righteous.

We are “in Christ” to the extent that we *are* Christ to this world. In this sense He has in this world no arms or legs or face than us. “The Son of God, Jesus Christ, was preached among you through us, even through me and Silvanus” (2 Cor. 1:19 RVmg.). Paul was a placarding of Christ crucified before the Galatians (Gal. 3:1 Gk.); to the Corinthians he was “the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 2:10 RSV). There is a prophecy of the Lord Jesus preaching: “How beautiful are the feet of *him* that preaches the Gospel” (Nah. 1:15); but it is quoted in Rom. 10:15 with a subtle change of pronoun: “How beautiful are the feet of *them* that preach”. We are the Lord Jesus to this world, because we are brethren in Him. This alone is a powerful imperative as to who we are, how we speak, the men and women we show ourselves to be. Imputed righteousness is given us on the basis of our faith. This means that insofar as we can believe all this is true, so it will be. In this sense “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Rom 8:16). We are His dear children (Eph. 5:1), the pride and joy of Almighty God, counted as wonderful and righteous by Him. And further, we are Christ to our brethren. The “master of the house” is representative of Jesus in Lk. 13:25; and yet we are to be the “master of the house” in spiritually feeding our brethren (Mt. 24:43,45 RV). It is through us that He ministers to His household.

### ***The Body Of Christ***

We are the body of Christ. We are counted righteous because we are baptized into Him. We are counted as Him; and we are parts of His body, hands, feet, eyes, internal organs. As such, we are inextricably linked in with the other members of the body. We cannot operate in isolation from them. “We are members one of another...we are members of his body” (Eph. 4:25; 5:30). Only insofar as we belong to each other do we belong to Him. We must perceive ourselves not so much as individual believers but as members of one body, both over space and over time. We must soberly ‘think of ourselves’ as someone who has something to contribute to the rest of the body, even if first of all we are not sure what it is (Rom. 15:3-8). We feel their weaknesses as if they are our own. Self interest must die; their wellbeing becomes all consuming. This is why men like Daniel and Nehemiah could feel that “*we* have sinned...”- not ‘*they* have sinned’. Ezra said that because *we* have sinned, *we* cannot lift up ourselves before Yahweh. And he cast himself down before Yahweh in demonstration of how much he was with his people in this (Ezra 9:15; 10:1)! Esther, in an eloquent type of the Lord’s mediation for us, risked her life because she felt that “*we* are sold, *I* and my people, to be destroyed” (Es. 7:4). If she’d have kept her mouth shut, *she* wouldn’t have been destroyed. But she fought and won the same

battle as we have daily or weekly before us: to identify ourselves with our weaker and more suffering brethren. The Lord Jesus didn't sin Himself but He took upon Himself our sins- to the extent that He *felt* a sinner, even though He wasn't. Our response to this utter and saving grace is to likewise take upon ourselves the infirmities and sins of our brethren. If one is offended, we burn too; if one is weak, we are weak; we bear the infirmities of the weak (Rom. 15:1). But in the context of that passage, Paul is quoting from Is. 53:11, about how the Lord Jesus bore our sins on the cross. We live out the spirit of His cross, not in just bearing with our difficulties in isolation, but in feeling for our weak brethren.

If we believe that we are counted righteous, we must likewise assume that all those properly baptized are equally righteous, and will be saved along with us. We cannot condemn each other; therefore we must assume each other will be saved. If we have a positive attitude to our own salvation, we will likewise perceive our whole community. And the reverse is true; if we cannot believe that God sees *us* positively, we will tend towards a negative outlook upon ourselves. My sense is that many of us fail in this area. Paul had many reasons to think negatively of his converts; and yet he writes to the Thessalonians as if 'we all', all his readership, would be saved (1 Thess. 4:17). And likewise to dodgy Corinth, he writes as if they would all be accepted at the Lord's return (1 Cor. 15:52); he saw them *all* as innocent Eve in danger of being beguiled (2 Cor. 11:3).

### ***The Two Pauls***

But we are real life men and women, only too aware that although yes, we are in Christ, we are also all too human still. We still sin the sins and think the thoughts and feel the feelings of those around us. We are only who we are, born in such a town, living in such a city, doing a job, trying to provide for a family. In our minds eye we see the spotless lamb of God, moving around Galilee 2000 years ago, doing good, preaching the Gospel, healing the sick. But He was there, and we are here now, today, in all our weakness and worldly distraction. He was as He was, but *we* are as we are. We each have two 'people' as it were within us; we act both as spiritual and as fleshly people. The record of Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18:16 reflects this: "At that time did Hezekiah cut off the gold from...pillars which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, because of the king of Assyria". The Hezekiah who faithfully overlaid the pillars with gold was the same man, acting a different persona, who then cut it off faithlessly when under pressure. Likewise the Jews could be described as both Abraham's seed (Jn. 8:37) and not Abraham's seed (Jn. 8:39); as having Abraham as their father (Jn. 8:56), and yet also having the devil as their father (Jn. 8:39-41,44).

Reading through his letters, it is apparent that Paul saw himself as two people: a natural man, a Jew from Tarsus, a Roman citizen living in the Mediterranean world...and also, a man in Christ. He speaks of how "I bruise myself", as if the one Paul was boxing against the other Paul (1 Cor. 9:27 RVmg.). This is why in an autobiographical passage in 2 Cor. 12, he says of himself: "I knew a man in

Christ”, who had great visions 14 years previously (at the council of Jerusalem of Acts 15), and who was subsequently given a “thorn in the flesh”. “Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory”, he writes (2 Cor 12:5), as if separating himself from this more spiritually exalted man who saw these visions. Paul is surely telling us that he sees himself as two people. He makes the point clearly: “I will not be a fool...I am become a fool” (:6,11). He was the greatest apostle; although he was nothing (:11). This language comes to a crisis in 12:10: “When I [i.e. the natural Paul] am weak, then am I [the spiritual Paul] strong”. Consider how this dualism is to be found in many other places:

#### *The Natural Paul*

Paul could say: “I am a Pharisee...I am a man which am a Jew” (Acts 23:6; 21:13,39; 22:3; 2 Cor. 11:22) Circumcision and being Jewish has ‘much advantage’ (Rom. 3:1,2). “Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel” (Phil. 3:5). He argues that all Jews are “the seed of Abraham”, including himself, by birth (2 Cor. 11:22).

“We who are Jews by nature and not sinners of the Gentiles” (Gal. 2:15)

#### *The Spiritual Paul*

But he also stresses that “they are not all Israel who are of Israel” because only “the children of the promise”, those baptized into Christ, are counted as the seed (Gal. 3:16,27-29; Rom. 9:8). The spiritual Paul is neither Jew nor Gentile. The ‘gain’ of being personally Jewish Paul counted as loss (Phil. 3:3-7). His circumcision meant nothing (Rom. 2:29; 1 Cor. 7:19). “We are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit...and have no confidence in the flesh [i.e. the fact of literal circumcision, see context]” (Phil. 3:7)

This contrasts sharply with Paul’s whole message that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, and both groups are all equally sinners (Rom. 3:9,23). He speaks of “theirs is the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship...theirs are the patriarchs” (Rom. 9:4,5). He clearly dissociates himself from Jewry. He had to *become like a Jew* in order to save them, although he was Jewish (2 Cor. 9:20). He carefully kept parts of the law (Acts 18:18; 21:26; 1 Cor. 8:13). To the Jew he became [again] as a Jew; and to the Gentiles he became as a Gentile (1

Cor. 9:20). He acted “To them that are without law, as without law...”. He was “dead to the law” (Gal. 2:19) He was a Jew but considered he had renounced it, but he became as a Jew to them to help them. He saw no difference between Jew and Gentile (Gal. 3:27-29) but he consciously acted in a Jewish or Gentile way to help those who still perceived themselves after the flesh. “...(being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ)” (1 Cor 9:21).

I am carnal (Rom. 7:14)

But in Christ he was not carnal (1 Cor. 3:1 s.w.)

No flesh may glory before God (1 Cor. 1:29)

Paul, in his spiritual man, as counted righteous before God, could glory (Rom. 15:17).

“Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect”

“Let us therefore, as many as be perfect...” (Phil. 3:12,15). In 1 Cor. 13:10, he considers he is ‘perfect’, and has put away the things of childhood. Thus he saw his spiritual maturity only on account of his being in Christ; for he himself was not “already perfect”, he admitted.

“ I laboured more abundantly than they all...

... *yet not I*, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor 15:10)

God set the apostles *first* in the ecclesia (1 Cor. 12:28)

God set the apostles *last* in the ecclesia (1 Cor. 4:9)

“I live...

... *yet not I*, but Christ liveth in me [the new ‘me’]... I [the old ‘me’] am crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20)<sup>(2)</sup>

“I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I

He “supposed”, the same word translated “impute” as in ‘imputed

magnify mine office” (Rom. 11:13). He considered himself rightfully amongst the very chiefest apostles (2 Cor. 12:11).

righteousness’, that he was amongst the chiefest apostles (2 Cor. 11:5). He knew this was how his Lord counted him. But he felt himself as less than the least of all saints (Eph. 3:8). “For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:9-10).

This all shows that Paul wasn’t so heavenly that he was no earthly good. He saw himself from outside himself, as a Jew, as a Pharisee from Tarsus. And he used that self-understanding to get his message over to ordinary people. He could turn it on and he could turn it off; to the Jew he acted as a Jew, to the Gentiles as a Gentile. To the spiritually weak, he became as weak. He didn’t think ‘Well this is how I am, you’ll just have to put up with me and take me for who I am’. He was far more sensitive to others than to be so selfish. Sadly, this former attitude is all too common amongst our community. We can delude ourselves that it is a sin to adapt, concede, compromise, tolerate, submit...obtuseness and angularity can become glorified in the name of upholding a true position. But in spiritual reality, others don’t have to put up with us- we have to make ourselves all things to all. Paul did this to the extent that he was slanderously accused of inconsistency by the Corinthians. Although Paul made himself all things to all men, he didn’t just seek to please men (Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4). He sought their salvation and approached them in appropriate terms, but he didn’t just seek to please them from a human viewpoint. He didn’t cheapen the Gospel. But most importantly, his own internal self-perception was that he was neither Jew nor Gentile but in Christ; a citizen of Heavenly Jerusalem, far more than earthly Rome (although he used that Roman citizenship at times). The Corinthians were mainly Gentiles, but Paul speaks of them as “When ye were Gentiles...” (2 Cor. 12:2 RV). They had a new racial identity in Christ, and yet, he also reminded them at times that they were Gentiles. We too cannot obliterate who we are or where we came from. But superimposed upon this must be the realisation than now, we are in Christ.

All this opens a window into our understanding of 2 Cor. 10:10: “His bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible”. Yet this is hardly how Paul comes over at his trials. The conclusion surely is that Paul made himself a weak person in his dealings with Corinth. He could truly be all things to all people, he wasn’t constrained by his natural personality type as so many of us allow ourselves to be. This is why Paul could go on in v. 11 to warn Corinth that the next time he visits them, he won’t be weak. He will ‘be’ as he is in his letters. In all this we see the full import of the sacrifice and crucifixion of self of which the Lord repeatedly speaks. Putting meaning into words, this means that we will genuinely ‘be’ the person we need to be in order to help others. And thus he

could say: “I protest by that glorying in you, brethren, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily” (1 Cor. 15:31 RV). By this he perhaps means that because he was daily crucified with Christ, he was thereby able to rejoice in them; to overcome the pain and hurt which their treatment of him would naturally give rise to, because he could be another person. That new person could rejoice in the Corinthians and view them so positively.

### ***The Self-Perception Of Jesus...***

Likewise the record of the Lord’s wilderness temptations is almost certainly a reflection of *His* self-perception; He spoke to the ‘devil’ / personification of sin which was within Him, He saw Himself as two people, and His spiritual man triumphed gloriously against the man of the flesh. Lk. 4:8 records how “Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve”. He understood that we can only serve two masters: God or the flesh (“mammon” is another personification of the flesh, similar to ‘satan’). He saw His own flesh, His own internal thoughts, as a master begging to be served which He must totally reject. His words are a quotation from Dt. 6:13, which warns Israel to serve Yahweh alone and not idols. He perceived His own natural mind and desire as an idol calling to be served. When the Lord explained what had happened in the wilderness to the disciples and thereby to the Gospel writers, He opened His heart to them. He gave us all a window on how He perceived Himself, as He sought to explain to men the internal struggles of the Son of God. Bringing it all back home, I must ask firstly how much we even *struggle* with temptation? And as and when we do, would we not be helped by the Lord’s example of talking to ourselves, and personalising Scripture as He did? ‘You don’t want to do *that!* Give up your place in the Kingdom, for that...drug, that girl, that job? Of course not! Come on. There *is* a way of escape; Paul told me God won’t try me beyond my strength, He will make me a way of escape’. The Lord in the wilderness was representative of us all. He was led of the Spirit at that time (Mt. 4:1); and Paul uses just those words of us in our present experience of trial (Rom. 8:14).

### ***...and David***

David too writes in the Psalms as if he sees himself from outside of himself. Ps. 132 is a good example, where he speaks of David in all his afflictions. Ps. 131:2 RV has him speaking of stilling and quieting his soul like a mother does a child-as if he saw himself as the mother to his own soul, talking to himself.

### ***Serious Sinners***

We shouldn’t be discouraged if in our self perception we see ourselves as serious sinners. We must say of ourselves that “we are unprofitable servants” (Lk. 17:10)- i.e. condemned, for this is how the phrase is used elsewhere in the Lord’s thinking (Mt. 25:30). This is the finest paradox of all. If we perceive ourselves as worthy of condemnation, we will be saved. If we would judge [i.e. condemn] ourselves, we will not be judged / condemned (1 Cor. 11:31). This is written in

the context of the breaking of bread. When we examine ourselves then, and at other times, do we get to the point where we truly *feel* through and through our condemnation? If this is how we perceive our natural selves, then surely we will be saved- if we *also* believe with joy that God's righteousness is counted to us. Over time, Paul's perception of his own sinfulness increased. The following quotes are in chronological sequence:

"I am the least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9);

"Less than the least of all saints" (Eph. 3:8)

"Chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

There is a tension between the fact we are saved *in prospect* and absolutely assured, by grace, of a place in the Kingdom; and the evident awareness we must have of our own inadequacy and condemnation; that sense of the future we might miss. In the age to come, we will no doubt realise that this is how it had to be. But for now, we are left with that almost irresolvable tension.

### ***Christ Centredness***

If we believe that we are counted righteous, we will with joy and gratitude be people who are centred upon another man- the Lord Jesus, the Saviour who made this great salvation possible. We run the risk, it seems to me, of being Bible centred rather than Christ centred; a community of Bible students, a kind of learned society that has more Biblical learning and erudition than most other 'Christian' communities; but precious little else. The man Christ Jesus must dominate our individual and collective consciousness, and the true doctrines we are blessed to know must enable this the more powerfully in practice. We must see in that Man who had fingernails, hair, who needed to shave, who sneezed and blinked, the very Son of God; the Man who should dominate our thinking and being. And we must grasp the wonder of the fact that from the larynx of a Palestinian Jew came the words of Almighty God. All that was true of natural Israel becomes a warning for us, Israel after the spirit. The tension between the following of Jesus and merely studying the pages of the Bible for academic truth is brought out in the Lord's encounter with the Jews in Jn. 5:39: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: [but] ye will not come to *me* that ye might have life". Surely the Lord is using irony here: as if to say, 'Go on searching through the scrolls, thinking as you do that finding true exposition will bring you eternal life. But you must come to *me*, the word-made-flesh, the living and eternal life, if you wish to find it'.

### ***God Manifestation***

We bear the Name of Yahweh / Jehovah, by reason of our baptism into it. His Name is declared as His character- merciful, truthful, judging sin, patient etc (Ex. 34:5-7). He who will be who He will be, manifesting His characteristics as He does so, must have His way in us too. Babylon and Nineveh were condemned

for having the attitude that “I am, and there is none beside me” (Is. 47:8; Zeph. 2:15). Their self-perception was a parody on the Name and being of Yahweh: He alone can say “I am, and there is none else” (Is. 43:11; 44:6; 45:6,21) and seek to be who He is. He alone can seek to articulate the characteristics that make up His Name onto the lives of others, and onto the things that comprise His Kingdom. We are not to be who we are; to ‘just be yourself’; to ‘just do it’, as foolish slogans and adverts encourage us. We are here to show forth His mercy, truth, judgment of sin, patient saving of the weak etc., not our own personality. We are, in the very end, Yahweh manifested to this world, through our imitation of the Lord Jesus. Paul was alluding to the Yahweh Name (as he often does) when he wrote: “...by the grace of God *I am what I am*” (1 Cor 15:10) <sup>(3)</sup>. ‘Yahweh’ means all of three things: I am who I am, I was who I was, and I will be who I will be. It doesn’t *only* mean ‘I will be manifested in the future’ in a prophetic sense; that manifestation has been ongoing, and most importantly it *is* going on through us here and now. Paul felt Yahweh’s insistent manifestation of the principles of His Name through and in himself and his life’s work. We are right now, in who we *are*, Yahweh’s witnesses to Himself unto this world, just as Israel were meant to have been. Thus he felt “jealous with the jealousy of God” over his converts (2 Cor. 11:2); jealousy is a characteristic of the Yahweh Name, and Paul felt it, in that the Name was being expressed through him and his feelings. His threat that “I will not spare” (2 Cor. 13:2) is full of allusion to Yahweh’s similar final threats to an apostate Israel. “As *he is* [another reference to the Name] so *are we* in this world” (1 Jn. 4:17). Appreciating this means that our witness is to be more centred around who we essentially *are* than what we *do*.

### ***Jesus Is Our Lord***

There are some passages which appear to teach [misread] that we go on living after death. It has been observed that Rom. 14:8,9 implies *that Jesus is our Lord* after death as well as in life: “For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living”. We are the Lord’s after death, in the same way as Abraham lives unto Him (Lk. 20:38). We are still with Him. He doesn’t forget us when we die, just as I will remember my mother till the day of my death, regardless of when she dies. But if the Lord doesn’t come, I will die, and my memory, my love, my fondness, will perish (for a small moment). But God doesn’t die, His memory doesn’t fade and distort as ours does; images of us don’t come in and out of His mind with greater intensity and insistence at some times than at others; He remembers us constantly and will remember us after our death, right up until when the Lord comes.

Because of this, He *is* the God of Abraham; Abraham is alive in the mind of God, He remembers his faith and his offering of Isaac, just as much as He was aware of it in Abraham’s lifetime. The works of the dead follow them, in the sense that once they finish their labours their works are still in the memory of the Father (Rev. 14:13); for what father would not remember his dead child’s ways

and deeds? This is why Rom. 14:8,9 says that Jesus is our Lord after death just as much as He was and is during our lifetimes. Why? Because we are “the Lord’s”, because we were “added to the Lord” through baptism (Acts 2:41,47; 5:14; 11:24), because we are true brothers-in-Christ. From God’s perspective, the dead believers are cheering us on as we run the race to the end; He remembers them as they were, and knows how they would behave if they were alive today, looking down upon us as we run the race (Heb. 12:1).

Or in another figure, the blood of the dead believers cries out from under the altar, demanding vengeance on this world: on the Catholic, Protestant, Babylonian, Roman, Nazi, Soviet systems that slew them for their faith (Rev. 6:9). To God, their blood is a voice, just as real as the voice of Abel, which cried out (in a figure) for judgment against Cain (Gen. 4:10). After their death, those who had already died are spoken of as being given “white robes” and being told to rest a bit longer (Rev. 6:11). Yet the white robe is given at baptism; a man may cast off Christ, but the prodigal is given again the robe if he returns (Lk. 15:22 s.w.); we are given white robes in this life through our acceptance of the blood of Christ and living in response to that redemption (Rev. 7:13,14; 22:14 Gk.). God giving believers white robes after their death can surely only be understood as His remembrance of how in their lives they had put on those robes. But His view of time is different, and He sees them as doing it again and again, as He considers how they had died for His cause and how thereby He will surely raise them. This is just as we would relive in our own minds the baptism of one of our children who has died. We know of course that there is no immortal soul, and that we personally feel nothing in death. But there is an immortal spirit, in that who we essentially are, our personality, lives on in the memory of a loving Father.

### ***In the end...***

In the end, we are all only ordinary men, nothing-special women, who have somehow been called by Almighty God to know the ultimately true faith, to have the hope of eternity with Him- life with His nature, with His Son, for ever and ever and ever... And yet we can treat this relationship, this essential *being*, as just something ordinary. We can fail to grasp the wonder of grace, fail to have grace ruling as a king in our hearts and lives, dominating everything (Rom. 5:21); fail to accept that through such grace, “where the spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is free” (2 Cor. 3:17). For those brought up in the faith, it can just be an unthinking following of the faith of our fathers. Or just a church to attend which we got to know from our work colleague, our distant relative, because it seemed like the logical way at the time. Or just...mere religion, with its traditions and simple ceremonies of baptism and breaking of bread, with its meetings, with its psychology of religious feeling just like anything else. Brethren, this ought not so to be for us. This is the Truth, and the things we stand for stretch on into the spectre of utter infinity; they are the one and only Truth for our whole and eternal existence. It isn’t just a crutch to help us through this life, which is all the religion of this world amounts to. It isn’t mere Christianity, a badge to wear just as everyone else says ‘I’m a Catholic...a Hindu...a Baptist’. It’s infinitely and

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essentially more than that; so much much more.

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### **Notes**

(1) David Levin, *Legalism And Faith* (Tidings, 2001).

(2) Gal. 2:20 and 1 Cor. 15:10 show Paul using the phrase “yet not I but....” to differentiate between his natural and spiritual self. Perhaps he does the same in the only other occurrence of the phrase, in 1 Cor 7:10: “And unto the married I command, *yet not I* [the natural Paul], but the Lord [the man Christ Jesus in the spiritual Paul], Let not the wife depart from her husband”.

(3) Another example would be Heb. 12:8: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, to day, and for ever”. Paul saw the three elements of the Yahweh Name supremely manifest in the Lord Jesus. Which is surely why ‘Jesus’ in the NT becomes the Name above every Name (Phil. 2:9,10; Eph. 1:21); for only ‘Yahweh’ was exalted above every other name (Neh. 9:5; Ps. 148:13). John’s Gospel points out how the Lord often changed tenses so strangely- to the extent that many have concluded that some of the strange combinations of tenses are a result of John’s later editing. But it could be that the Lord used past, present and future tenses in close proximity in order to show His manifestation of the Name. He is the bread which was, is and will be on the cross. He came, is coming down, and will come (Jn. 6:50,51). The hour was coming and yet “now is” (Jn. 4:23; 5:25; 16:31,32). These mixing of tenses must have seemed strange to the hearers, and they read strangely in the tense-conscious Greek language. About 50 times in John’s Gospel we read the phrase “I am” as having been on the lips of Jesus. And it gets more and more frequent as He nears the cross, as if He was aware of an ongoing manifestation of the Name which reached its climax there. Or take Jn. 3:13: “No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the son of man which is in heaven”. This man Jesus standing before them was saying [in figurative terms] that He was in Heaven, had been in Heaven, had ascended there. Surely His abrupt shift of tenses and places is to suggest the Yahweh Name being manifested in Him. The language of ‘coming down’ is classically used in the OT in the context of Yahweh manifestation in theophany; yet it often occurs in Acts in the context of the preaching of the Gospel, as if our witness is a manifestation of the Name (Acts 8:5; 10:21; 12:19; 14:25; 18:22; 25:6).

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## **12-1 Preaching By Door Knocking: Dialogues**

### **Appendix:**

#### **Dialogue: Door knocking [North American context]**

Following are four dialogues. The first two are successful. Why? The last 2 are unsuccessful. Consider where the preacher went wrong in them.

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#### **Dialogue 1**

*C= Christian preacher*

*O = Occupant [non-religious]*

C: Hi! I know this isn’t the best time to call on you, but can you spare me a moment of your time please?

O: Well, I am rather busy, but what’s it about?

C: Yeah, OK, I do appreciate you’re busy. Well, briefly, it’s about some Bible seminars we’re holding in [West Valley High on Tuesday night]. OK, I realize you may not be very religious, but then neither am I, in that sense of going to church and praying in Latin and lighting candles and all that stuff. I’ve read the Bible, and parts of it far more than once, and I

really got convinced that it offers a hope of eternal life, in the Kingdom of God, here on earth, when Jesus comes back here. But hey, what a tragedy that false religions and churches and all that stuff have created so much war and suffering, so much hypocrisy.

O: Yeah, well I'm not that religious actually, hope you understand...

C: Yeah, understand. Like I said, I'm not a very religious person either, most of that religious, preacher-man stuff just turns me right away. I'm too locked up inside myself I'm afraid to want to go to some huge happy-clappy set up. What I'm trying to do is read the Bible for myself, which I take to be the voice of God Himself, yeah, read it slowly, systematically...and we're running these seminars in [West Valley High on Tuesday night]

O: Yeah yeah OK, interesting, but, not for me thanks.

C: OK, I don't want to pressure you. Man, I hate it when them Jehovah's Witnesses just won't take no for an answer when they come round to my door. Just wanted to say, there was a time when I'd have said the same, "not for me thanks". All I want to get over, and I'm sorry I took so long, is that, why not just spend an hour of your week, of your whole life, at least having a look into all these things? [Silence]

... And [get eye contact, squint, half close one eye etc.], you know, we really ARE sincere. None of that , you know, the Pastor takes off with the choir girl and who-knows-what-goes-on in Sunday School kinda thing. We don't have Pastors, actually. We're just ordinary guys. Well, I'm not the best kind of person for doing this kind of thing. No good really at talking to people on doorsteps. And more than that, you know at times I feel the biggest hypocrite around.

O: Yeah...?

C: Yeah. I mean, not that I do big time sins and all that, but when I think that Jesus really died for me, that He LOVES me and is coming again to save me, I've been baptized by water baptism, that's immersion, I'm responsible to Him, and yet I know I say and think and even sometimes DO the most wrong things... well, I just kinda feel I shouldn't be here. But I DO believe there is a real forgiveness with God [there ain't no forgiveness with men, ha], and this is why I can keep going with hope and some kind of deep joy, that Jesus is going to come back, and the Kingdom of God, eternal life, is going to be given to me here on earth.

O: Ha, yeah, there ain't no forgiveness with men. My divorce papers went through last week actually. And I just had my ex-mother in law round here giving me hell.

C: Ooooh...[appropriate body language, brief eye contact]. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We're all broken men and women. Well I didn't want to take this much of your time. But, well, can you tell me your name, just your first name, coz I'd love to pray for you tonight when I kneel down and say my prayers...coz I can feel something of your hurt and pain.

O: Yeah, well I'm not saying it wasn't totally her fault, I feel kinda dumb saying it was ALL her fault, but fact is, I was working shifts and she was messing with other guys all the time.

C: Messing with other guys, that's the worst.

O: Yeah, it is....[he holds forth for some minutes about it all]

C: You know, I really feel bad taking all this time of yours. I really want to hear some more. Do you have e-mail? Or a telephone number? I'm not local, I'm from [DC], but I would love to just let you know that I'm with you. And look, this is no sales thing, but , I honestly from my heart reckon you'd get something from that seminar I was talking about. It's at 7:30. You know [West Valley High]? ...

**Note:**

The C. keeps wanting to leave, like the Lord, making as if He would go further, and they begged Him to stay.

C repeats O's ideas and words.

C directs the conversation and makes at least 3 doctrinal points as well as gets over the invite to the seminar 3 times at least

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## **Dialogue 2**

*C= Christian preacher*

*O = Occupant [religious]*

C: Hi! I know this isn't the best time to call on you, but can you spare me a moment of your time please?

O: Well, I am rather busy, but what's it about?

C: Yeah, OK, I do appreciate you're busy. Well, briefly, it's about some Bible seminars we're holding in [West Valley High on Tuesday night]. OK, I realize you may not be very religious, but then neither am I, in that sense of going to church and praying in Latin and lighting candles and all that stuff. I've read the Bible, and parts of it far more than once, and I really got convinced that it offers a hope of eternal life, in the Kingdom of God, here on earth, when Jesus comes back here. But hey, what a tragedy that false religions and churches and all that stuff have created so much war and suffering, so much hypocrisy.

O: Well actually I'm a Baptist, so, I suggest you spend your time preaching to those who need it. I don't get it, you're not religious but you preach the Bible. What are you, some kinda sect?

C: No, no [grin]. No, we don't have Jim Jones or someone giving this seminar and telling us all to go out into the jungle! We're just ordinary guys, we don't have any pastors, just ordinary people who spend an hour or so a day reading the Bible using this little plan- I don't know if you've seen a 'Bible Companion' or something like it, it's a plan for reading the Bible every day [explain using the plan]

O: Yeah yeah OK I read the Bible, I'm a Christian. So what are you trying to tell me?

C: Well we've found that by reading and studying systematically, not randomly, we have come to see a few things about the Lord Jesus Christ and His work that a lot of Christian people don't seem to have latched onto. That's why we're running this seminar in [West Valley High on Tuesday night].

O: I don't get you still; what kind of things?

C: Well, I was reading recently from Acts. That bit where the Lord Jesus is about to ascend to Heaven. And the Angels say He is going to come back. And then from the vision in Daniel 2 I understand that when He returns, He's going to establish His Kingdom here on earth.

O: Yeah yeah well don't we all believe that who are Christians?

C: OK, that's great you believe that! But my point is, we've come to understand something quite revolutionary!

O: Yeah? What?

C: Well, that when Jesus returns there's going to be the resurrection and the judgment...and SO, this idea that we go to Heaven when we die just isn't right; we can't have some kind of immortal soul, we're going to be unconscious until Jesus returns...

*Note:*

Committed Christians are perhaps the hardest to talk to on the door step.

Lead them on through common ground to start with, but make them inquisitive. They won't come along to another church's meeting unless they think it's pretty different. And unless they know their need or we make them perceive it. I know we can say 'this seminar isn't about doctrine, it's just learn to read the Bible effectively'. Personally I find this a bit deceptive as I for one am out to convert people, not just show them how to read the Bible and leave them in an apostate church. When advertising a one evening event, like a special lecture, one really has no option but to give them some kind of radical reason why they should attend.

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### Dialogue 3

*C= Christian preacher*

*O = Occupant [non-religious]*

C: Oh HELLO! Nice to see you! I'm Duncan, from the CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP! We've got this fabulous seminar going on in West Valley High!

O: Yeah OK, I'm very busy just now, please understand.

C: Yes yes, but please can I just tell you about these seminars, lots of people have come to them in the past and now in your town there's the chance to visit them! They're professionally presented...

O: Yeah OK, I don't have time, thanks.

C: Well they start at 7:30, that's SEVEN THIRTY, OK, seven thirty, and oh yes, they're...guess what!...FREE!

O: Look I never like to be rude to you religious types but I really have to go.

C: Well the Christian Fellowships have been holding these seminars all over North America...

O: Look I've never heard of Christapoodles or whatever...

C: Errr...Christian Fellowships actually, we were founded in this country by a doctor John THOMAS who...

O: Look pal, I just got the divorce papers through from my wife, my ex-mother in law was just round giving me hell and...

C: Yes yes, but look this is REALLY important because you could come to the seminars and find THE TRUTH!

O: Yeah yeah the truth, know what, I'll count myself lucky if I never know the full truth about all the fellas my wife messed with

C: Yes but to know the TRUTH this is a wonderful thing and it can give you the chance of being in the Kingdom when Christ returns!

O: Look I really am going to have to shut the door now...

C: Oh no, please, just a moment, you are shutting the door on the Truth and the Kingdom and...

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#### **Dialogue 4**

*C= Christian preacher*

*O = Occupant [religious]*

C: Oh HELLO! Nice to see you! I'm Duncan, from the CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP! We've got this fabulous seminar going on in West Valley High!

O: Yeah OK, I'm very busy just now, please understand. And anyway I am a Baptist, thanks very much.

C: Oh , the BAPTISTS! Well, you know, I don't know if you have ever considered the reasons for believing that Jesus can't ever possibly be God, for example...

O: Yes, but please understand I really have no time just now, I consider those who don't believe in the trinity to be a cult, but please, as I say to the Jehovah's Witnesses, I do NOT discuss religion on the door...

C: Oh no, Jehovah's Witnesses, we're NOTHING to do with THEM! They've made all sorts of false predictions about Jesus coming in 1914 etc! Well what do you make of that verse that says we must give a reason to every man who asks us of the hope that is in us? Surely you ought to be willing to discuss your faith with me at any time?

O: What, like, if I am in the middle of washing my baby? Come on. "In the beginning was the word and the word was God", it's quite simple. Jesus is God, but I am NOT going to discuss these holy matters on the doorstep with a cult member.

C: No no, you don't understand, the Greek word translated "word" is the word "logos", that's LOG-OSSSS, and it means 'the plan, the idea behind the deed', if you look in any lexicon you'll find...

O: Look, did you hear my baby crying then? I MUST go! Anyway I thought you were on about a seminar. We hold seminars at 1st Baptist Church, all are welcome. I MUST go!

C: Yes but I'm sorry, really, but LOG-OSSSS really and truly does mean "the idea behind the deed", and what I just wanted to say was that in the beginning God had this idea, this LOG-OSSS, and then...this is the great bit!...the word WAS MADE FLESH! So you see, Jesus couldn't have been God because the word was made flesh IN THE PERSON OF JESUS...God wasn't made God! See...?

O: Did you hear the baby again! You are MOST rude! [Clank...]

C: Well, I am MOST disappointed that you are a so-called Christian and yet...

**Note:**

The C. doesn't mirror what O. is saying. They are talking at cross purposes. Sooner or later the door is going to have to close. The C. is using a lot of in-house ideas. There is no attempt to get contact details when it's clear the young mother may be unable to attend in any case. The interaction ends with the person having a very negative impression of our group. Sadly we are all likely to perceive that preaching cannot be about listening to another person, but is *only* about telling someone our views. Yet real dialogue must include listening to the other person, affirming them, feeling for them, whilst at the same time projecting to them our own sincerity, beliefs, hopes, and concern for them.

Following two dialogues are set after a preaching meeting has finished. The visitor is approached by a missionary. How could both of these have been improved? What body language may have occurred? What body language would have been appropriate? When would there have been eye contact? Underline on the transcript when it would have occurred.

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## **Dialogue 5**

Following a lecture “The Gospel of the Kingdom of God”

**C = Christian preacher**

**V = Visitor**

### Unsuccessful dialogue

C: Hi! Wasn’t that just the GREATEST lecture? Such a BRILLIANT talk! What did you think?

V: Well, it’s kinda new to me you know

C: But SUCH a great topic! So great that after two thousand years people are still learning all about the Gospel and such an awesome future God has in store for us!

V: Um, yeah, well...

C: So what did you think of the speaker?

V: He reminds me of one of my high school teachers - is he your pastor?

C: No, no! Nothing like that! No-one in our religion - Christian Fellowships, that is - is paid to do any sort of talks, it’s all done completely voluntarily. It’s been that way ever since our founder discovered the truth after he was shipwrecked and vowed that if he ever made it back to land he would find the truth. So now we’ve rediscovered the truth about the Gospel and believe exactly the same as the first century Christians believe! Isn’t that great?

V: Well look, I’m kinda new to all this...

C: So what did you think? Do you believe there’s a God? Do you believe Jesus died and rose again? What’s your vision of the Kingdom?

V: Um, I haven’t really thought...

C: Come on, you must have thought something! Are your family religious?

V: Well, no, actually...

C: You’re joking! You mean you’ve lived all this time without any belief in a God?

V: Well yes, that’s right.

C: Gosh! What was that like?

V: I guess to me it was pretty normal, I haven’t known any differently...

C: That's great, that's great! Well there's heaps of literature and stuff I could give you if you like, about any topic whatsoever, maybe something about the existence of God?

V: Look, I'm not sure that I'm really interested...

C: That's okay, I'll just give you something about the kingdom of God that's coming - most churches believe we go to heaven when we die, but the Bible makes it quite clear that the kingdom will be on earth and everyone will stay dead until Jesus returns, then the resurrection will take place and all the dead will be raised - actually I shouldn't say all the dead, just those who are responsible - but then I guess you don't know what 'responsible' means, right?

V: Look, I don't really want to know.

C: Okay, okay, how about I get you a cup of coffee or something?

V: Look I'll be fine, it was nice meeting you, bye.

C: Here, it won't take me a minute to grab a pamphlet for you...

V: I have to go. Bye!

**Note:** the visitor didn't really get a chance to express anything, the preacher wasn't listening and they were talking at cross-purposes.

### Successful

C: Hi! My name's Mary - I'm not sure that I've seen you here before?

V: No, you wouldn't have, this is my first time, I saw the lecture advertised and thought I'd come along and see what this whole Bible thing is about.

C: So you are new to the whole Christian concept?

V: Pretty much, my family has never been to church or anything. There was this super religious chick I went to school with but she was pretty fanatic.

C: Well I'm sure glad you didn't go to school with me, you may have put me into the same box! But just to set the record straight, I'm not at all scary or fanatic, so don't stress! If truth be told, I actually don't know an awful lot myself, but that's not important. There's this verse I came across in the Bible which really strikes a chord with me, that anybody who thinks they know something actually know nothing like they ought to know! Which believes me, I was never the bookish type!

V: Me neither! I used to hate studying for exams, I'd do anything to get out of it.

C: That's one thing I love about the whole Christian concept, that we won't have to pass an exam to be saved!

V: So what do we have to do to be saved? I thought you'd have to know heaps, and do heaps of good things and all that.

C: You're right - you don't have to know heaps, we simply believe that there was a man called Jesus, God's own Son, who gave His life so that we may be saved. I don't know about doing heaps of good works, I guess first step is to respond by being baptised. But even then I feel pretty ashamed for a lot of the failures I still have.

V: Yeah, I heard the speaker guy say something about baptism . What's this whole baptism thing?

C: How about we grab a cup of coffee and a biscuit or something and we'll chat? Remember I'm not a guru about all these subjects!

V: Okay, no problem!

### **13. Christian Crisis Of Conscience**

We have all seen wonderful devotion and commitment to a cause displayed by those who don't have the Truth or who are even atheists. It must have occurred to all of us at some time, that 'If *they* can do *that*, why can't *I* do...' this, or that, or whatever, for the sake of the *Truth*. And there is no harm in seeking to provoke our feeble devotion by the example of others, including those in the world. There are many Biblical examples of just this:

- Shepherds and farmers can read the sky, and make prudent preparation accordingly. We must even more so discern the reality of the coming of the Lord; and we must act in confident expectation of this (Mt. 16:3) <sup>(1)</sup>.

- The Jews were to consider how the Gentiles who didn't know the details of God's law behave better than them. Their untrained conscience prodded them to live better than the Jews; when, with all their detailed knowledge of God's will, the Jews should have been living far better (Rom. 1:13). This can be extended to spiritual Israel too. For the reality has to be faced that there are many atheists or others who don't know the Truth as we do, who live better lives than many of us do. Our knowledge of God's doctrines should issue in a spiritual way of life; for the purpose of all the true doctrines which we know is to elicit in us the life and living which the Father seeks of His true children. It isn't so that God created a set of true doctrines and is pleased with those who intellectually figure them out, and angry with those who don't. He wants behaviour, He wants our being, our feeling and thinking, to be after the image of His Son; and the true doctrines of the one Faith are to help elicit this in us. If, as we so often say, 'we have the Truth', then our lives ought to be better than those who don't have it. Israel should have been the same; they should have been a light in the darkness of the Gentile world. And yet they behaved *worse* than the Gentiles. In a terrible image, Ez. 16:33 likens the Gentiles to whores who take payment, but Israel to a whore who pays men to come to her. We as spiritual Israel must consider the 'spirituality' of the world, and ask whether our lives are really so much better. They ought to be, for we 'have the truth'. The gift of Divine Truth will have been in vain if our lives are not essentially different to those who don't have it. This very day, this very hour as you read these words, men and women are risking their lives in the service of others, often in order to provide them some level of salvation in this life, for no personal benefit to themselves. They may be risking their lives and limbs to clear landmines in Mozambique, to take food and medicines into refugee camps along mined

roads, with shells flying overhead, soldiers risking their lives to run back past snipers to drag back their wounded comrade, young men laid down on torture beds to reveal the names of others who like them refuse to fight for the cause of evil... And if they can do this, what are we doing for the *eternal salvation* of others which we have in our hands? What are we doing for our brethren? Getting on with our careers, building up our own homes, worrying about ourselves in whatever way?

- The joy of the Gentiles as a result of their faith was to provoke a lazy, self-satisfied Jewish brotherhood to repentance (Rom. 10:19; 11:11 cp. 15:9-11). And the joy and peace of many false religions, from Buddhism to Pentecostalism, serves as a challenge to us. The certainty of the Truth ought to lead to "all joy and peace through believing" (Rom. 15:13). But does it, in our Christian experience? The joy of other religious people, however surface level it may be, ought to deeply probe whether we have the joy of the Truth. For if we lose joy, we lose the faith and the hope (Heb. 3:6). If we believe that by grace, if the Lord comes, we will be there, then there will inevitably be a deep joy in our lives, no matter what temporal struggles we have.

- One doesn't give sub-standard service to their employer. One didn't bring him a defective animal as a gift. And yet Israel gave their God the lame and the blind animals, they only served Him as far as it didn't hurt them (Mal. 1:6-9). They gave Him what cost them nothing. And yet they should not only have served Him as they served their earthly masters; but, because He is the "great God", they should have given Him even more. And so we must ask: the time we give to our careers and development in them, the *thought* we give to our secular lives, the respect we pay it...how does this compare to our attitude to Divine things? On a simple level, we may always turn up to work early rather than late. But do we arrive at our ecclesial meetings on time, with that same sense of respect...? Is our attitude on Sunday morning inferior to that of Monday morning? The way "the children of this world" are so zealous in forgiving others their debts so as to get themselves out of major trouble is an example to us, the Lord said (Lk. 16:8). It could be that His comment that they were "wiser than the children of light" was a rebuke to the children of light- that those in the world are more eager to forgive, more zealous in their secular lives, than many of us are.

- Moses stood before Israel at the end of his life and pleaded with them to have the faith and courage to go and drive out the tribes of giants that lived in Canaan, and dwell there themselves. He cites as an example the way that other tribes had driven out giants and lived in their lands, in order to inspire his Israel (Dt. 2:12-21).

- The Lord pointed out that the Queen of Sheba came a long way to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and the men of Nineveh repented when they heard the judgements which Jonah preached. Yet the Jews of first century Palestine were generally little more than fascinated and intrigued by the Lord's preaching. And then they got back on with their lives, not seeking the urgency of repentance. Tyre and Sidon would have repented had they seen the miracles which Jewish towns like Bethsaida had witnessed (Mt. 11:21). The Jews didn't do this because they were the ecclesia of God, and therefore, they thought, they had no need of repentance and awe at the message of the Kingdom. It was OK for the Gentiles to be excited about it. But they had seen it all before, they knew it all already. And so with us. We can smile approvingly of news of mass conversions to the Truth, and nod in sober approval of how a drug abuser has repented and been baptized. But we can thereby miss the point: that if men and women world-wide can make these changes at conversion, the Gospel of the

Kingdom ought to be bringing forth the same transformation of human life in us, in an ongoing sense.

- Getting down to a very simple level, Solomon taught that if the ants can be so zealous, well why can't the ecclesia of God be zealous [for it was 'believers' that he was teaching]. The ants scurry around, working as if there is no tomorrow, to build up something so precarious that is in any case so tragically short lived. Can't we be yet more zealous, with a like loving co-operation, building the eternal things that we are (Prov. 6:6,7)? And Solomon pressed the point further, in that ants are self-motivated; they need no "guide, overseer or ruler". This was surely a reference to the complex system of overseers which Solomon had to place over Israel in order to build the temple and build up the Kingdom. The same Hebrew word for "overseer" is found in 1 Chron. 23:4; 26:29. Yet ideally, he seems to be saying, every Israelite ought to be a zealous worker. Prov. 12:24 says the same: "The hand of the diligent [whoever he / she is] shall bear rule [in practice]" [s.w. Prov. 6:7 "ruler"]. And we must ask ourselves, whether for whatever reason the new Israel hasn't slumped into the same problem, of lack of self-motivation, waiting to be asked to do something before we do it, over-relying upon our "overseers". The ants aren't like this. They see the job to be done, and naturally get on with it.

- Jer. 35:14 makes the point about the Rechabites. This family wouldn't drink wine nor live in cities, just because they respected the commands of their ancestor about these matters. Yet Yahweh God of Israel had been rising up early, sending His prophets, pleading with Israel to hear. And His people didn't take Him seriously at all. If the sons of Rechab could live as they did, based on their obedience to human words and traditions, why couldn't Israel even more so when it came to God's word? And so with us. There are communities which blindly follow the faith of their fathers, obedient to their traditions and demands regarding, e.g., whom they marry. If men and women can be so obedient to the word *of men*... shouldn't the word *of God*, black print on white paper that it is, but nonetheless the same word that made Moses tremble and that Sinai ablaze, have an even deeper impact and more insistent imperative in *our* lives?

- Paul got mad with his Corinthians over the case of incest in their midst; for, he reasoned, that sort of thing was scarcely heard of even in the world (1 Cor. 5:1). The existence of at least some semblance of 'morality' in the world, the fact, e.g., that there are atheists who live as faithful husband:wife partners for a lifetime, ought to mean that immorality is unheard of amongst those who know the true God. The fact that the Jews have zeal for obedience to God not based on true knowledge implies that those who *have* knowledge ought to be even more zealous (Rom. 10:2). The Lord saw the zeal of hypocritical Jewry in the same way; our righteousness must *exceed* that of the Pharisees (Mt. 5:20). Their apparent zeal to understand God's intentions and live accordingly mustn't be forgotten by us, just because they are morally and doctrinally wrong. The Lord could easily have not held them up as examples in *any* context at all. But He says that we should behold their essential zeal, take a snapshot of it as it were, and exceed it in the true service.

- For a good man, some would even dare to die (Rom. 5:7). This has been shown many a time, in the way soldiers and prisoners will allow their lives to be lost for the sake of a comrade who has inspired them. The contrast is that Christ died for us, the uninspiring, who were in some sense His enemies at the point of His self-sacrifice. Yet His sacrifice is a pattern for ours; as He lay down His life for the world and for His brethren, so we ought to (1 Jn. 3:16). If men of this world can lay down their lives for a good man, surely we ought to be

able to do so for our brethren. Men, let's take soldiers, lay down their lives for another because they see the tragedy and urgency of the situation, because they believe that this person is worth saving by their risk or by their death. Simply because...that soldier is of the same colour, the same race, the same nation, fighting for the same principles, regardless of whatever personality differences there were between the two men as men. And so we too must have that sense that our brethren are worth it, that they are in the end on our side in the struggle. And that this is the only worthwhile and defining reality, to live and die for.

- The unjust steward in the parable of Luke 16 ran round forgiving others their debts, so that in his time of crisis and judgment he would have a way out of his own debt problems. And in the context of forgiving our brethren, the Lord holds him up as an example. But He laments that sadly, the children of this world are often wiser than the children of the Kingdom, i.e. the believers (Lk. 16:8). I take this as meaning that the Lord is sorry that His people don't see the same obvious need to forgive each other, in view of their own inadequacies and the coming of judgment. The children of this world see the coming of their judgments and the urgency of the need to prepare, far more strongly than many of us do; we who face the ultimate crisis of sinful, responsible man meeting with an Almighty God.

- God challenges Judah's indolence to rebuild the temple by drawing their attention to how zealously Edom had rebuilt their "desolate places" (Mal. 1:4). If Edom can do it... why can't you, Judah, with all God's prophecies and support behind you?

### ***If they can do it...***

Many of the above arguments have a powerful feature: if this is how the world or unbelievers behave, not only should the believers be *as zealous* as them but *far more so*. It must of course be remembered that mere comparing of ourselves amongst ourselves isn't wise. The Lord Christ is our constant pattern and inspiration. And yet Paul could bid men follow him, that they might follow Christ. And the inspired word does bid us go down the road of comparing our behaviour with that of others. Paul boasted of the Corinthians' enthusiasm in planning to make donations in order to provoke the ecclesias in Macedonia to a like generosity. Their zeal "provoked very many" (2 Cor. 9:2). We should provoke one another to love and good works, by example (Heb. 10:24). Consider how God spoke to Israel "by Isaiah" when he walked naked and barefoot. Who he was, was to be their example and thereby God's message (Is. 20:2). Many Bible characters were clearly inspired by those who had gone before. Thus Moses' offer of losing his part in the book of eternal life so that Israel could be saved, mightily inspired Paul. He says that he *could wish* himself accursed from God for the sake of Israel's redemption (Rom. 9:3). He wrote: "*could wish*" because he had learnt the lesson from God's refusal of Moses' offer, i.e. that God will not accept a substitutionary sacrifice, but only individual faith in the representative sacrifice of His Son. Paul is unashamed to reason that the Gentiles had accepted salvation in order to provoke the Jews to jealousy and eventual repentance (Rom. 11:11); and he sets himself up as the pattern to every Jew who would repent and come to Christ (Rom. 11:14; 1 Tim. 1:16). All this means that we cannot view and admire Bible characters as we would a beautiful painting. Their having lived and been as they were is an imperative to us to action. We cannot merely sit comfortably through a character study of, say, Daniel, or read the record of Ruth smiling at how sweet she was. We must be like them. Dear Peter exemplified how we so often behave, when he gasped at how deep was Jesus' faith, as he saw the fig tree withered in exact accord with the Lord's earlier words. But the Lord turns on Him immediately: "[*You*] have faith in God...*you* must believe, and

whatever *you* ask in faith will happen, if you like me, see it as if it has happened at the point of asking for it” (Mk. 11:22-24).

We can be like the weeping Jews who remarked, surely with feeling, “Behold how He loved him!” when they saw the Lord so broken down over the death of Lazarus. But that was where it ended for them. They didn’t grasp the fact that the Master’s faith, the Saviour’s love, is not just there to be remarked upon, especially not in that irritating White Anglo-Saxon Protestant way; but to be practically inspired by, in the smallness and reality of our humanity. Another example is in the way a woman exclaimed about Mary: “Blessed is the womb that bare thee!”. The Lord’s response was: “Yea rather [“therefore indeed”], blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it” (Lk. 11:27,28). He was alluding to how His mother had “kept” God’s word in her heart in devout meditation (Lk. 2:51). He didn’t say ‘Blessed is *she* because *she* heard the word and kept it’. Rather, “blessed are *they*”. He was surely saying: ‘Don’t just dumbly admire my mother, with some kind of distant, spectator admiration; she is the pattern for *all* of you. Follow her, make her the pattern of *your* life with respect to God’s word, rather than just gasp at her example’. Roman Catholics as well as ourselves need to take this lesson to heart.

And so the case is established. The zeal of others in both the believing and unbelieving world should serve as a conscience prodder to us; just as the joy and faith of the Gentiles was intended to provoke the Jews. We are all confronted by examples which ought to provoke us. Here are just a few which are more universally known:

- About 100 years ago, a British team set out to reach the South Pole. They travelled through blizzards and extreme temperatures until most team members died. Only 4 remained. Their dogs died and they had to pull their sleighs themselves. They slept on top of each other for warmth in their tent. One of them became sick, eaten up with frostbite until he could no longer walk. So they pulled him on their sleigh. He realised he was impeding their progress, and so one night he undressed and walked out into the cold to die, so they would have a better chance.
- Polish Jews were imprisoned within the Warsaw Ghetto. It was obvious they were all going to die. Yet unknown to the Germans, it was possible to escape from the ghetto using sewers. Many Jews escaped. Any day the sewers could have been discovered and blocked. Some Jewish doctors, however, travelled in and out of the ghetto using the sewers in order to bring in medical supplies. They eventually chose to suffer and die with their people rather than personally escape.
- The Nazi death camps were unbelievable in their torture and destruction of humanity. All the inmates were kept there against their will. *Almost* all of them. The Jehovah’s Witnesses were the exception. The inmates had to work until they died. Each day selections were made of those who looked too weak to go on working, and the weak ones were killed. They were fed with virtually nothing. All inmates wore the same uniform. Except one group: the Jehovah’s Witnesses. They were the only people in those camps by choice. There was specific Nazi legislation about them: they merely had to tell the Camp ‘kommandant’ that they renounced their faith, sign a document, and they were free. The original documents stating the Nazi legislation to this effect survive to this day. And yet hardly any of the JWs did this. They lived and died witnessing to their faith. The more I know their doctrines, the more wrong, seriously wrong, I think they are. And yet their zeal ought to provoke us. Not just in what they then endured, but in their courage today to go door-to-door in the most

aggressive environments. And it is they who have opened ‘Kingdom halls’ in Israel, proudly bearing the Name ‘Jehovah’ written in Hebrew, in the face of every conceivable Israeli opposition.

- The standard Protestant churches, with all their false doctrines, sent missionaries to Africa and Asia in the 19th century. They landed on the coasts and moved inland- not knowing any local languages, dying from malaria and other diseases, often killed by hostile tribes. And they were simply seeking to tell people about this man, Jesus Christ, who had lived and died for them in a place called Israel many centuries ago. Everything was against them, and yet they established missions, translated Bibles even though it meant having to develop written forms of the target languages first...

- In the face of terrible persecution, men like Richard Wurmbrand and Georgij Vins went through years of imprisonment in Soviet gaols, not seeing daylight for years, knowing their families were being persecuted for their sakes...all because of their faith.

- After midnight one night I was sitting in a carriage on the Moscow metro. A young American Mormon got on. He looked very tired, nervous, afraid, looking suspiciously at me in case I tried to jump him. He sat for a while and then wearily pulled out a book titled ‘701 Irregular Russian Verbs’. As we sped through the darkness, he read, shaking his head, furrowing his brow, underlining, copying things out onto a piece of paper. He kept closing his eyes and I noticed his lips moving. He was either praying or reciting those verb conjugations. And if *they* can do that, for the sake of the nonsense they sincerely believe, a young man likely from some well heeled town in the USA, with mom, dad, siblings and maybe girlfriend the other side of the world...what about our young people, who have *the Truth*? Can’t *they* learn some Russian verbs [or Chinese or Spanish or Swahili ones]? And take their message of Truth to the regions beyond?

- Educated Western men and women give up their careers and savings to risk their health and lives taking aid and medicines to war-torn areas. They leave behind the comfortable life that could be theirs- a partner, children, financial security, professional respectability, a social circle of former University friends, going along to a well-heeled church every Sunday, enjoying the singing and the social evenings... I have met such men and women. Many of them. I live as it were suspended between two worlds. I see what they do and how they live and the chances they take. And I also know what they left behind. Just as I have met many Mormons, zealous young men from small, comfortable towns in the USA, staying up late struggling to learn Russian grammar, comforting their fellow missionary who has just been beaten up and is standing there holding his broken spectacles and realising his Passport has also been stolen, nervously going from apartment to apartment in cities riddled with crime and anti-Western sentiment, preaching a message which there is every reason for the hearers to reject. And when I think of these young men, their faces almost haunt me. As I lay awake at night, staring at the ceiling, I think of myself, I think of our beloved community, of *our* young people, *of us*... and the faces of those French doctors, Canadian nurses, aid workers in Bosnia, clean cut young Mormons, the white South African doctor telling me how many times landmines exploded behind his ambulance in Mozambique [i.e. he drove over them], the photos I have in a book of the JWs in the Nazi camps...they stream before me as in an uneasy, silent procession. They demand a verdict from us who know the true God, and who have the realistic Hope of eternity in God’s Kingdom. They demand a response. We cannot merely say ‘well, that’s them’. What of *us*? These men, those women, lead us to a crisis of conscience.

### *An Uneasy Conscience*

Please don't get me wrong. I am not saying these people had faith in the right things. I am just observing that they had faith and commitment to whatever they believed in, and this ought to be a lesson for us. If they could go through all this, then, in whatever context, didn't we ought to be equally committed? And, more than this. Not equally committed, but *far more* so, seeing 'we have the Truth'? It would be tempting to now write an analysis of our community, or my perception of it at least. To compare it with the above examples, and all the Biblical reasons that teach that in commitment, in joy, in faith, in love, in love of God, in response to our Maker, we ought to be far beyond the examples of others. But it would be of no use. For the only worthwhile thing is for us to individually examine again our doctrinal beliefs, and to see how each of them are intended to bring forth living and behaviour and spirituality, in various ways. We have elsewhere developed these connections for each of our first principle doctrines. And it is for us to meditate upon the many examples of zeal and joy, love etc. in the lives of the men and women around us. And to realise that these are our examples. And to ask *why* exactly it is that we who know God's Truth don't always respond with the same extent of devotion which they do. It is a paradox, that often we who are God's people don't respond as well as even the world does. But it is a paradox that played itself out repeatedly in the experience of natural Israel. We simply *must* take the lesson from them; that we cannot merely *assume* Divine Truth and relationship with Him, passively keeping our talent hidden in the earth, but must instead respond to that Truth as He has intended. We have the best thing in the world- God's Truth. It *is* important what we believe, precisely because those true doctrines elicit the true behaviour which God seeks.

Sadly, our community has all too often separated doctrine from practice. We ourselves all too often live in a manner which denies the doctrines we hold in our brain cells. We refuse to see that doctrine is intended to bring forth living and love towards others. The doctrines of the one faith aren't merely empty theological statements devised as a test of our obedience and understanding. They are as they are to inspire a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Some have analysed certain aspects of doctrine, especially relating to the atonement, to an extent that is inappropriate; and have virtually divided over these matters. And yet the pseudo-intellectual minutiae over which there has been such strife contain no power to live the new life. It is the basic Gospel itself which has the power to bring forth the new man, after the image of Christ. It is crucial to what I would call 'true theology' [defence of first principles, upholding the Truth, call it what you will] that it is not separated from the call of doctrine to be the vital force for the transformation of human life. After many years of 'holding the Truth', we have developed a complex intellectual theological system that is all wonderfully and thrillingly true; and yet it is looking for a praxis. That praxis, I submit, is in the preaching of the Gospel to the poor, and within the more desperate parts of society. In these places there is plenty of praxis, striving to find an adequate theological / doctrinal underpinning. People don't know their Bibles, don't know true doctrine, and yet they so want to be taught. Things *are* coming together, slowly, as we start to see our need to reach out, and is encouraged by the successes the Lord has granted. We are starting to realize that the true theologian, the real lover of doctrinal truth, cannot avoid the challenge of knowing this world's life in its most traumatic forms. For 'theology' cannot but have a mission to men. Unless 'theology', doctrine, defence of it etc., are put at the service of our mission, to save men and women and glorify the Lord, then there can only be an ever increasing gap between the 'theologians' and the grass-roots ecclesia, especially in the mission field. The two halves *must* come together, else the new converts will wander, and the 'theologians', shocked at the lack of perception in the converts, will likewise go their own way, into ever increasing

abstraction and theory. And yet, as 5th generation converts go out preaching and converting, things *are* coming together. Let's not be too hard on ourselves. It *is* happening. The wonderful truths of our faith, *the Truth of Christ*, really is producing a harvest in the *lives* of ordinary women and men, literally throughout the globe. Personalities are being transformed, thereby the world is being transformed, in that a tiny taste of the coming world-wide Kingdom is being displayed world-wide, in the lives of those who have responded. And in this marvellous way, we *all* have a part to play in this heralding of the Kingdom to the whole planet.

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### **Note**

(1) The sign which Israel sought but couldn't discern was that of Jonah. In allusion to this, Paul says that Israel didn't find what he sought for, i.e. justification with God on account of their Messiah (Rom. 9:31). The "sign[s] of the times" which they wanted but couldn't discern can be seen as the whole work of Jesus, rather than specifically the signs of His coming again. The "sign[s]" which they sought for were in front of them at the time of their asking for them. They therefore cannot really refer to fulfilled latter day prophecies. The lesson is that as farmers and shepherds act accordingly as they interpret the weather, so we ought to respond to the resurrection of Christ [cp. that of Jonah], because it portends the return of Christ in judgment.

When John Wesley was at Oxford, his income was 30 pounds / year. He lived on 28 pounds and gave 2 away. His income later increased to 60 pounds, then 90, then 120. He continued to live on 28 and to give the rest away.

## 14. People Matter

We live in a world tired and bored with itself. Each day, week, month and year is for them just the same old scene. Flat emotions, a radical indifference to others, the sensation of drifting, numbness, a resigned acceptance of a world gone mad... And we too, in our weak moments, can feel the same. Why am I living? What is this circus all about? Can one person among five billion make a difference on this planet? What is a human being, but a tiny blip in the billion-year progression of history? "Carl Jung reported that a third of his cases suffered from no definable neurosis other than "the senselessness and emptiness of their lives". He went on to name meaninglessness the general neurosis of the modern era"<sup>(1)</sup>. And this isn't only true of the richer worlds. Poorer people, locked into a cycle of struggle for survival, doing repetitive work, riding crisis after crisis towards no meaningful end, are in just the same problem. Everyone, rich or poor, predictably sequence their lives, and the syndrome of 'the same old scene' inevitably develops.

One of the hardest things about God to believe is that really, all men matter...you matter. I matter. How we speak, what we do and think, is incredibly significant to God. It is a staggering thought that the Creator of heaven and earth should care about how an obscure individual man behaves toward poor widows, orphans, his wife... Perceiving that we are *so important to God* means that for us, life needn't be the same old scene, weighed down in the mire of mediocrity. For us, there is newness of life in Christ; the urgency to the daily round that comes from truly knowing our desperation; a dynamic relationship with a passionate, feeling God; a life that shares His undying passion for the lost; an emotional prayer life; and the constant energising that comes from our grasp of the Gospel. These are the headings under which I want to consider why for us, life is far from that 'same old scene'.

### *Newness Of Life*

The Lord Jesus died and rose as our representative. Therefore we live out His life, His death, His rising again to new life; and so as we sing, "into my life your power breaks through, living Lord". The life that He lived and the death that He died become ours (Rom. 6:10 RV). We identified with that life, that death, at baptism. But it's an ongoing thing. We live in *newness* of life. The life in Christ is not a stagnant pond, but rather living water, spring water, bubbling fresh from the spring. And this is what we give out to others- for "he that believeth in me, out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of springing water" for others (Jn. 4:10; 7:38). We can experience the life of Christ right now. His life is now made manifest in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:11), insofar as we seek to live our lives governed by the golden rule: 'What would Jesus do...?'. The life that He had and now lives is the essence of the Kingdom life. Who He was and is, this is the definition of the Kingdom life. It's why one of His titles is "the kingdom of God" (Lk. 17:21). And it's why it can be said that we 'have' eternal life now, in that we can live the essence of the life we will eternally live, right now. Is. 42:9,10 says that we sing the "new song" now, because we sing / meditate of the "new things" which will be in the Kingdom. In that day, we will "sing a new song" (Rev. 5:9;

14:3). And yet this is undoubtedly picking up on the way in which we can *now* sing the ‘new song’, every morning (Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1). Likewise, all things will be made new at the Lord’s coming (Rev. 21:5), and yet those in whom the new creation is worked out already have all things made new in their spiritual experience (2 Cor. 5:17,18). The Kingdom will hardly be the same old scene. There is and will be something dynamic in our relationship with the Father and Son. The Lord Jesus spoke of how He ‘knows’ the Father and ‘knows’ us His sheep in the continuous tense (Jn. 10:14,15)- He was ‘getting to know’ the Father, and He ‘gets to know’ us. And this is life eternal, both now and then, that we might *get to know* the one true God and His Son (Jn. 17:3). The knowing of God and His Son is not something merely academic, consisting only of facts. It is above all an experience, a thrilling and dynamic one. There is no “new thing under the sun” (Ecc. 1:9)- all in this world is born to roll downhill. And yet in Christ, all things are made new in an ongoing sense. The emotions and feelings of meaninglessness are commented upon in great detail in Ecclesiastes. There is a thrilling duality in that book- the contrast between life as it is “under the sun”, and the contrasting imperative for the believer to live life God’s way. The exhortation is to live life *God’s* way with all our zeal, exactly *because* of the vanity and ‘same old scene’ nature of the natural life.

### ***The Thrill Of Grace***

It can be, though, that we perceive even our service of God as the same old scene- the same round of daily Bible readings (although, why not try reading from another version or in another language?), the same cycle of ecclesial meetings and Bible schools. The same faces, the same issues. But our experience of grace means “that we should serve in *newness* of spirit and not in the oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6). We don’t *have* to serve God in the sense that He grants us salvation by pure grace, not by works. But just because we don’t *have* to do it, we do. This is the power of grace; it doesn’t force us to monotonous service, but should be a wellspring of fresh motivation, to do perhaps the same things with an ever fresh spirit. The pure *wonder* of it all needs to be felt- that *for nothing but pure faith* the Lord will grant us eternal redemption for the sake of the Lord’s death and resurrection. Which is why Rom. 6:4 says that because of this, and our appropriation of it in baptism, we therefore live in *newness* of life, a quality of life that is ever new. Through His death, a new and living way is opened (Heb. 10:20). We share the ever fresh life which the Lord lived from His resurrection. It does us good to try to imagine that scene- the Son of God, coming out of the grave at daybreak. He would have seen the lights of Jerusalem shimmering away in the distance, a few kms. away, as everyone woke up and went back to work, the first day after the long holiday. Getting the children ready, caring for the animals...it was back to the same old scene. But as they did so, the Son of God was rising to newness of life, standing alone in the fresh morning air, with a life that was ever new, with a joy and dynamism that was to know no end...His feelings are beyond us, but all the same, distorted by our nature, by our spiritual dysfunction, into *our* lives *His* life breaks through.

### ***Our Desperation***

If in the daily round we can know *how* desperate we are, the urgency of our spiritual situation, we will appreciate the more finely what the Lord has done and is daily doing for us, and will be motivated to make an urgent, joyful response. As a student at London University I recall an over-zealous evangelical spraying on a wall: “Jesus is the answer”. But a few days later, someone scrawled underneath: “But what’s the question?”. And this is simply so. The whole wonder of God’s truth as it is in Christ is totally lost on us unless we see our desperate need; unless we perceive the problem. And the wider wonder of it will only be appreciated, the thrill felt, if we feel something of the whole of humanity’s desperation; if we see the tragedy of human existence without the Truth.

One way of realising the seriousness of our sin is to recognise that each sin we commit, we could have avoided. We must hang our heads, time and again. In the very end, we can blame neither our circumstances nor our natures, even though these are factors in the committal of each sin. We must each bear total personal responsibility for every sin, both of commission and omission. We must hang our heads. James, as he often does, foresees how in practice we may reason that fervent prayer isn’t possible, because...we are angry, low, tired, don’t feel like it. So we tell ourselves. But James cuts across all this: “Elijah was a man subject to like passions [RVmg “nature”] as we”- and yet *he* prayed earnestly (James 5:17). We can’t excuse our lack of prayer by blaming it on the “passions” of our natures. Men like Elijah had the same nature as we do, prone to the same depression and mediocrity, and yet they prayed fervently.

Job fell into the trap of thinking that his terrible situation somehow allowed him to speak whatever words came into his head. Consider:

- “Doth the wild ass bray when he hath grass? Or loweth the ox over his fodder?” (6:5). Job felt he hadn’t been ‘fed’ and so he was entitled to “bray” and “low” over his misfortune.
- Because “my calamity [is] heavier than the sand of the seas, therefore have my words been rash” (6:3 RV).
- “Therefore I will not refrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit” (7:11).
- “I will give free course to my complaint. I will speak in the bitterness of my soul” (10:1 RV).
- Zophar criticises Job being “full of talk” and speaking “the multitude of words”, “for thou sayest, my doctrine is pure” (11:1-4)- as if Job felt that because he held true doctrine he was justified in pouring out words as he did.
- “Why should I not be impatient?” (21:4 RV).
- “Today is my complaint bitter. My stroke is heavier than my groaning” (23:2)-

i.e. his complaining was due to his sufferings.

- “If I hold my peace, I shall give up the spirit” (13:19 RVmg.).

Job felt that the situation he was in *forced* him to use the words he did, and certainly justified it [we may well have used this reasoning ourselves when justifying the use of bad language]. But in the end, Elihu on God’s behalf rebuked him for his wrong words. And Job himself recognised: “I am vile. I will lay mine hand upon my mouth” in regret of his words (40:4). “Wherefore I loathe my words and repent” (42:6 RVmg.). He realized his mistake: he had thought that the situation justified his words. Now he hung his head and admitted that there was no justification for speaking in the way he had. Especially in the matter of the tongue, we can so easily justify ourselves; ‘I only said / did it [or didn’t do it] because...’. And it is all so child-like. Once we leave off *all* attempts at self-justification, we will face up to our sins. Let us kneel at our bed sides and *confess without reserve* our sin. And we will thereby realize the more finely our utter desperation. And the vital force, the nerve, the most essential idea of Christianity will be unleashed in us afresh: that we are desperate sinners, and the Son of God, as one like us, died to save us from our desperate situation, and to grant us a gracious place in His Kingdom. And we will respond, not therefore in mediocrity, but in lives of active grace and dynamic service.

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### Notes

(1) Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), p. 144.

## 14-2 A Feeling God

Insofar as we realize that God is not passive, but has feelings toward us far more deep and passionate than we can ever know, so far we will realize that life with Him is a daily, passionate experience. It cannot be ‘the same old scene’. Consider the passion of God: “For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant” (Is. 42). “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart is changed within me; All my compassion is aroused” (Hosea). The prophets are full of such passionate intensity. The prophets are not just predictions of the future. They reveal the passion of God’s feelings for His people. At the very time when He condemns them for their adultery against Him, their ingratitude, their worthlessness, He cries out His belief in the blessedness He will one day grace them with.

Can one person on a speck of a planet in a speck of a solar system in a mediocre clump of a galaxy really make a difference to the creator of that universe? Just one of the estimated 77 billion who have lived on this planet since Adam? As David looked to the heavens, he felt what surely we all have: “What is man, that thou art mindful of him...?”. Reflect how Almighty God created a bush to give Jonah shade from the sun; and created a tiny worm to take it away, to teach Jonah something. We *matter* to God. Our lives and experiences and the things in our lives are important to Him, down to the micro level [a worm, in Jonah’s case]. And we should reflect this in the way we treat others- *all* men. God reminded Jonah that He had laboured and ‘made to grow’ the people of Nineveh, just as He had consciously

expended energy on the growth of the gourd (Jonah 4:10). People should matter to us; their lives, their feelings, their eternal destiny. I am not preaching some kind of humanism. Rather, appealing for us to reflect the same senseless, illogical, caring and saving spirit of our Lord and our Creator. He rent the heavens to come down (to come down *so far*)...and save us. And the extent of that rending and coming down was in the death by torture of His only, beloved Son. We can push pass people in a line, or on transport, ignore the old lady who slipped on the ice, the child lost in the bus station or taxi park; the driver needing a tow...because we are just too busy. Because, even, we are busy on the Lord's business. So we tell ourselves. The reality is, we just don't care, or, we don't care very deeply. And we can remain untouched by the tragedy of all those who have not known, as we see them streaming before us on a city street, as we look out over the thousands of lights on a city night. From Nairobi to Moscow to Mumbai...all the way back home. It should concern us, worry us, that we have what they so desperately need. To say 'they're not interested' is, for me, just an excuse. Of course they're not (nobody is)...*until they meet you or me*, until we have gotten them to see, to listen, in whatever form, to the Truth we have. The Angels in Heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents. A solitary act on this speck of a planet reverberates throughout the cosmos. One solitary life...thrills Almighty God. Just because He doesn't show His feelings to us doesn't mean this isn't so. The prophets especially, and the parables of Jesus, help us to see beyond the mask of His silence, the mask of a sky above us that rarely reflects the Creator's feelings. The life of the Father was manifested unto us in the Son (1 Jn. 1:2), and He has shared that life with us. God's life is essentially activity; it is hardly the same old scene, even though to the unspiritual observer it may seem He acts repetitively.

#### ***"He was moved with compassion"***

One of the repeated features of the Lord's witness was His compassion towards humanity: "When he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. [Mk. 6:34 adds at this point that He *therefore*, as a result of that compassion, started to "teach them many things"]. Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest..." (Mt. 9:36-38). It was their spiritual as well as their material and human need which evoked His compassion. I have to say that this spirit of urgent compassion is not as strong in our community as it should be. There seem few if any tears shed for the tragedy of humanity. The world's desperation seems written off as 'they're not interested' rather than felt as a tragedy that should evoke our emotional and practical response. When Jesus saw the leper who wanted to be "clean"- not just 'cured' or eased of his discomfort- He made an emotional response. He put forth His hand, touched him, and made him clean-because He was "moved with compassion" (Mk. 1:40,41). Mt. 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mk. 5:19 and Lk. 7:13 all record other times when the sheer humanity of the situation evoked the Lord's compassion: e.g. the woman in the funeral procession of her dear son, or the hungry crowds, unfed for 3 days...

Yet the Lord's compassion is clearly intended to be ours, who are to live and move and feel "in Him". The Lord of the servant "*was moved with compassion* and forgave him"- the very words used about the Lord being "moved with compassion" for the spiritual and human needs of the Galilean Jews He lived amongst in His life. But the point of the parable was: "...shouldest not thou also have had compassion...?" (Mt. 18:27,33). If we have seen and known His compassion, ought we not also to show that compassion in the same way as He did and does? His compassion must be ours. The Samaritan of Lk. 10:33 was clearly intended to be interpreted as the Lord Jesus. He "had compassion" on the dying man of humanity, not

counting the personal cost and risk; and then the Lord bids us each to go and do likewise. Our ‘doing likewise’ will issue in us too sensing the tragedy of those who have not heard, of those without a shepherd, of those who have fallen out of the way. We will be like the Father who was likewise moved with compassion for his wayward son (Lk. 15:20). The crowds of unknowing people who stream before us each day, the sad fact that we are so outnumbered in this world, that those you live and work with are dying in ignorance of the wonderful eternity that *could be* for them...that they live their lives in the darkness of selfishness, as existence rather than real life, without the light of the knowledge of the glory of God as it is in the face of Jesus Christ...all these things will powerfully *move us* to witness after the pattern of our Lord.

#### 14-3 The Personal Pleading Of The Prophets

Often the prophets break off from predicting coming condemnation to *plead personally* with their hearers to repent [this explains some of the strange shifts of pronouns in the prophets]. Take Micah. Chapter 2 is a message of judgment against Israel. And then Micah pleads: “And I said, Hear, I *pray* you, O heads of Jacob...is it not for you to know [the coming of] judgment?” (3:1). Likewise: “For this will I wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked: I will make a wailing like jackals...at Beth-le-Aphrah have I rolled myself in the dust” (Mic. 1:8,10 RV). Rolling naked in the dust...this was the extent of Micah’s passion for the repentance of his audience. He comes to the point where he would fain make sacrifice for Israel, even to the point of offering his firstborn son, so strongly did he take upon himself the sins of his people. But he tells Israel that even this will be no good; they must repent themselves: “Wherewith shall I come before the Lord...shall I come before him with burnt offerings....shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?...what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly...and to humble thyself [in repentance]” (6:6-8). In all this, Micah came close to the spirit of the Father and Son. For the Father *would* give His firstborn for their sin.

We will appeal to men with conviction, as Isaiah’s heart cried out for Moab like a young heifer about to be slaughtered, feeling for them in what would come upon them, and desperately appealing for their repentance. Because the Moabites would cry out and their voice would be heard, “*my* heart shall cry out for Moab” (Is. 15:4,5,8). As the Lord Jesus is a representative Saviour, we too must feel the judgment that is to come upon others, and in that sense cry out for them as they will cry out. “Therefore shall Moab howl for Moab” (Is. 16:7)-but Isaiah, feeling for them so strongly, also howled for them; “*my* bowls shall sound like an harp for Moab” (16:11). And he felt the same for his own people, Israel. He repeatedly pronounces “woe” upon them (Is. 3:9; 5:8,11,18,20,21,22; 8:11), and yet in that very context he can exclaim: “Woe is *me*” in chapter 6; he identified with them to the point of also feeling unworthy and under woe [in this clearly typifying the Lord’s identity with us]. In Is. 22:1 we read: “What aileth thee now, that thou art wholly gone up to the housetops?”, and I suggest this is Israel’s question to Isaiah, as he went up on the flat roof to weep. And thus he replies in Is. 22:4: “Therefore said I, Look away from me, I will weep bitterly, labour not to comfort me, because of the spoiling of the daughter of my people”.

This level of love inspired Jeremiah to adopt the same attitude (Jer. 48:20,31-34); he too howled for those whose howling in condemnation he prophesied (Jer. 48:31 s.w.). As Moab cried out like a three year old heifer (Jer. 48:34), so did Isaiah for them (Is. 15:5). All this was done by Isaiah and Jeremiah, knowing that Moab hated Israel (Is. 25:10) and were evidently worthy of God’s condemnation. But all the same they loved them, in the spirit of Noah witnessing to the mocking world around him. Our knowledge of this world’s future means

that as we walk the streets and mix with men and women, our heart should cry out for them, no matter how they behave towards us, and there should be a deep seated desire for at least some of them to come to repentance and thereby avoid the judgments to come. Particularly is this true, surely, of the people and land of Israel. It ought to be impossible for us to walk its streets or meet its people without at least desiring to give them a leaflet or say at least something to try to help them see what lies ahead.

And there are many other Biblical examples of such genuine pain at the lostness of this world, and their refusal of the Gospel's grace; not least our Lord Himself weeping over Jerusalem. Think of how He was angry [i.e. frustrated?], "being grieved for the blindness of their hearts" (Mk. 3:5). Are we just indifferent or even smugly happy that men are so blind...? Or do we grieve about it to the point of angry frustration? Remember how Moses and Paul would fain have given their eternal life for the conversion of Israel, this is how they felt for them. Peter's hunger to eat was played back to him as the hunger of God to accept and save the Gentiles (Acts 10:10). Reflect too again on Jeremiah; how he responds to the prophecy he has to utter against the hated Philistines by begging the Father to limit these judgments, presumably on account of their repentance: "O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? Put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still" (Jer. 47:6). Think too of how he almost interrupts a prophecy he is giving to Israel about judgment to come by appealing for them *therefore* to repent (Jer. 4:13,14). Our handling of the prophecies of judgment to come should have a like effect upon us: they should inspire us to an inevitable witness. Each of our days cannot be just 'the same old scene' when we see the world in this way.

### ***Doing Something Concrete***

Because people matter, their inherent worth as humans warrants our all-out and most conscious, planned effort to convert them to God in truth. But beyond all this theory, *how* exactly are we to bring ordinary men and women to Him? Following are some practical suggestions:

- We are the salt of the earth, and one characteristic of salt is that it creates thirst. We are mistaken if we assume that all those people out there are just waiting for us to come to them with a series of true doctrinal propositions. Virtually nobody is seriously interested- until they meet you and me. We need to create some sort of realization of need in those we mix with. Through our examples and through the way we make our initial approaches to them, we need to plug in to that basic human hunger for their creator. Plenty of other religions do just this- and we ought to be far more 'in there' than many of us are.
- What we believe in theory, if it is believed rather than merely known, will have an outworking in practice. Not only must the difference between us and them in terms of our basic personality be apparent to them, but we should be actively looking for opportunities to put love and concern for people into concrete action.
- Realize that we are all prone to spiritual schizophrenia. We so easily are one person in our Christian life, and quite another in the workplace or home. This shouldn't be the case of course. It is the witness we make in the midst of ordinary life which converts people, which arrests their attention. To simply give someone your time in this busy world, to write a letter rather than an email... that itself shows your value of them, and is arresting to them. People's lives are so busy with the struggle for existence- whether in a dirt poor village in the poorer

world, or in the corporate life of the West. They live their lives stumbling from crisis to crisis. If our lives are somehow evidently not like this, then this in itself will be a powerful witness. And it will beg the question, as to *what* and *how* and *why* exactly we are so different. And at the appropriate moment, we can give answers. This is quite a different thing to merely imposing our beliefs upon them when they don't know us. People lack the time and emotional energy to truly care for others. When we break that pattern, it is obvious. It will arrest attention. People have never really listened to the Gospel, because nobody ever got their attention. Both literally and in a wider sense, we only listen, once someone has gotten our attention. We can teach away, with the most beautiful websites, smartly written books and tracts... but until we get someone's attention, they're not going to listen. And we get their attention by the startling and radical transformation in human life which there should be in us.

- In a world where there is increasingly less leisure time for much of the population, the most startling gift you can give to anyone is your time. That you bothered to write a letter. That you found time to visit them at a hard time. When the Lord passed through Jericho, there was a huge crowd around him, trying to get a few words in with Him. But despite all those demands upon His time, He looked up into the tree and spoke with Zacchaeus, and made the time to set up a meal with him. Jesus must have had so many people trying to invite Him for a meal- for this was the high point of His ministry. But despite all that, He purposefully made the time to eat with that despised man. No wonder He converted Zacchaeus. Jesus gave him time and attention. He showed that He truly cared. Almost every human being must, like I do, lay awake at night for a time, staring at the ceiling with wide eyes. It is in those moments that the people you live and work with will be thinking about you. That you gave *time* to them, or to someone else. It will make an impact. Cynicism of religious people, especially preachers, runs very deep in most people. They will perhaps subconsciously be keeping a tab on whether or not you are truly consistent in your life. And if they see that you are, over an extended period, it *will* make an impact.

- Try to avoid the temptation to think that preaching somehow equals debate with others who are committed religious people. Do it, of course, but remember that Jesus made most of His converts amongst those who were outside the religious establishment in first century Palestine. And surely His witness is the basis for ours. We are continuing His work. Time tends to soften history. We can too easily imagine that those the Lord converted were already some sort of saints at the time He met them. But the hard hearted tax collectors, the prostitutes, the rough working men, the desperately poor...were just like those types are today. Their thinking and mannerisms would have been very similar. And yet it was from these types that the Lord made His converts. People need people, not just pieces of paper with writing on, invitations to meetings etc.

- Therefore recognize that God created *you* as a unique person. You were *designed* by God with a unique combination of personality, temperament, talents and background. Respect yourself for who you are. We must love our neighbour *as* we love ourselves. He has placed you in the position you are, in the circle of people you know and move among, for a purpose. There is something in *you* that can potentially reach out to them. The world seems to have the idea that when there is a need, a job to be done, then anyone able and willing to have a go at solving it should do so. So, a company may put a guy in a position that he *can* fill, but it isn't quite him. And this is why so many don't enjoy their daily work. It is too simplistic to think that "There's a world of need out there, so, you, brother or sister, go out into it". Think first of who you are, and then seek to witness in the way God intends you to. It isn't for all of us to

stand up as Peter did and make a point blank appeal to people to repent. It's not for all of us to employ the intellectual persuasion which Paul did. Or to go round telling everyone what the Lord did in our lives, as the healed blind man did. Or to knock on doors or distribute tracts. We're all different and are intended to make our own type of witness. So, appreciating this, why not *aim* to make a convert? Write down the names of say three people you mix with, and pray *on your knees* that the Lord will open up opportunities for you to get the word over to them. Disabuse yourself of the wrong idea that preaching is all about reaching out to unknown people. Because it isn't. It's essentially about witness to people you know; for *you* are to be the light of their world. And why not make contact with people you once knew but are out of touch with- those you studied with at school, once worked with, lived with...people in this world have very few relationships, and to be contacted out of the blue like that will be a pleasant surprise to most people. Reminisce about the old times. Try to be their friend, first and foremost, before coming on heavy with the message. You have been put into their world exactly because you are the right person to witness to them. Paul speaks as if we each have a "province", an area, a group of people, which the Lord intends us to witness to (2 Cor. 10:16 RV).

- Most of us mix with people at the same shops or services we visit. They know your face. Give them a leaflet [we can arrange to send you leaflets if you don't have any]. There will then be a connection between you and the message when you see them in future. Col. 4:5 sums it up: "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make use of every opportunity". People are not always so impressed by the story of the drug abuser or murderer who turns to Christ. Far more arresting will probably be the life of an ordinary person like you, another ordinary worker, another woman who takes their child to school each morning...which has been transformed by a personal response to the truth of God. Someone like you who escaped from mere religion and found the ultimately true relationship with God.

#### **14-4 Passionate Preaching And Prayer**

In his time of dying, Stephen saw the Lord Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55). But about 13 times in the New Testament, the point is made that the Lord *sits* there, unlike the Mosaic priests who *stood* (Heb. 10:12). Jesus was passionately feeling for Stephen; and He just as emotionally and passionately feels for us in our struggles. This alone should lift us out of the mire of mediocrity. Prayer will have meaning and power. It won't just be the repetitious conscience-salver it can descend into.

A window on what communication can be with our creator is provided by considering the 'imprecatory Psalms'; those where the writer wishes terrible judgments upon his enemies. It is possible to understand these Psalms in terms of the promises to Abraham- that God will curse those who curse the true seed of Abraham. They can therefore be seen to be merely asking for the promises to Abraham to be fulfilled against God's enemies. But another angle on this problem is to consider how the Psalmists talk to God in a far 'rougher' way than we do. They pour out their feelings, their anger and frustration with their enemies, their inability to understand how God is working...and they let it all hang down. They seem to have no reserve with God; they talk to Him as if He is their friend and acquaintance. David pleads with God to 'avenge my cause' (Ps. 35:23), he protests how he is in the right and how he longs for God to judge him. And so do the prophets, in the interjections they sometimes make in commentary on the prophecy they have just uttered. The emotion which David often seems to have felt was "Damn these people!", but he pours this out to God and asks *Him* to damn them. When we like David feel our enemies are unjust, we can:

1. Seek revenge. But this isn't a response we can make, Biblically.
2. Deny the feelings of hurt and anger. And yet, they surface somehow. And we join the ranks of the millions of hurt people in this world, who 'take it out' in some way on others.
3. Or we can do as David seems to have done. Take these feelings, absolutely as they are, with no rough edges smoothed off them...to God Himself. Pour them all out in prayer and leave Him to resolve the matter. In passing, this fits in with the conclusions of modern psychiatry- that we can't eliminate our feelings, so we must express them in an appropriate way.

This latter option is how I understand the imprecatory Psalms. Those outpourings of human emotion were read by God as prayers. The writer of Psalm 137, sitting angry and frustrated by a Babylonian riverside, with his guitar hanging on a willow branch, being jeered ("tormented" Ps. 137:3 RVmg.) by the victorious Babylonian soldiers who had led him away captive...he felt *so* angry with them. Especially when they tried to make him sing one of the temple songs ("sing us one of the songs of Zion"). And, as a bitter man does, his mind went from one hurt to another. He remembered how when Babylon had invaded, the Edomites hadn't helped their Hebrew brethren (Obadiah 11,12). They had egged on the Babylonian soldiers in ripping down the temple, shouting [in a chorus?] "Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation". And so in anger and bitterness this Jew prays with tears, as he remembered Zion, "O daughter of Babylon...happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock" (:8,9 RV). God read those angry words as a prayer, and in some sense they will have their fulfilment. For these words are picked up in Rev. 18:8,21 and applied to what will finally happen to Babylon. Her spiritual children will be dashed against the rock of Christ, the stone of Daniel 2:44, at His return. He will dash in pieces the Babylon-led people that oppose Him.

This makes these Psalms a challenge to us, in that they show how our earlier brethren poured out their souls, their anger, their doubts and fears, their joy and exuberance too...to the God who hears prayer, to the God who feels passionately for us, who feels for *our* feelings, even moreso through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we must ask whether our prayers are of this quality, or whether we have slipped into the mire of mediocrity, the same standard phrases, the same old words and themes... and even worse, could it be that we perceive that God only sees and hears the words we say to Him in formal prayer, and disregards our other feelings and thoughts? Seeing He sees and knows all things, let us therefore pour out all that is within us before Him. And we will find it wonderfully therapeutic when struggling against anger and hurt.

## **Passionate Preaching**

Phil. 1:7 speaks of the "defence and confirmation of the gospel". These are legal terms- the Greek word translated "defence" means a plea entered in a court of law; and "confirmation" refers to supporting evidence offered to a judge. Paul's idea is that in our preaching, our audiences are the judge; and we are entering a plea for the case of none other than God Himself, and His Son. We have to ask whether our witness to the world is indeed a *plea*- or whether it's a case of merely getting people in our own social group to just drop by at *our* church rather than their usual one. The fact we are speaking on God's behalf, pleading for His case to be accepted in the hard hearts of men, should impart an urgency, a desire to penetrate minds, and persistence in our witness.

### ***The Power Of Basics***

The Lord said that a scribe (one who knows well the Old Testament scriptures) who also knows the Gospel of the Kingdom is like a man who brings out of “his treasure” things new and old (Mt. 13:52). But Jesus had just defined the “treasure” as the Gospel of the Kingdom (Mt. 13:44). If we make that ‘treasure’ *our* personal treasure, the most valuable thing in our whole being, then out of the basic Gospel that is in our hearts we will bring forth things “new and old”. Our treasure is where our heart is (Mt. 6:21). Yet the treasure is the basic Gospel, i.e., that Gospel lodged in our deepest hearts. The old things of basic certainties; and the new things relating to our increasing appreciation of what they really mean, these will come out of us in our lives and feeling and being. The word of reconciliation has been placed within our hearts, and “we are ambassadors *therefore* on behalf of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19,20 RV). A from the heart witness is inspired by having that message within our hearts, as our deepest treasure. The treasure of “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” is in our earthen vessels, and it is the basic message which we preach (2 Cor. 4:5-7). So, one source of “new things” comes from sustained meditation upon the fundamentals of our faith, making the treasure we found in a field *our* personal treasure, our pride and joy.

So the power of our basic doctrines should never cease to inspire us. I can testify to this, as can so many who have been baptized even a few years. That Christ really will come, soon; that now is my salvation nearer than when I first believed. That the feet of Jesus of Nazareth will surely stand on this earth again, and His Kingdom be eternally here; that He truly was a man of my passions and nature, and yet overcame. That I and my innate selfishness are the real ‘satan’, not someone or something else. That death is death, that this brief and fragile life is the time to serve the Lord, with no fiery hell beneath us, but instead the sure hope of God’s grace. That through baptism, I truly am part of the seed of Abraham and a partaker in Israel’s Hope. And that by the grace of God’s calling, I am delivered from the fog of error which dogs so many about these things. And that there is, in the end, one body of true believers world-wide believing as I do; that the sun that bids me rest is waking my brethren ‘neath the Western sky, so that the voice of praise is never silent. There are times of total desperation and disappointment with myself, with my nature, with this world, with humanity, with my brethren. In my hard moments, in the hours and days of such utter and essential loneliness, that only the Lord Himself knows... through all these, the power of our basic Christian doctrines has revived me, sparked again a light in the black, bringing me to know again the personal presence and power of Jesus my Lord. And it can and will do for you, too. Not for us ‘the same old scene’. Working on the highway, drilling through the hardtop, hour after mindless hour; changing those nappies, preparing the same food at the same times, day after endless day...as we take the same route to work each day...walking to the textile mill, across the railroad tracks...boarding the same bus...coming off at exit 42...in all these things we can be more than conquerors. Into our otherwise wasted and pointless lives, *His* life breaks through. His life of unending passion and urgent, feeling concern for the lost; of daily ‘knowing the Father’, of pouring out our unshareable self, our very soul, before Him; of realising time and again the gripping wonder of His grace, and serving therefore and thereby in newness of spirit. Not only are we to perceive the value of others, but of ourselves too. Gal. 5:26; 6:4 RV make the point that we shouldn’t be desirous of *vainglory*, but of “his glorying in regard of himself alone”. Secured in Christ, justified in Him, we can even glory in who we are in His eyes. We can be so sure of His acceptance of us that there is such a thing as “the glorying of our hope” (Heb. 3:6)- all ours to explore and experience.

## 15-1 Hearts That Bleed

The opposite of love isn't so much hatred, as indifference. To be indifferent to the real welfare of our fellows in this world, and of *all* our own brethren, is perhaps our most common sin. The Lord taught us that we should have a sense of urgency in our response to others. The Lord showed by His example that it is better to meet the hunger of human need than to keep the letter of Sabbath law (Mk. 2:25,26). *His* urgency, *God's* urgency, *our* consequent urgency...all means that when even Divine principles appear to come into conflict, we are to be influenced above all by the urgency of others' need. " Which of you shall have a son fallen into a well, and will not straightway draw him up?" (Lk. 14:5 RV). Wells weren't that wide. Only a small child would fall down one. We can imagine the tragic situation in the home. " Benny's fallen down the well!" . And everyone would go running. They wouldn't wait until the Saturday evening. Nor would they worry the slightest about infringing the letter of the law. And so, the Lord explained, that little boy was like the sick men and women, sick both physically and spiritually, whom He saw around Him. There was an *urgency* which He felt about them. And so there should be with us too. We can realize that this world is evil and vain; and yet we can still fail to perceive the tragedy of it all, and the urgency of our task to save at least some. The Father of the prodigal told the servants: " Bring forth *quickly* the best robe" (Lk. 15:22 RV). The indebted man was told to sit down *quickly* and have his debt reduced (Lk. 16:6). There is an urgency in the mediation of mercy towards others. When Paul thanks God that Titus has a heart of "earnest care" for the Corinthians, he uses a Greek word [*spoude*] which literally means "speed", and is elsewhere translated "haste" – as well as "haste" and "business" (2 Cor. 8:16). The heart that really cares will be characterized by a speedy and quick response, not a careful weighing up of a situation, nor a resignation of responsibilities to ponderous committees. In Rom. 1:14,15, Paul speaks of his "debt" to preach to both "Greeks and Barbarians" as the reason for his planned trip to Rome–for in that city there was the widest collection of "Greeks and Barbarians". And yet he later speaks of our 'debt' [Gk.] to love one another (Rom. 13:8). The debt of love that we feel on reflecting upon our unpayable debt to the Father and Son is partly an unending 'debt' to loving share the Gospel of grace with others, to forgive the 'debts' of others sins against us.

What this world is crying out for are people who really and meaningfully care. We don't want a standard reply to our letter or e-mail that asks for information. People need people who are real and therefore credible. Not just the same old stock answers. As we survey the tragedy of humanity around us, hearts must bleed. This alone will make us and our position about anything attractive to people. Our tendency is only to feel for those who we consider to have some worth. But God commends His love to us (as though it needed any commendation) in that He poured out (and still pours out) His feelings, His passion, the blood of His only Son for those who have *no* worth, but are actually the most *unworthy*. Hundreds of pages of Old Testament history exemplify this in His attitude to His wayward children.

Consider the time when after a generation of abusing the God who so loved them, " the children of Israel said unto the Lord, We have sinned: do thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto thee; deliver us only, we pray thee, this day. And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the LORD: and his soul was grieved (Heb. cut down, reaped-as in harvest) for the misery / grief of Israel. (Jud. 10:15,16). The Hebrew word translated "misery" is also translated "grief". The soul of Almighty God so far away from us grieved for their grief. Their pain elicited in Him a response, no matter that their pain was totally their fault.

I once heard a middle class woman say to her child (in that irksome White Anglo-Saxon Protestant way): " Look at that bad man lying there in the gutter. He's been *drinking!* *Silly* man, hey!" . She didn't want to imagine how that red, contoured face had once been a sweet baby, a mothers pride and joy; a mischievous little lad at school; a young man with an ambition to marry a young woman and have a family. Yes, on one level it was his fault he was in the gutter. But the heart that bleeds sees the tragedy, the human pain and wastage of it all. The heart that bleeds cant walk on by. It will realize our limited ability to judge the total circumstances in any human encounter, but more than that, it will be hopeful and seeking for Gods glory to be achieved in the most apparently hopeless of cases. God need not have grieved for the grief of Israel. It *was* their fault. But He did, and He eventually grieved for it to the extent of giving His own son to be done to death. We began by recalling the Lords story about the little boy who falls down the well. The legalistic mind would have gone straight to Ex. 21:33: the man who dug a well and didn't cover it was responsible for any deaths arising from it. The story would imply that the father of the child was the owner of the well. The Lord doesn't draw the lesson that Its your own fault for being disobedient to the Law. He focuses instead on the need to act *urgently* to save, without maxing out on the issue of whose *fault* it was that the tragedy had occurred.

## 15-2 The Parable of The Three Friends

The Lord told a parable about three friends. One friend, presumably very poor, arrives at midnight at the doorstep of friend number two. Perhaps those not from an Eastern background can never understand the pressing urgency of the hospitality culture; you *must* feed the visitor. It just has to be done. But he is poor, and he doesn't have any bread. So, he goes to his richer friend, friend number three, and wakes him up, disturbing the whole household, to ask him to give him some bread with which to entertain the first friend. Because of his " importunity" , the rich friend gave to him. The Greek translated " importunity" means lack of shamefacedness, lack of reverence. The Greek word is *an-aideia*: without *aidos*. What does *aidos* mean? It is used twice in the New Testament: in 1 Tim. 2:9 " shamefacedness" , and in Heb. 12:28 " serve God acceptably with *reverence*" . The man (who the Lord invites us to see as representing us) comes to the rich friend (cp. God) *without* this reverence. Now of course we should serve our God with appropriate reverence. But there ought to be times when we as it were rush to God, because He is our father and our friend, without that formality which our worship of Him might more usually include. Contrary to the ideas of popular religion, God is not merely something to be worshipped; He is Father and friend, the one to run to in time of urgent need *when that need arises from the requirements of His people and His work*.

The Lord will one day come to *us* at midnight, and the unworthy will not open to Him (Song 5). And He right now stands at the door and knocks (Rev. 3:20). The rejected will know what it is like to stand knocking at the Lords shut door and be unanswered (Mt. 25:10; Lk. 13:25). He surely intended us to make such links within His teachings. The message is quite clear-those who cant be bothered to respond to the knocking of others, who refuse to feel for others in their desperation... these are the ones who will then come to know just how that feels, as in ultimate spiritual desperation *they* hammer at the Lords door. >From this it surely follows that in our response to the desperation of others, we are working out our own eternal destiny. We are deciding whether or not the Lord will respond to *us*, as we lay there prostrate before Him at judgment, knowing our desperation whilst at the same time believing and hoping in His love and response. When we see others in their needs, the sister who cant get to meeting because nobody will baby-sit for her once in a while, the brother who just needs someone to

talk to, someone to listen, an evening of someone's time, the man over there who is so lost in his Catholicism, that guy so addicted to his dreams of personal wealth, the woman back there hooked on dope, the single father with two spastic children, the grandmother left to bring up three children on a tiny pension in one room with broken windows and severe winters, the refugees streaming over that border day after day... we are confronted with these pictures daily.

They are knocking at our door, at midnight. And we would rather not be disturbed. We would rather acknowledge their status as our friends, our brothers and sisters, but make excuses as to why here and now we cant respond. To tell the friend that, well, give him bread tomorrow...this was quite inappropriate. It could have been argued that they didn't *need* bread right then. They could wait till morning. But the friend appreciated the *shame* and the *awkwardness* of his friend...his heart felt for him, and he responded. It isn't just dire material need we should feel for, therefore; but feel for others in the sheer humanity of their life situations, and have a heart willing to try to give them all they need in them.

Paul's writings are packed with allusions back to the Lords parables. In his reference to the tale of the three friends, Paul seems to have understood just as we have done. Rom. 16:1,2 comments that the ecclesia should welcome " Phoebe our sister receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she *hath need* of you: for she hath been a succourer of many" . "Hath need" is the same Greek word as in Lk. 11:8- the friend gave whatever *was needed* to the friend who arrived from his journey. And Paul says this should be done for Phoebe because she lived a life of giving out to others needs.

The friend who came on his journey with " nothing" (Lk. 11:6) is intended by the Lord to be understood primarily as referring to the disciples whom He had sent out on their journey with nothing (" take nothing for your journey" , Lk. 9:3). When He told them to " eat such things as are set before you" (Lk. 10:8), He didn't just mean 'Don't be picky about your food'. He used the same word in Lk. 11:6 to describe how the faithful friend " set [food] before" his visitor. As they travelled around, the disciples were to be received in the way He was describing. Those in that early brotherhood of believers who received and supported them were to do so knowing that these brethren were in their turn responding to human need, and they could be fellow Helpers in the Gospel's work by showing hospitality. John says just the same: " Because that for his names sake they went forth [alluding to the great commission to go into all the world], taking nothing of the *Gentiles* [i.e. the unbelievers]. *We* therefore ought to help receive such, that we might be fellow Helpers to the truth" (3 Jn. 7,8).

The knocking on the door is specifically a symbol of prayer. If we see our brothers need, even if we can do nothing physically to help (and so often, we cant); we will *pray* earnestly for them. If we truly feel for them, we will pray for them. The friend troubles his friend for help (Lk. 18:7), just as in another parable about prayer the desperate widow " troubles" the judge for a response (Lk. 18:5). " From within" (11:7) is always used in the Bible about the inner man, rather than meaning indoors. The Greek word occurs twice in the same context: " your *inward part*...that which is *within*" (11:39,40). Inside himself, he spoke to his friend: " Trouble me not" . Yet that satan within him, that desire to be selfish, was overcome by his realization of his friends need, and *why* it had arisen. And if we have this same emboldened conscience to overcome our innate selfishness and ask of our Father *for the sake of others*, then we will s the work of the ministry will be provided by Him- that is His sober promise. Jn. 15:16 is one of John's versions of the great preaching commission: " I chose you and appointed you, that ye should *go* and bear fruit...whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my

name, he may give it you" . The promise of support and help and answered prayer is again held out- in the context of preaching and ministering to the Gospel.

### ***For The World***

We should preach because we know the Gospel, because we are men and women charged with good news- which is what the very word *evangelio* implies. We will want to lift the load of shame and guilt that burden men down, with the good news of Gods saving grace. This is where *our* preaching ought to be different to the preaching of other Christian groups. Their goal seems to be getting more members for their church. We must ask: Are we evangelizing, or are we recruiting? The knowledge of the True Gospel, the real good news which none others have...this ought to make *our* witness far different from their drives to recruit more members to their religion. We should be seeking to liberated the hurt and the lost, rather than trying to merely validate ourselves and the faith of our fathers. We must ask ourselves whether we have the right focus; whether we are leading people into the grace and real empowerment that comes from walking simply, honestly and closely with God; or are we adding to the good news until its not good any more? Are we really using grace and truth to tear down the fortresses of unbelief or false belief...or are we more taken up with struggling over what type of hymn book we have, or dress standards, or stopping people chew gum in church? We each have a tendency to withdraw from the world, secluding ourselves, observing life without truly participating in it. Yet in preaching the Gospel we seek to break down the barrier between observer and participator, and enter into others' lives. We are humans, all our knowledge of the Truth does not make us somehow separate from all the rest of us. And this is the basis for our love and concern for them.

Thomas Merton in *Confessions Of A Guilty Bystander* sums it up nicely:

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers...those 'out of the world' are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution and all the rest"<sup>(1)</sup>.

And truly did John Donne write in his *Devotions*: "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee". Yet it is cruelly difficult to be sensitive in today's world. Those who are so often end up destroying that sensitivity in order to escape the pain that comes from being truly sensitive. Yet this was the pain of the life of Jesus, and all those others whose hearts bled for others. The Gospel answers to actual human need, as glove fits hand, but we can only take the Gospel to the human need if we ourselves, as preachers, are motivated by a passion and sensitivity for their need.

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### ***Notes***

(1) Thomas Merton, *Confessions Of A Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965).

### **15-3 Passion For The Lost**

Consider the passion for saving men and women which there was in Bible characters:

#### ***Paul***

" These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation. And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (Acts 16:17,18). Paul didn't allow himself to be irritated. The tragedy of mental illness grieved him; the tragedy of the way in which some people have an all too *partial* knowledge of Gods truth. And his grieving for her didn't merely result in him preaching the Gospel to her; he did something concrete to help cure her. Paul's grief of spirit is crystallized for us in his words of Rom. 9:2: " I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could pray that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren's sake" (RV). With full allusion to Moses prayer that *he* be blotted out from the book of life for the sake of Israel finding salvation, Paul felt that if it were possible, he would be condemned if only *they* would respond to the Gospel. This is quite something. He woke up each day, the words imply, with this pain in his heart: that Israel had not heard. And can we not rise up to at least something of this passion for them, and for a Gentile world that is equally resistant to Gods grace? It was this which led Paul on to Jerusalem, even though the Holy Spirit specifically warned him (in effect) not to go there, for bonds and imprisonment awaited him. Why did he go? What impelled him? To forge ahead past weeping women on the shore, the tug of close friends, the pressure of common sense, and the direct statements of the Holy Spirit? It could only have been this pain in his heart, this grief for Israel, and this earnest desire to *at least try* to bring their Jerusalem leaders to repentance. This was how strong it was.

J.I. Packer has written: "Paul sought to save men; and because he sought to save them, he was not content merely to throw truth at them; but he went out of his way to get alongside them, and to start thinking with them from where they were, and to speak to them in terms that they could understand, and above all to avoid anything that would prejudice them against the Gospel...in his zeal to maintain truth he never lost sight of the needs and claims of people"<sup>(2)</sup>. A cameo of his attitude is presented when Eutychus falls down from the window; Paul likewise runs down afterwards and falls on him, on the blood and broken bones (Acts 20:9,10). The language of Paul's descent and falling upon Eutychus and Eutychus' own fall from the window are so similar. Surely the point is, that Paul had a heart that bled for that man, that led him to identify with him.

#### ***Job***

" Did not I weep for him that was in trouble? was not my soul grieved for the poor? When I looked for good, then evil came *unto me*: and when I waited for light, there came darkness" (Job 30:25,26). Note the past tenses; even in the past, it seemed that evil came when he deserved blessing; but despite this, he hadn't become inward looking; he had wept and grieved for the misfortune of others. " Weep with them that weep" seems to be quoting from here; as if to say: Job is really our pattern in all this.

## Noah

The Hebrew word translated "grieved" also occurs, about Noah, in Gen. 8:10: "And he stayed [s.w. to be grieved, hurt] yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark". This word is found translated in other places like this: "Be in anguish" (Dt. 2:25); "wounded" (1 Sam. 31:3); "exceedingly grieved" (Es. 4:4); "travaileth" (Job 15:20); "wounded" (1 Chron. 10:3); "sore pained within me" (Ps. 55:4); "I am pained at my heart" (Jer. 4:19); it is several times used of a woman "in pain", "travailing" in expectancy of the birth (Is. 26:17,18; 54:1; 66:7; Mic. 4:10). Why was Noah grieved and distressed, as he waited seven days before sending the dove out again? Surely for the plight of his world. He was hoping the dove would return with some sign of civilization, some hint of human survival. His grief was for the corpses floating, for the animals lost...for the world that once was. He had preached to them for 120 years, and they hadn't listened. Yet he didn't think Well that's their problem, they didn't want to hear when they could, it serves them right. And neither does it seem he was looking out of the ark window thinking My, I'm sure glad we were obedient.

As the rain came down, it seems to me that the practical reality of the tragedy would have dawned upon Noah; as the waters rose, he would have pictured the folk he knew running to ever higher hills he would have seen the faces of local children, maybe those of the guys he bought wood from, faces of the women his wife had bartered with, memories of his own brothers and sisters, perhaps his other children. It seems to me that he spent all that time in the ark grieving, grieving, grieving for the tragedy of it all. He surely wasn't smugly thinking Ha, serves them right, and praise God, I'm saved, and there's a great future Kingdom for me in store!. I also muse- and no more than this- that perhaps he went on a bender on coming out of the ark because he just couldn't handle the tragedy of it all. Walking around an empty earth knowing he was saved and the others hadn't made it...

And this all has vital, biting relevance to us. For Peter takes Noah in the ark as a symbol of us all in Christ. Yes, he was there thanking God for His gracious salvation, looking forward to the new world to come, but distraught at the tragedy of those masses who hadn't responded, and who had died the slow, desperate, struggling death of drowning. He sent out the dove to see if the waters were "abated" - but the Hebrew word is usually translated "curse"; he wanted to know if the curse was still evident; if the waters were cursed in the presence of the ground / earth. The same word is found in Gen. 8:21 "I will not again *curse* the ground"<sup>(3)</sup>. If our concern for this world is genuine, if our preaching is not just seeking to gain members, or prove ourselves right and others wrong, then we will grieve for this world; even though the exclusion of some from Gods salvation is in some way their fault. Those who reject our message we will grieve and bleed for; not just shrug our shoulders over. Lack of response should concern us, worry us, *drive us* to think of how we could be the more persuasive of men.

## Jeremiah

The extent to which Jeremiah's heart bled for his people is reflected in Jer. 9:1-3. He wished he had more moisture in his body, so that he could weep both day and night for Judah- and yet he goes on to describe them as proceeding from evil to evil in an ever downward spiral, shooting lies everywhere... Everyone is special, nobody is like anyone else. This is how God sees His children, and we should reflect this perspective. It is this which will make us arrestingly different from the people with whom we daily walk. We will cry out with

Jeremiah: “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?”, unmoved and lost as they are in their own petty issues (Lam. 1:12).

If we too have a heart that bleeds, we will come to know the mind of Jeremiah, who as he proclaimed the judgments of his last days, interrupted his sermon: “My bowels, my bowels! I am pained at the walls of my heart; my heart is disquieted in me...because my soul heareth the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war” (Jer. 4:19 RV). His very *soul* heard the message which he preached, and he interrupts his proclamation of it with this emotional outburst; this was no mindless distribution of bills or casual mention of our church. He was pained in his heart to the extent that he seems to have had some form of seizure. This is how much Jeremiah felt for those he preached to and warned, both within and without of the ecclesia. And he speaks of the pain of *his* heart after having spoken of the pain that would reach unto the heart of Judah (Jer. 4:18,19). The pain of their heart became the pain of his heart. And yet Jeremiah had the mind of God in this sense, as David was after God’s own heart. This is reflected by the way in which it is very difficult at times in Jeremiah to decide who is speaking- Jeremiah, or God. Jer. 9:1-3,10,11 is a good passage to work through from this perspective, asking ‘Who is speaking? Jeremiah, or God?’ Their minds were clearly so intertwined. Both of them are described, in consecutive verses, as rising up early to plead with Israel (Jer. 25:3,4).

Jeremiah could say in truth that “mine eye runneth down with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. Mine eye trickleth down, and ceaseth not, without any intermission...mine eye affecteth mine heart” (Lam. 3:48-51). What he saw with his eye affected his mind / heart. Let us not see the doom of others, the pain and suffering of another life, and walk on by not permanently moved. What we see should affect our heart- if we have a heart that bleeds. And a bleeding heart doesn’t merely bleed- it *does* something concrete, in prayer and action. Consider other examples of the bleeding heart of Jeremiah:

- “Mine eyes do fail with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth [“my stomach is in knots”, the Net Bible], for the destruction of the daughter of my people; because the children and the sucklings swoon in the streets of the city” (Lam. 2:11)
- “For these things I weep; mine eye, mine eye runneth down with water... my bowels are troubled; mine heart is turned within me; for I have grievously rebelled” (Lam. 1:16,20).
- Having pleaded with Judah to repent, Jeremiah goes on to say: “But as for me, behold, I am in your hand: do with me as is good and right in your eyes” (Jer. 26:13,14 RV). It’s as if he doesn’t mind if they kill him because they misunderstand him, his passionate concern, far over-riding any desire for his own preservation, was that they should repent.

Notice how Jeremiah’s bowels were turned for his people, because he felt that *he* had shared in their sin. The arrows of God entered into his “reins”, his kidneys, and this is why he so cried out (Lam. 3:13). But God’s arrows were against a sinful Judah (Lam. 2:4). Yet Jeremiah so identified with them that he felt they had entered *him*; and this is why he could cry out in the way he did. Even though he hadn’t rebelled, he felt that because they had, so had he, as he was so identified with them. He reached such a level of grief through identifying himself so closely with those for whom he grieved. Time and again, the descriptions of his personal suffering and grief are expressed in the terms of the very sufferings which he had prophesied as coming upon a sinful Israel. And so with us, if we feel and show a willful solidarity with the people of this world, with our brethren, then we will grieve for them. If we maintain the

selfish, 21st century detachedness from them, then we will never have a heart that bleeds for them. Jeremiah could so easily have shrugged his shoulders and reasoned that Judah had had their chance; and it wasn't on his head. But he didn't. His attitude was that he had to seek the sheep until he found it.

<i>Jeremiah</i>	<i>Judah</i>
Afflicted (Lam. 1:9; 3:1)	s.w. Lam. 1:3,7
Built against (3:5)	Jerusalem “built against” by the invaders, Jer. 52:4
“Waxed old”, i.e. prematurely aged (3:4)	The heavens and earth of Judah were to “wax old” (s.w.) and pass away (Ps. 102:26; 50:9; 51:6).
Felt his prayers not heard (3:8)	As Judah’s weren’t
“Hedged me about, that I cannot get out...inclosed my ways” (3:7,9)	“Therefore, behold, I will hedge up [s.w.] thy way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths” (Hos. 2:6)
“He was unto me as a bear” (3:10)	“I will meet them as a bear” (Hos. 13:8; Am. 5:19)
“As a lion”	How God was to Judah through the Babylonians (Jer. 5:6; 49:19; 50:44 etc.)
God bent His bow against him (3:12)	As against Judah (2:4 s.w.).
“Mine affliction and my misery” (3:19)	Same words in 1:7 “her affliction...her miseries”
He drank gall (3:5,19)	As Judah had to (Jer. 8:14; 9:15; 23:15)
None to comfort him (1:21)	None to comfort her (1:9)
He bore a yoke (3:27)	As Judah bore the yoke of condemnation by Babylon (Jer. 27:8,12)

And so Jeremiah feels that he himself has committed Israel’s sin along with them: “*We have transgressed and have rebelled*” (Lam. 3:42). He feels that God will not hear *his* prayer (Lam. 3:44), even though this was only true for the people and not for Jeremiah personally. In this

he looks forward to how the Lord Himself genuinely felt forsaken by the Father, even though He Himself was never forsaken.

And Jeremiah wanted his grief to be reflective of the grieving prayer of the remnant to their God: “Cry aloud to the Lord! O wall of daughter Zion! Let tears stream down like a torrent day and night! Give yourself no rest, your eyes no respite!” (Lam. 2:18 RSV). His grief really was and is to be the pattern for others. Doubtless it influenced the Lord Himself, who wept over Zion (Lk. 19:41), inevitably holding Jeremiah in His mind.

But like us, Jeremiah didn’t always have such a heart of compassion. Initially he didn’t even want to preach to his people. And he even prayed that he would so grieve for them in regard to the message he gave them, that he would cry for them day and night: “Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” (Jer. 9:1). And this prayer was heard. For by Lamentations, this is just what he was doing. And if what we read of Jeremiah troubles us, we too can pray for a heart that bleeds, and through the experience of life which the Lord allows us, He will develop such a heart in those who want it. You may be so caught up in your business, your family, your ecclesia even, your web of social contact...that in honest moments, you know that your heart doesn’t bleed as it should. You see the needs and pain and struggle of men and women, but it doesn’t touch your heart very deeply. Jeremiah may well have been like this; but he prayed for a new heart, and so can you. Jeremiah had actually been commanded by God to have such a level of grief for His people: “Therefore thou shalt say this word unto them; Let mine eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease: for the virgin daughter of my people is broken” (Jer. 14:17). Jeremiah’s grief was God’s word of care and concern to the people; and so it can be with us. Jeremiah was to be like this, to reflect God’s passion for His people; so he prayed that he would have such a heart of true compassion [note that the chapters in Jeremiah are totally out of sequence chronologically]; and in the end, he found it.

The fact others reject our message ought to pain us at the very core and heart of our beings. Jer. 13:17 records a private soliloquy of Jeremiah: “But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride”. He would hide away and weep for them, and nobody would ever know. His grief was to be deeply personal (“my soul shall weep”) and unperceived by others (“in secret places”). And I challenge us, each one: have we ever done this, or even come near it, in our frustration with those who reject our message? Jeremiah wept. He didn’t “...not care a rush”.

### ***Isaiah***

Isaiah speaks of “My leanness... I pine away” (Is. 24:15,16 RV), as he spoke about Israel’s future glory and the inevitable judgments upon the enemies of his people. He didn’t gloat over the prospect, as many American Christians appear to gloat over any defeat suffered by their nations’ enemies. Isaiah’s heart bled for humanity, he so believed his message that he emotionally responded to it himself. He too bled for the people whose doom he had to foretell. Having prophesied the fall of hated, pagan Babylon, which was to happen well after his death, Isaiah responded: “Therefore are my loins filled with pain: pangs have taken hold upon me...I am pained so that I cannot hear [the message he had to tell]...my heart panteth, horror hath affrighted me” (Is. 20:3,4 RV). Such was his sensitivity for his enemies, and for things which would happen in the future. It would be rather like us grieving deeply for the fact that within 200 years, millions of human beings may die because of global warming.

Likewise when it came to prophesying the doom of Jerusalem, people came to comfort Isaiah in his grief and breakdown, not perceiving the heart that bled within him (Is. 22:4). He wept, because of how they would weep in future (Is. 22:4,5). Such was his passionate identity with them.

The bleeding hearts of Jeremiah and Moses were actually for the ecclesia. David's eyes wept "streams of tears" because Israel didn't keep the Law (Ps. 119:136); the faithful in Ezekiel's time sighed and groaned over all the abominations committed in Jerusalem (Ez. 9:4); Paul spoke "even with tears" about those in the ecclesia who lived as enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18), exhorting the Corinthians to mourn for those they had to disfellowship (1 Cor. 5:2; 2 Cor. 12:21); Ezra wept for the sins of his people (Ezra 10:1). Is this attitude seen amongst us? We lament in a gossipy way the weaknesses of the brotherhood; but is there this bleeding heart for the cases we mention? Perhaps we should never think of disfellowshipping anybody unless the decision has been come to through a process of such prayerful mourning for them first.

### ***Ezekiel***

Ezekiel is yet another example. He sat astonished and silent among the captives for seven days when he arrived to them with his message of judgment (Ez. 3:15). The connection with Job's friends is obvious and intended. Ezekiel, the one whom Israel hated and rejected as they did all the prophets, beating some and killing some, felt their grief and sat with them, deeply sympathizing, just as Job's friends initially did. The Hebrew translated "astonished" is usually translated "destroyed", "desolate" or "wasted". All that had happened to Israel for their sins, Ezekiel felt had happened to him, such was his identification with sinners. Two closely related words occur in Ez. 3:14,26 [*marah* cp. *maree*]: "I went in *bitterness*...they are a *rebellious* house". Why was Ezekiel bitter / rebellious of spirit when he went to preach to his people; even though he personally *was* willing to preach to them? Surely it was because he shared their spirit with them; he so entered into their spirit that he reflected their feelings within himself, even though he was not ultimately rebellious personally as they were. Because Israel's heart would melt and be feeble "Because of the tidings" which Ezekiel taught, therefore *his* heart sighed and broke because he identified with how they would later feel when his words came true (Ez. 21:6,7).

### ***In Practice...***

In practice we need to firmly decide upon our aims. Much of Christianity is, it seems to me, without defined aims; and so many of us have lived for too long with no clearly defined personal mission statement. One of the reasons we are here in this world is to be a light of this world. If we grasp this, then this becomes one of our defining, dominant desires. It shapes our personality and our direction in life. If we have a heart that bleeds for humanity, we will seek their salvation; we will want to see conversions. We will be out to convert. And that dominant passion will articulate itself in various ways. If somebody is ready for baptism, we won't leave them till Sunday, if someone requests baptism we will act on it immediately. We will catch the spirit of those early brethren who baptized thousands in one day. We tend to get our dominant desires in the very end. If we desire earnestly mass conversions and work for them, God's blessing will surely attend us. It seems to me that our lack of a clearly defined personal commitment to convert others, to go out into our world and make disciples, has led many of our beloved community to be somewhat listless and aimless in their witness. If we are on the scent of victory, we will close the long gap which there is on average

between someone desiring baptism and actually being baptized. Jesus said that although there were four months yet to go until harvest, He saw the gap as not existing- for He said that the disciples were to lift up their eyes and see, that the fields were already white to harvest. This is why He said that the sower [Himself] and reapers [the disciples] would rejoice together, at the same time. There was such a fast response time between sowing and reaping that the analogy from agriculture wasn't true in that regard. This seems to have been His point. He saw the potential in those people. He went for it. He played to win, and the Father blessed the witness because the desire and motive was pure.

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### Notes

(2) J. I. Packer, *Evangelism And The Sovereignty of God* (London: I.V.P., 2002 ed.), p. 53.

(3) Prov. 3:20 RV says that " By his knowledge the depths were broken up, and the skies dropped down the rain" . The flood was brought about by Gods wisdom, not because a deity lost his patience and temper with mankind. God destroyed mankind because of His *grief* (Gen. 6:6)- and He did so because He planned on saving the world through water (1 Pet. 3:20). Noah and the faithful were saved from corruption and the faith being lost by the world that threatened to destroy them (spiritually) being itself destroyed.

### 15-4 Loving Our Brethren

Hearts that bleed will feel not only for the world, but for our brethren too. Think of Nehemiah: " I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And it *grieved* me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber (Neh. 13:8). His *grief* led him to discipline Tobiah. Grief should likewise be the motive for ecclesial discipline today (as in 1 Cor. 5:2). The same word is translated " sad" in Neh. 2:3: " why should not my countenance be sad [grieved], when the city, the place of my fathers sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?" . The King observed that his " sorrow of heart" was written all over his face, even though he was trying to conceal it. His sadness for His weak people was engraven in His body language. It could not be hidden, even though he became as it were a fool for Christ's sake.

Esther likewise, when she heard of the condemnation of her brethren, " was exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai" (Esther 4:4). Now, nothing else mattered. She openly identified herself with Mordecai and the Jews. She did what was not worldly-wise, because of her grief for people.

Asaph reflected upon the fate of the wicked within Israel: " Until I went into the sanctuary of God; *then* understood I their end. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction... Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was *as a beast before thee*" (Ps. 73:17-22). On entering " the sanctuary" , he saw the plates around the altar, which were all that was left of Korah's rebellion. " *Thus* my heart was grieved" - for the tragedy of that rebellion, for the tragedy of men experiencing Divine condemnation. He didn't gloat over the punishment of the wicked. He grieved for it; it pricked his conscience, right within the depths of his being (" pricked in my reins" ). Korah again wrote in Ps. 41:1: "Blessed is he that considereth the poor". The Hebrew really means to understand- that's how it is normally translated. To be sensitive to the poor, to understand them, to have a heart that bleeds for them- this is what God seeks in us. The chief butler felt that he had committed a very serious sin in allowing the busyness of daily life and his demanding job to make him simply forget Joseph's need and tragedy. The

word in Gen. 41:9 for "faults" is really "sins". Perhaps an intensive plural is being used here-as if to mean 'my very great sin'. To forget others' need due to the busyness of our lives is a great sin.

And David reached a like depth of feeling for Saul: " Thine enemies take thy name in vain. Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred" (Ps. 139:20-22). David grieved for them, and in this sense his " hatred" of false ways was " perfect" . The same mixture of anger and yet grief is found in the Lord Himself; He looked round about upon them in anger, being grieved for their hard hearts (Mk. 3:5). We must ask ourselves whether we don't have merely an indignant reaction at others' unspirituality; the looking round on them with anger, and yet without the unpretended grief for the whole situation. As David was " pricked in my reins" , so the grief of Daniel for his people was deeply internal; this was no passing feeling of Oh what a pity it is that more won't hear the Truth: " I Daniel was grieved in my spirit *in the midst of my body*, and the visions of my head troubled me" (Dan. 7:15).

If we are truly members of the one body, we will be affected by the sufferings of others in that body. The fact we are members of the one body of Jesus should exclude all self-centred feelings, in the sense that if one other part of the body suffers or rejoices, then we are to be affected by this. Heb. 13:3 tells us to " remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them, and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body" . We are to feel as if we are inside the body of our brethren. This is quite something. There is a purposeful ambiguity here. Whose body? The body of Jesus, or that of the suffering brother? Effectively, the one is the other. We can truly place ourselves in the place of others. The only other time the Greek word translated " remember" occurs is in Heb. 2:3: " What is man that thou art *mindful* of him" . Because of the almost senseless mindfulness of God for us down here on this speck of a planet, dust and water as we are... we must be inspired to likewise be mindful of our suffering brethren.

And thus Paul could write in truth: " Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not?" (2 Cor. 11:29). The word he uses for " weak" is one which features frequently in his writings, and it nearly always refers to the spiritually weak (Rom. 4:19; 14:1,2,21; 1 Cor. 8:9,11,12). He was so sensitive to his brethren that when he considered their spiritual weakness, he felt the same. He identified with them, he could put his arm round someone who was all slipping way and say " I'm with you" and so evidently mean it. He had a genuine and obvious sense of solidarity with them. He wasn't critical of them to the extent that he made a barrier between him and them. They knew his disapproval of their ways, but yet it was so evident that his heart bled for them. And when Paul saw a brother being offended, he burnt. His heart burnt and bled as he saw someone drifting away with a chip on their shoulder. He didn't just shrug and think Well that's up to them, their choice. He cared for them. That brother, that sister, and their future meant so much to him. If Paul had lived in the 21st century, he would have telephoned them, written to them, visited them, met with them week by week To be weak and to be offended are bracketed in Rom. 14:21: " thy brother is offended, or is made weak" . And in 2 Cor. 11:29 we have the same idea: " Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not?" . The parallels imply that if the weak brother was offended, Paul himself was as it were offended, even though he himself didn't stumble. He could identify with the spiritual weakness of others to the point of feeling that he himself had committed it or was in the shoes of the sinner- even though he himself was innocent.

In this he was living out the pattern of his Lord, who although sinless, so felt for us that it could be said that He was " made sin for us, who knew no sin" . Many brethren have pointed out the connections between the promises to David about Jesus, and the later commentary upon them in Psalm 89 and Isaiah 53, with reference to the crucifixion:

<b>2 Sam. 7</b>	<b>Psalm 89</b>	<b>Isaiah 53</b>
<i>If he [Jesus] commit iniquity</i>	<i>If his children [us] forsake my law...</i>	The Lord hath laid on <i>him</i> the iniquity of <i>us</i> all
I will chasten <i>him</i> with the rod of men	Then will I visit <i>their</i> transgression with the rod	For the transgression of <i>my people</i> was <i>he</i> stricken
And with the stripes of the children of men	And <i>their</i> iniquity with stripes	With <i>his</i> stripes we are healed

The point of all this is to show how our sins were somehow born by Jesus, to the extent that He suffered for them. But *how* was this actually achieved? It is one thing to say it, but we must put meaning into the words. I suggest it was in that the Lord so identified with us, His heart so bled for us, that He *felt* a sinner even though He of course never sinned. The final cry "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" clearly refers back to all the many passages which speak of God forsaking the wicked, but never forsaking the righteous. The Lord, it seems to me, *felt* a sinner, although He was not one, and thus entered into this sense of crisis and fear He had sinned. He *so* identified with us. In the bearing of His cross, we likewise must identify with others, with their needs and with the desperation of their human condition...and this is what will convert them, as the Lord's identification with *us* saved *us*.

The cross is the supreme quintessence of this identity of the Lord with sinful men; but His whole life was comprised of hour by hour feelings of identity with the sick, the lonely, the addicted, the habitual sinners...and we, far away in time and perception, must seek to follow Him. This means that when we encounter human weakness and need, either materially or spiritually or emotionally, we put our arms and hearts out to help and identify, rather than pull back within ourselves. It may be there is a difficult brother or sister with whom we have to deal; or awkward neighbours or work fellows. Or those who have left our community or the way of Jesus. All these people have a *need*, a desperation, which lies beneath their surface problem and awkwardness; and it is this that we must seek to feel for and identify with, that we might bring them to us and to the Lord we, by grace, represent.

Our belief in the institution of our denomination, or a particular local ecclesia, can lead us to deal increasingly with abstractions of what things ought to be like, rather than the daily realities of the people who are part of that community. We can end up loving our dream or image of a community more than the people within it. By doing this we are forgetting that God has created each individual unique, to reflect His image and glory in a totally unique way. Yet all too easily Christian preachers can seek to stamp their image upon another of God's children, insisting that things must be seen as they have been called to see them. Instead of letting God create His image in the other person, we can seek to enforce our image

upon them. By thus constraining the other person, we are doing violence to their basic freedom before God. And this sort of thing goes on all too often, with insistence, e.g., that a person dresses as we do, thinks about Bible prophecy as we do, prays as we do...

### **15-5 Reaching Those Who Left Church**

When we are first baptized, we can tend to view those who leave our community as simply hard to understand, but we may easily shrug it off. Yet surely we need to do *more*; to *feel* more for them. And to realize that we all leave, in that we can be lost in sin for minutes or hours at a time, having numbed our responsibilities to the Father and Son. And yet, we are in covenant relationship with Him. This means that we do not slip in and out of fellowship with Him according to our concentration upon Him or our spirituality. We likewise shouldn't call those who leave us Mr or Mrs. They are always our brother or sister. We are in a family bond with them. Even if the hand says " I am not of the body, it is not therefore not of the body" (1 Cor. 12:15 RV). These words were written in the context of some of the Corinthian brethren resigning from the ecclesia and joining the various temples of even synagogues in the town. But they couldn't really resign from a relationship with God; resign from the fact that their Lord bled to death for them.

One advantage of those who leave Gods ways is that as and when they return, they do so with a heightened sense of Gods grace. David's greatest insight into the promises was at the time he doubted them the most (Psalm 89). Those who have these crises know the love of God in the way that the prodigal son knew it far more than the son who stayed at home, living in obedience each day. The wrath of God and the love of God are related; they are brought together supremely in the cross. " For the wrath of God is the love of God, in the form in which only the man who has turned away from God and turned back to Him can experience it" <sup>(4)</sup>. Knowing this, hearts that bleed, minds that perceive the tragedy of the future our brethren may miss, will search for the lost sheep until they find it. At least, that is the attitude we must have. David's eyes wept " because they keep not thy law" , and yet he grieved for those who do not keep Gods word (Ps. 119:136,158). In other words, he grieved for where their way of life would lead them, even though he saw that at times he behaved like them.

### ***For The Cause Of Christ***

A sensitive heart will constantly be looking to the Lord Jesus for inspiration. For its hard to maintain the intensities of which we have written. Consider how Jonathan suffered the same suffering as did David, in that Saul tried to kill him with a Javelin: " Saul cast a javelin at him to smite him: whereby Jonathan knew that it was determined of his father to slay David. So Jonathan arose from the table in fierce anger, and did eat no meat the second day of the month: for he was grieved for David, because his father had done him shame" (1 Sam. 20:33,34). Jonathan felt the shame of David, and grieved for him. David is set up in the record as a type of Jesus, and Jonathan as a type of those with whom Jesus has made a covenant after His defeat of sin on the cross [cp. the fight with Goliath].

We should *feel* His shame, feel the tragedy of the cross; that Israel slew their Saviour. The memory of His cross cannot be simply a religious ritual. The ecclesia in the time of Amos " chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David; That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. (Am. 6:5,6). They drunk wine and anointed their faces with oil- rejoicing in Gods blessings. They looked back to the heritage of their spiritual

ancestors (David), and on a surface level appeared to follow them. They chanted the temple songs, and yet there was no grief within them for the affliction of Gods people. The archers were to surely grieve Joseph (Gen. 49:23), but they chose to ignore the terrible import of those prophecies of Messiahs suffering. There was the appearance of religion and worship, but no grief nor passion for the tragedy of Messiahs forthcoming death, no grieving for the tragedy of Gods people, who were about to be afflicted for their sins. And in this we must take our warning.

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### Notes

(4) Emil Brunner, *Man In Revolt* (London: Lutterworth Press, 2002 ed.) p. 187.

## 15-6 The Heart Of Jesus

Above all, in the Lord Himself we see a heart that more than bled for the salvation of others. He didn't live out His perfect life in isolation from others, withdrawn from society, insulated from the world's pain. Is. 59:15-20 speaks of how He came to perceive that really there was nobody apart from Him who could bring about such great salvation to the world: " and the Lord saw it, and it displeased [s.w. grieved] him that there was no judgment. And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him. For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloke" . So many of these phrases and ideas are picked up in the New Testament and applied to the Lord Jesus in His time of dying. It was His grief that inspired Him. " How often would I have *gathered* thy children together" (Mt. 23:37), He lamented over a Zion that sought only to hurt and murder Him. Yet not so many verses later in our Bibles w hear the Lord using the same word in saying that at His coming, the elect would be " *gathered together*" unto Him (Mt. 24:31). He so often had earnestly desired the coming of His Kingdom there and then; to gather His people unto Him. But they would not. It must have been unbearable to be such a sensitive person in such a hard and insensitive, dehumanizing world. One gets a fraction of insight into the Lord's struggle when we read that He perceived that the disciples were worried about bread; and He laments that they do not perceive the miracle of the loaves which He had wrought (Mt. 16:9). His perception, His sensitivity, is contrasted with the lack of these things in His followers. He must have therefore been so humanly alone. The value of persons felt by the Lord is made very obvious when we notice His attention to women, children, Gentiles and the mentally ill / deformed. These three groups often occur together in the Rabbis' teaching. The very people who were not counted as persons, the Lord went out of His way to express value for. And in this He sets us an example. Children were counted as of little value- but the Lord spoke about salvation for children (Mk. 10:14), and of the need to become like a child if we are to enter His Kingdom (Mt. 18:3). This purposeful recognition of the value of *all* human persons was a radical and difficult thing in His surrounding culture. And so it can be in ours too.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Who He was then, as He walked around Palestine 2000 years ago, the lamb for sinners slain, is who He will essentially be at His second coming and judgment. It's not quite so that He was once a meek lamb but will

roar back as an angry aggressive lion of Judah. Revelation brings out the paradox of "the wrath of *the lamb*" - not the roaring lion. Even in condemning men, His basic passion for humanity, His pain for the lost, comes out. Thus He will call those whom He rejects "Friend", just as He addressed even Judas, a man not fit to breathe the same air as He did. And in any case, it was in His role as the lion of Judah that He opened the seals through His death, not at His return. In His mortality He was the one who served rather than the one who sat at meat; and when He returns He will again come forth and serve us, His Divine nature notwithstanding. He so earnestly desired that even the wicked children of Jerusalem who did Him to death should be gathered together into His Kingdom. As He was, so He will be, and so He is even now. And so should we be, for all men, and especially for the children of Jerusalem today. He asked the women of Jerusalem to likewise weep for their children, just as He had wept for them (Lk. 13:34 = 23:28).

The Lord so wanted their response. "As he said these things, he *cried*, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Lk. 8:8 RV; Jn. 7:37). The very muscles of the Lord's face, His body language, would have reflected an earnest, *burning* care and compassion. The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost; He put His whole personality into the task. And we beseech men "in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:10 RV). We are to be *His* face to this world and to our brethren. With raised eyebrows, lines showing in our forehead, one eye half closed...our body language should reflect the depth of our concern for others.

I have often reflected that we tend to sin when we are over-tired. The Lord Jesus was at times physically exhausted by the crowds. I would have figured: Well in case I get tempted to sin or snap at someone, I'd better just keep my contact with them to a minimum and get plenty of sleep, seeing I'm trying so hard not to sin. But the Lord seemed driven by a compassion for humanity, both materially and spiritually, that knew no such sophistry. He wanted to save and to give to men and women, to little boys and girls...and it was this heart that burned and bled for them, regardless of their lack of response, oblivious to their murdering of Him, after using Him for all they could materially get out of Him...that enabled Him to be perfect; to be God Himself manifest in flesh. And when there was even a little response, His bleeding heart rejoiced. Dehydrated at the well, very hungry, the response of the Samaritan woman revived His spirits to the point that the disciples assumed He must have been given a meal (Jn. 4:32,33).

He goes on to say that working with a woman like that is His "meat", the doing of the will of him that sent me and to accomplish his work (4:34 RV). Yet the will of God and accomplishing of His work was evidently the cross (Lk. 22:42; Jn. 6:38; Heb. 10:9,10). In preaching to that woman and converting her, the Lord was living out the essence of the crucifixion that awaited Him. As we have earlier remarked, preaching work isn't glamorous. It is a living out of the cross. Paul felt he had been "separated unto the [preaching of the] gospel of God" (Gal. 1:15); and he uses a word which the LXX uses for the separation of part of a sacrifice to be consumed (Ex. 29:24,26). The Greek word for "witness" is *martus*, from whence 'martyr'. To witness to Christ is to live the life of the martyr; to preach Him is to live out His cross in daily life. In his preaching of the Gospel, Paul could say that "I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more" (1 Cor. 9:19). Yet elsewhere, Paul uses the idea of the "servant unto all" as descriptive of Christ's attitude upon the cross (Phil. 2:7). The connection of thought reflects how Paul understood that in seeking to gain others for Christ, we make ourselves their servants, and in this sense our witness to them is a living out of the principles of the cross. Being such a "servant unto all" hardly squares well with the image of arrogant platform preachers dazzling their audiences. That isn't the preaching which truly

'gains' people for Christ. The way the Holy Spirit controlled Paul's missionary itineraries is an example of how mission work is almost purposefully made difficult at times. Thus Paul was forbidden to go north into Bithynia, and from going Southwest into coastal Asia Minor- and there were good roads leading to those places from where he was, and it would've seemed they were the logical places to go and expand the work of the Gospel. But instead Paul was told to go diagonally, cross country, through the rough roads and passes of central Asia Minor, to Troas- from where he was told to go to Macedonia. And on the way through that wild mountainous area, it seems Paul became sick (Gal. 4:13). And we follow similar paths in our witness, if it is truly God directed.

In Gethsemane, the Lord Jesus felt that His soul was so sorrowful that this alone could kill Him. This was the extent of His mental burden. Time and again, the Gospels record how He "perceived" things about people. Admittedly this could have been because He simply had a Holy Spirit gift to enable this. But I prefer to think that His sensitivity, His perception, aided by His extraordinary intellectual ability as the Son of God [for intelligence and perception / sensitivity are related]...these things developed within Him over the years so that He could sense the essential needs and feelings of others to an unsurpassed extent. "Jesus, seeing their thoughts..." (Mt. 9:4 RVmg.) shows how He came to perceive the hearts of others from His observation of them. This was the same Jesus who could be ridiculed into scorn / shame / embarrassment (Mt. 9:24), such was His sensitivity to others. The way the Lord healed people reflects His sensitivity- He commanded food to be brought for a girl who had been dead and was therefore hungry (Lk. 8:55), He healed the blind man in two stages so that he wouldn't be scared when he first saw people moving (Mk. 8:25). And the Lord cured "them that had need of healing" (Lk. 9:11), possibly implying that some posed as being sick, and yet the Lord could discern whose need was genuine. How hard His life must have been, in that hard land. And how hard it is for Him, in this hard world.

Above all, in the Lord's death we see the heart that bleeds, bared before our eyes in the cross. It is written of Him in His time of dying that He "poured out his soul unto death" (Is. 53:12). The Hebrew translated "poured out" means to make naked- it is rendered as "make thyself naked" in Lam. 4:21 (see too Lev. 20:18,19; Is. 3:17). The Lord's sensitivity was what led Him to His death- He made His soul naked, bare and sensitive, until the stress almost killed Him quite apart from the physical torture. To be sensitive to others makes us open and at risk ourselves. A heart that bleeds really bleeds and hurts within itself. And this was the essence of the cross. It seems to me that the Lord was crucified naked- hence those who turn away put Him to "an open [Gk. 'naked'] shame". In being sensitive to others, we make ourselves naked. The heart that bleeds is itself in great risk of hurt and pain. And in my exhortation to you to have such a disposition, I can only warn you of this in advance. We have all doubtless felt a little of this when those we have done much for act unreasonably towards us, or betray us. But in the cross, this feature of human experience was taken to its utmost. The Son of God bared His soul in the naked shame of crucifixion. All that He was and stood for was displayed so openly. His mental pain was openly revealed, pain that came as a result of risking and opening up so much to us, to our humanity. And the tragedy of it all was that *at the time*, virtually nobody perceived it. As we share in His cross, as share in it we must, we can only expect to pass through those feelings of disappointment at others' ingratitude...they shouldn't lead us to give up on the work of the ecclesia, or effort with other people, or our children... but rather make us know that if we are so sharing in His suffering, we will likewise reign with Him.

Reflect upon the record of Him weeping at the death of Lazarus (Jn. 11:33-35). He of all men knew the reality of future resurrection at the last day, and He knew what He was going to do. So why then did He weep? He saw how unnecessary was their grief, how misguided. For He knew what He was going to do. And yet He wept with them because His heart bled for them, because He shared their grief (on whatever basis it was) to the extent that He too wept with them. And the love of Christ will constrain us to have His bleeding heart (2 Cor. 5:14). Think too of when the Lord was alone on the land whilst the disciples were in the storm on the sea. Mk. 6:48 says that “He saw them toiling in rowing” and then, later, He went to them. He didn’t literally see them rowing; but in His sensitive mind, He imagined just how it would be for them, and so He went to them.

But I ask, are we sensitive to others? Are our words, the impressions we give, thought out and framed so as to encourage and save, with sensitivity to their sensitivities...or do we think that because we have truth on our side, it doesn’t matter how we spit it out? It would be a mistake to think that raw truth alone converts anyone. It’s the way we articulate it which is all important. Peter said that the cynical, unbelieving husband could be won “without the [specific preaching of] the word” by the way of life of the believing wife (was there some autobiographical allusion here?). And so it has been in so many cases over the last few years especially. Summing up, the heart and compassion of Jesus must be our pattern. His compassion, His bleeding heart, is an imperative for us; we therefore, and thereby, must be the same. Reflect how the Lord called His men unto Him, and informed them that He had compassion on the hungry multitude. He said no more than that. But the disciples immediately started bleating on about how there was no way they had the money nor ability to arrange so much bread in a deserted place (Mk. 8:2). They understood that their Lord had transferred His compassion onto them; all that was true of Him became true for them. *He* wanted to feed the multitude; *He* was feeling compassionate to the crowd; so, axiomatically, so must they. And so must we today, as we face the crowds too. Whatever are the feelings, the mind, of Jesus towards this world; so must our mind be. And He came, without controversy, above all to give His all, to die, for this world’s redemption.

J.I. Packer has some valuable words for us: “...we shall not try to violate their personalities, or exploit their weaknesses [and we can wrongly exploit others’ doctrinal weaknesses- D.H.], or ride roughshod over their feelings. What we shall be trying to do, rather, is to show them the reality of our friendship and concern by sharing with them our most valuable possession. And this spirit of friendship and concern will shine through all we have to say to them...however drastic and shattering the truths that we tell them may be...the right to talk intimately to another person...has to be earned, and you earn it by convincing him that you are his friend, and really care about him. And therefore the indiscriminate buttonholing, the intrusive barging into the privacy of other peoples’ souls, the thick-skinned insistence on expounding the things of God to reluctant strangers...these modes of behaviour, in which strong and loquacious personalities have sometimes indulged...should be written off as a travesty of personal evangelism”<sup>(1)</sup>.

One repeated theme of the Gospel records is that “Jesus perceived...” (Mt. 22:18). We read this so often. Now it could mean that a bolt of Holy Spirit informed the Lord of the contents of men’s minds. But I prefer to think that He was so sensitive to people that somehow He was able to read minds, to read body language, to be perceptive to a very high degree (Jn. 2:24,25). And so as the mind and compassion of Jesus become ours, so it seems to me that we too will develop better people skills, become more perceptive of what a contact is really driving at, what their real hang ups are...what they really and truly seek and need. “He knew

"what was in man" (Jn. 2:25) may be a description of how far the Lord got in this kind of thing; rather than an indication of some magical gift He was given. And so when I am asked 'How best to preach? What to say to people...?', there is no simplistic answer. It's a matter of who we are, of our own perception and reflection of Jesus, not the specific form of words we may use.

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### **Notes**

- (1) J.I. Packer, *Evangelism And The Sovereignty of God* (London: I.V.P., 2002 ed.), pp. 80,81.

### **15-7 The Value Of Persons**

The way Biblical history is written contrasts strongly with the way secular history is written, focussing as it does on mega movements of peoples, international events etc. Biblical history- and the records of Israel's early history are classic examples- is articulated in the last analysis through the story of individuals. Reflect on how the account of Isaac's family is prefaced by the note: "These are the generations of Isaac" (Gen. 25:19). We expect a genealogical list- but instead we get the accounts of human lives. That history was the 'generation' of Isaac. In this we see a reflection of how God views history- the growth, actions, thoughts, struggles, spirituality and passing of persons. The value placed by God upon individuals is seen by the way in which He inspired Biblical history to be written. Humanly written history tends to focus upon megatrends, the glories and successes of a nation as a nation. God's history focuses upon people. And the Bible is hardly a history of glorious successes- it's a record of one human failure after another, endless rounds of attempt and failure, a historical path that leads God from one disappointment to another with us. Human history records human failure only as it were as a foil, a context, to the successes of the heroes. God's heroes are the lowly, the poor of this world rich in faith like Hannah and Mary, and the megatrends of society's history are passed by. But this is how much He values people on an individual level.

One of the major themes of the Lord's teaching in the sermon on the mount was the need to respect others; to see the value and meaning of persons. Indeed, it can rightly be said that all sin depersonalizes another person. Sin is almost always against persons. Relentlessly, ruthlessly, the Lord drives deeper, and yet deeper, into the very texture of human personality in demanding that, e.g., we are not even angry with others, lest we effectively murder them. To say "Raca" to your brother was to commit sin worthy of condemnation, He taught (Mt. 5:22). "Ra-ca" was the sound made when a man cleared his throat to spit, and it was a term of abuse in earlier Semitic languages. To despise your brother, to disregard his importance as a person, was to be seen as an ultimate sin. In this light we should seek to avoid the many terms of abuse which are so common today: "a right idiot" etc. The Law taught that one should not curse a deaf person. Think what this really means. Surely the essence of it is that we should never be abusive, in any form, to or about anyone, even if it is sure that they will never know or feel our abuse. The Law also taught that a man must not be over punished, or else, if you did this, you considered him "light" (Dt. 25:3 Heb.). The weight of persons, the immense meaning attached to them, is not accepted by us if our judgment of them is too harsh or severe. The Hebrew word for "care" also means "reverence". Thus in 2 Kings 4:13 Elisha speaks of how the Shunamite woman 'cared' (AV) for him, or 'reverenced' him (RVmg.). To reverence someone is to care for them. Care therefore comes out of a respect /

reverence for the person. If we respect persons for who they are, we will care. Care in that sense can't in any sense be properly done or shown if it's simply from a sense of duty, because we're paid to do it, because we might get some benefit from doing so, etc.

True Christianity places a remarkable value on the worth of the individual person. Even in the Old Testament, God had spoken of gathering His people "one by one" (Is. 27:12). The ten commandments are unique amongst the legal codes of ancient peoples, in that they speak of Divine commands given to individuals- "thou", you singular, shall do this, or not do that. God shows in this crucial covenant statement that He wished for personal obedience from every one of His people, not just certain sacrifices offered by representatives of the tribe. To deal with another person as a slave or chattel, to not treat a person as a person, was seen even under Mosaic Law as meriting the death penalty- for it was as if a person had been killed by treating them like that (Dt. 24:7 RVmg.). Even a criminal was not to be overly punished, "lest your brother be degraded in *your* sight" (Dt. 25:3)- he was still to be treated as a person, and nothing should be done to him which would make the punishers think too lowly of that person. The Old Testament reflects that God has a heart for all humanity- not just Israel. Nineveh was a great city *to God*, and it grieved Him that it might have to be destroyed (Jonah 3:3)- He even was sensitive to the plight of the animals there. The sensitive heart of God becomes all the more sensitive to us, His chosen people. Jesus speaks of how a person can lose their place in the Kingdom as a person losing or forfeiting their own self; He was thereby teaching that a place in the Kingdom was possessing one's own real self (Lk. 9:25 RV). If we too perceive this focus on the worth of the person, we will not consider anyone as merely an "ordinary" person. There is no such thing, no such person. In my own search for a partner, and probably in yours too, I have observed the sense that it has to be someone *special*, not just one of the crowd, someone *different* from all those normal ones. This attitude has some wrong implications. If we perceive the *meaning* of persons, their *value*, we won't consider those near and dear to us as somehow unique when compared to the mass of others. Because we all look vaguely similar, it's tragically easy to forget that our bodies, genetic structure and especially our minds, the way we think, the way we are, is totally unique... and we each therefore have a set of possibilities which no other human being has. These are our 'talents'- which we can use to glorify God in some unique manner.

Everyone is special, nobody is like anyone else. This is how God sees His children, and we should reflect this perspective. It is this which will make us arrestingly different from the people with whom we daily walk. We will cry out with Jeremiah: "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?", unmoved and lost as they are in their own petty issues (Lam. 1:12). As the concrete of my generation's "progress" has hardened, so our hearts have hardened too. People are now desperately looking for real and meaningful grace and care from *people*, and yet they find none. In all soberness and reality I can say that there are so many ripe for conversion, everywhere, if they see in us a heart that bleeds for them with no motive other than that of pure grace. Because we all look vaguely similar, it's tragically easy to forget that our bodies, genetic structure and especially our minds, the way we think, the way we are, is totally unique... and we each therefore have a set of possibilities which no other human being has. These are our 'talents' - which we can use to glorify God in some unique manner.

The Lord's parables all feature an element of unreality, which flags attention to His essential point. The shepherd who left the 99 and went after the lost one was an unusual shepherd. Common sense tells us that one should think of the good of the majority, not max out on the minority. We invest effort and resources in ways which will benefit the maximum number of people. But the Lord turned all that on its head. The heart that bleeds cannot disregard the

minority, however small or stupid or irritating it or they may be. For people matter, and the heart that bleeds will bleed for every single one. The parables so often allude to contemporary Jewish conceptions of grace, and show how God's grace is so far beyond them. The Father is watching for the return of the prodigal, even while the son was "far off" (Gk. *makron*); and this is the same word used about the "far (Gk. *makros*) country" where the son was (Lk. 15:13,20). The Divine eyesight sees the person who is far off in sin, and longs for their return. This was quite contrary to all Jewish and human notions of showing grace to those who return - *after* they return. There was a contemporary Jewish story about a son who wished to return to his father; and the father sends a message to him saying "Return as far as you can and I will come the rest of the way to you" (1). The Lord's parable showed how the care of the Father for His children is so far more than that. And He is there watching billions of cases, simultaneously... such is the passionate heart of God for the individual. There is a well known statement of John Thomas, to the effect that "God manifestation, not human salvation" is God's essential purpose. Only in some sense is this true; God's concern is truly with individuals, with their healing and radical reformation as persons, and He gave His Son for our individual salvation. The concept of God manifestation should not lead to an eclipsing of the value and meaning of the individual person.

It can be that we mutter " Typical!" on observing someone's behaviour, that we categorize groups of our brethren, types of people, as " all the same" . In this way we may write off masses of people as disinterested in the Gospel or true spirituality- when if only we would perceive them as persons, we would see their potential and their desperate need. And thereby we will be the more motivated to preach and minister to " all men" , not just those we perceive as interested. Both psychologically and philosophically, we have what has been termed a "craving for generality" (2), and a desire to observe 'family resemblances' in people (3). Once we grasp the huge value of the individual, we'll at least be aware of these tendencies we have to categorize people, to put them in general groups... and struggle against those tendencies, towards perceiving every individual as a unique person. Exhausting and demanding as this is, it's the teaching and example of our Master.

The love of Jesus was ever seeking to appreciate the perspective and motivations of others; He could even ask for His crucifiers to be forgiven " for they know not what they do" . His love and sensitivity must become ours. We must be substantially transformed in the depths of our being, in the intricacies of our thoughts, feelings and dispositions, until we are permeated with the love that Christ had. The Law of Moses sought to inculcate a culture of care and sensitivity to others, and this spirit was fulfilled ultimately in the life and death of the Lord. The continued stress on not cooking a kid in its mothers milk was surely to teach sensitivity to the feelings of the mother goat- to encourage the Israelite to feel for others, even if they are animals, and seek to enter something of their feelings. And the sensitivity and thoughtfulness of God extends even to His plant creation: "...thou shalt not cut [some trees] down; for is the tree of the field man, that it should be besieged of thee?" (Dt. 20:19 RV). And how much *more* sensitive is the Father to humankind!

The heart that bleeds for others will not merely feel 'sorry' on an emotional level. We will realize how the sufferings and experiences of others are not just events that evoke our sympathy. We will realize that suffering can be 'rejoiced' in " because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured his love into our hearts" (Rom. 5:3-5). We will perceive that suffering is intended, and it is intended to *produce* something. The heart that bleeds, the mind that perceives this truth, will not make dumb responses to others'

misfortunes; we will not advocate grin-and-bear-it, or act-tough-like-nothing-happened. No trace of those attitudes is to be found in the Lord's response to human suffering. We will believe the triumphant truth of Romans 8, "that in *all* things God works for the good of those who love him". Those "all things" are defined later as trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger. But through all these things, true hope takes shape within us, "a hope that does not disappoint". We will know this from our own experience, and our concern for others will be motivated by a desire to bring spiritual good out of their present evil experiences.

The Lord's high value of persons is reflected in how He taught His followers to not resist evil. A poor man had only two garments- an outer one, and an inner one (Dt. 24:10-13). Underneath that, he was naked. Yet the Lord taught that if you had your outer garment unjustly taken from you, then offer your abuser your undercloth. Offer him, in all seriousness, to take it off you, and leave you standing next to him arrystarkus. This would have turned the table. The abuser would be the one left ashamed, as he surely wouldn't do this. And thus the *dignity of the abused person was left intact at the end*. This was the Lord's desire. Likewise, Roman soldiers were allowed to impress a Jew to carry their pack for a mile, but they were liable to punishment if they made him carry it two miles. To offer to carry it the second mile would almost always be turned down by the abusive soldier. And again, at the end of the exchange, he would be the one humiliated, and the Lord's follower, even though abused, would remain with head up and dignity intact.

Perceiving the value of persons also leads to a recognition of the autonomy of individuals, and also the autonomy of local churches. Those who perceive the value and meaning of the human person will never seek to manipulate, railroad or otherwise deny their autonomy. Rudolf Rijkeboer perceives this teaching of local church autonomy in the way "Israel was one nation and was therefore represented by one seven branched candlestick. Under the New Covenant there are scattered ecclesias in an "outside" world and hence seven separate candlesticks" (4). The Lord's acceptance of local church autonomy should be reflected in the way we view local congregations- rather than lumping them beneath some primitive understanding of mere denominationalism. In practice, this works out through dialoguing with people as individuals, and not treating them as being merely under a banner, a statement of faith, a name or category of human invention. This is true most importantly in the realm of personal relationships, as well as in our approach to the theological persuasions of others. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour" (Lev. 19:17,18). Unless there is direct, one on one dialogue, the hatred born of misunderstanding will develop. But reasoning together is something only possible if we perceive the value of persons.

## **Family Life**

The radical value attached to every individual in Christ is brought out especially by the New Testament teaching about family life. There were many pagan 'household codes', which basically exhorted the slaves, children and women to be subordinate to the male leaders of the family. Paul frames his family teaching in exactly the terms of these 'household codes' in order to bring out the significant differences between God's way and the way of society in this vital area (5). The fact Paul and Peter in their 'household codes' speak of the head of the house being submissive and having responsibilities to love, as an act of the will, was quite radical. But those male leaders had to learn that in Christ, everyone matters, and people can't be treated by their brethren as they are by society generally, as nothing and nobody, mere

cogs in a machine. The *familia*, or extended family, was of itself devaluing to persons. A woman married into her husband's extended family, and effectively lost so much of her uniqueness as an individual- indeed women were so often treated as faceless. But Paul teaches, on the sure foundation of Genesis, that a man should *leave* his parents and *cleave* to his wife (Eph. 5:31). This was far more radical than may now appear. The man was being taught that merely perpetuating the extended family, using the woman you received in your arranged marriage in order to continue and expand the family, was not in fact God's way. He was to *leave* that extended family mindset and personally *cleave* to his wife in love- love which was an act of the will. He was to start a new family unity; to love his *wife* rather than his extended family "as himself". Likewise fathers are told to bring their children up in the instruction of the Lord Jesus (Eph. 6:4)- when the task of training up children was left to the women, older children and slaves (especially the *paidagogos*) in the extended family (6). The value of persons implicit here was thus a call to be essentially creative, independent, perceiving the personal [rather collectively-imposed] value in both oneself and others in ones' family

### ***Theological Implications***

The Lord's great emphasis upon the value and meaning of persons has a huge theological implication, too. I recall being present at the baptism of a young American. Afterwards, we had a gathering for him, and asked how he felt. I still remember his words, verbatim: "I feel like a bunch of crap on two legs that God had pity upon". And I recall well my own feelings of deep sorrow that he should feel that way. For that young man was made in the image of God, like all of us. His position was, I assume, an extension of a belief that we are somehow born with a 'nature' that is so wicked that God is angry when a foetus takes shape, and somehow relieved when every person bearing that nature disappears off the face of the earth. But this is *not* the case. A loving Father rejoices in our birth, and mourns our [temporary] passing. Whatever we say about 'human nature', we say about the Lord Jesus- for He bore our 'nature' and yet was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. It's actually very hard to Biblically define what we mean by 'human nature'; it's not some intrinsic piece of 'sin' that somehow is metaphysically ingrained into us, upon which the wrath of God abides. So I prefer to speak rather of 'the human condition' to avoid this impression. In passing, let's get it clear that Rom. 8:3 doesn't speak of something called 'sin-in-the-flesh'. Students as varied as John Carter and Harry Whittaker [in *The Very Devil*] have faithfully pointed out that this is neither grammatically nor contextually correct. The Lord Jesus condemned sin; and where and how did He condemn it? In "the flesh", in that He too lived within the nexus of pressures and influences of this sinful world. He appeared just another man, so much so that when He stood up and indirectly proclaimed Himself Messiah, those who knew Him were amazed; because He had appeared so very ordinary. Truly He was in "the likeness of sinful flesh", yet without personal sin. 2 Cor. 7:1 exhorts us to cleanse ourselves from all defilement of the flesh (RV), not being like those sinners who "defile the flesh" (Jude 8). These passages would imply that the flesh is defiled not by who we are naturally, but by human behaviour and mindsets from which we can separate ourselves. Whilst we consider ourselves so awful that we consider our flesh to be defiled *naturally*, we will never value the human person, and will give way too easily to sin as if it's just our natural fate. "In the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3) seems to be parallel with "in the likeness of men" and "in fashion as a man" (Phil. 2:7,8). "Sinful flesh" refers therefore to 'sinful humanity', rather than implying that we are sinful and offensive to God simply by reason of being human beings. The spotless lamb of God had full human nature, He looked

like a man because He was a man, and therefore He looked just like the same men who regularly perform sinful actions.

Now all this is not to say that man is not a mixed-up kid. Our deepest desires are selfish; and we all say ‘Amen’ to Paul’s description of his experience of his own humanity in Romans 7. We see the Hitlers, Auschwitz, the young men who put out the eyes of beautiful horses... and of course we wonder about human depravity. But such depravity, disturbance, delinquency... is clearly enough rooted in a lack of love, of true relationship. Such horrors are not, to me, any proof that something called ‘human nature’ which we each carry within us is so evil *of itself*. We have the *propensity* to these things. because our experiences and environment *can* elicit such responses from us. And of this we all need to soberly beware. But the Lord was like us; and He never sinned. We’re not, therefore, ‘inevitable sinners’. Biblically [and experientially], our need is redemption from sin, rather than from this abstract idea of a ‘nature’. And this was why the Lord died for us, to atone for real, actual, concrete, committed sin, and thereby open up the way of life. This is the clear teaching of Scripture.

The Lord achieved this because He was our representative. He was like us, “according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:4), with the same heredity and environment. He was the product of these processes, like any other member of the *homo sapiens* species. But in Him, God showed us the true humanity, what humanity was intended to be; hence the many allusions to Adam when Paul is writing about the Lord Jesus. We understand Him, therefore, as our *representative*. Not so that we don’t have to die [this is the error of substitutionary theories]; but exactly so that we *can* die with Him. We find ourselves located within a nexus of pressures and relationships- political, sexual, racial, psychological etc., which appear at times to force us into sin. And yet He, as our representative, who was “according to the flesh” in just the same position, never sinned. And thus He inspires us; for He shared in the human condition, “in the likeness of sinful flesh”, just as much as we do. He died to the promptings of His own desires, He resisted the pressures of the surrounding world of flesh unto death. Again I’ll say it. He was human, our representative, not to save us from having to die- but precisely so that we *can* die with Him, in following His example. This was why He lived and died *for us*. And this love of Christ “constrains us”, it leaves us no choice, but to follow Him.

## Notes

(1) Peskita Rabbati, 184b-85a, as quoted in Harriet Kaufman, *Judaism And Social Justice* p. 29.

(2) See L. Wittgenstein, *The Blue And Brown Books* (2nd ed., Oxford: OUP, 1969) p.17.  
(3) See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (3rd ed., Oxford: OUP, 1967) secs. 66,67,77.

(4) Rudolf Rijkeboer, *Jesus' Last Message* (Voorburg, Holland: De Broeders In Christus, 1998) p. 17.

(5) As exemplified in Ben Witherington, *The Paul Quest* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1998) p. 188.

(6) This is brought out powerfully in Ben Witherington, *Grace In Galatia* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) pp. 262-271.

## 15-8 A Dehumanized World

Our witnessing work is made harder by the fact that so few people value or realize their own personhood, who they are, what part they have to play in the body and purpose of Jesus. Decades of co-dependency, of some forms of abuse however mild, of being shamed for individuality, leave many people with no real sense of who they are or of their own value and worth. We all suffer from this probably. And yet by our treating others as if they matter, showing them that our heart bleeds for them, we will ennable them and make them realize that they *are* worth something, that they *do* have a value as a person. And once they realize this, they will in their own way, in *their* circle of contact, pass on this message to yet more. All converts to the body of Jesus have an intended part to play in His purpose and in the manifestation of His personality and reality before the eyes of this world. The perception of what our role may be, or could be, doesn't get clear to us immediately after our baptism. But be on the look out, perceive and feel that you *are* valued by your Lord, the Lord who bought you...and in seeking to bring others into the body of Jesus, we are eventually seeking to make *them* know *their* worth in His eyes. For you don't give your life for women and men whom you don't value.

We are preaching against a background of a world that increasingly devalues people; and our message should offer a radical focus on the value of the human person amidst a society that increasingly ignores it. Society reflects the basic fear which permeates individual human lives, and which is the very antithesis of true faith. It is the basic human fear of being crushed which leads to the globalization phenomena, whereby the global economy organizes itself into ever larger corporations and amalgams, and the workers combine in increasingly organized masses. The infinite variety of human persons is lost amidst this universal leveling process; people are dehumanized into cogs in a machine. True creativity and the expression of the person is mitigated against by a fear of being left alone in the battle of life. Members of communities, be it the corporations they work for or the denomination they belong to, fear to step outside the narrow limits of their society. The radical conversion of which Jesus spoke is militated against. The majority feel that they can move from department to department, from relationship to relationship, from denomination to denomination, but never ultimately stand alone with their Lord.

And yet a great paradox develops, which our witness should plug into. It is this: It is a fear of loneliness which drives people to seek refuge in the organizations they perceive to be 'safe', and yet the destruction of human personhood within those structures leaves them even more lonely and desperate. The solitude of modern man has resulted in a breakdown of community spirit. But one aspect of the call of Christ is to attain victory over individualism, and thereby to raise up a church so dominated by love that the witness of unity, of the community spirit, is enough to convert this lonely world. Victory over selfishness is related to victory over loneliness. So many remain isolated and alone, willing work-horses for others in the family or workplace, thinking that this is actually their calling from God, their self-sacrifice- when actually it's more a case of inertia, of not allowing the power of grace and God's affirmation of us as persons to set us free from our selfish complexes.

Much as the Western world has fought against Communism, they have imbibed the same essential spirit of loyalty to a party at all costs. The victor always runs the risk of being infected by the defeated, and this is what has happened. The way Israel worshipped the idols of those they defeated is classic proof of this. Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon* is all about the tragedy of those within the system who step outside of it. The hero, Rubashov,

becomes crushed by the same principles of loyalty to the party which he had once advocated and still believed in after a fashion: "All he had believed in, fought for and preached during the last forty years swept over his mind in an irresistible wave. The individual was nothing, the Party was all; the branch which broke from the tree must wither". Capitalism, denominational Christianity, Communism, corporations...have all done the same thing. Communities, departments, offices, working groups, families, ecclesiastical bodies, all intended to be living cells and freestanding communities, have become reduced to being mere administrative divisions. The message we preach must radically challenge this. A convert stands alone before his or her maker and Lord, with a personal responsibility to the Father and Son. Ecclesiastical bodies comprised of those converts are to be genuinely autonomous, not mere administrative divisions. And yet increasingly the spirit of dehumanization of this world has eroded these Biblical ideals. The individual is not "nothing", as Koestler wrote. He or she is *everything* to the Lord and Saviour who as Paul says "loved *me* and died *for me*". The churches which those individuals quite rightly comprise are merely a means to an end; for salvation is in the end a personal matter. We are therefore to seek to win men and women one by one; and it can be that an overemphasis on tactics, strategies and statistics, much as they have their place, can lead us to be teaching a general ideology rather than earnestly seeking to save the individual. We are not preaching mere attachment to a church as a spiritual luxury, a refuge from a few storms, a social club...but rather the doctrine of the real and living Christ, as a reality which has more and more points of contact with real human life. Our goal is to bring individuals into a place where their whole existence is subject to the will of the Father and Son, not submission to any human organization.

It seems to me that there are an ever-increasing number of people in this world who feel they are non-persons, struggling with the feeling of being utterly insignificant. The nature of modern employment leads to this- employment that on one end demands the very soul of a person, and on the other offers low pay and no prospect of ever 'making it' in an increasingly competitive world. Likewise the world of 'virtual relationships', sitting at a computer pressing keys as the only form of acceptable creativity, only leads to the feeling of being a non-person, and ultimately insignificant. To this growing mass of people we present a radically different world-view, where the meaning and value of persons is one of the core values: for this is what we find in the teaching of Jesus.

Another outcome of not valuing individuals is a resignation of authority to leading individuals, or perceiving the body of Christ as an organization to the point of not valuing the individuals within it. Any attempt to consciously limit the individual intellectual freedom or individual integrity of each individual member of the body must surely be suspect. Even worse, the idea of 'submission' can be taken too far (as it has been in Islam) to encourage individuals to abdicate their personal responsibility to the authority of charismatic leaders or 'committees'. The nature of how we identify ourselves as a group can lead too easily to dehumanizing the individuals both within and outside of the group. The Roman Catholic church, for example, has covered up the abuse of children by priests, on the basis that more glory to God would be given by preserving the image of their church. What has happened here is that transparency and integrity, and basic care for people and the children involved, have all been sacrificed for the sake of the institution. And in every Christian community, this can so easily happen. We can decide upon a particular goal or end [e.g. 'keeping the truth pure'], and all else is subjected to achieving this. People are dehumanized and treated as objects, and no longer related to as we would wish others to relate to us.

Our technology mad, materialistic age has increasingly denied the meaning and value of persons. Science especially has depersonalized people. Everything has been objectified;

relationships lack passion and personal meaning; people have become objects, things, rather than persons. The rampant spread of pornography is perhaps the most obvious example of this. And economically or in the work place it's also true. Marx was right when he suggested that capitalism reduces the proletariat to mere things rather than people. The corporate employment structure has reduced people to roles; and it is by these that they are defined, rather than by their personality. By this I mean that we relate to John as the office manager; rather than to John as the guy with a slight stutter he's very conscious of, the John who struggles in his marriage and secretly reads the Bible some lunchtimes, the John who sometimes gives a lot of money to charity when he feels bad about being quite wealthy... the John who fantasizes about being a poet and living in the countryside, and coming to understand God better. In order to manage people, a growing number of rules and regulations have been created, which leads to our avoiding the need to judge people according to their person. Rather do we submit them to the test of legalism, instead of evaluating them and their situation in personal terms. This is seen, e.g., in churches which adopt blanket policies regarding divorce and remarriage, rather than judging each case individually. The glorification of science has had the same result; nature, history, relationships are analyzed by science and reduced to cold cause and effect statements. But the essence of treating people as things rather than persons is to be seen everywhere, not least in the fickleness shown in personal relationships. These relationships tend to be sacrificed increasingly easily for the sake of material advantage. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber wrote of this at great length in a book well worth reading- he sees everything in the modern world being reduced to an 'I-it' relationship rather than the 'I-thou' relationship which it ought to be (1). Yet the capacity for personal relationships is what actually makes us human; it's what singles us out from the animals. By perceiving the world as a world of things rather than a world of persons, we're effectively denying our humanity as God intended us to have it. But once we adopt the Biblical and Christian perspective, our world becomes full of persons rather than people whom we treat as mere objects. Far too many live in a world devoid and empty of meaningful personal relationships. We are called to be lights in this darkness. This perception of the value and meaning of persons will be reflected in many small ways- e.g. writing clearly rather than scrawling messages to others in handwriting only we understand [I find it interesting that doctors have notoriously illegible handwriting!]. It will make us more patient with people- we will the more patiently hear them out, or explain things to them, because we have an interest in them as persons. And perceiving the value of persons will make us value ourselves more, not in pride, but in the way God intends.

This understanding of "the world" as a world of persons rather than the physical world of material "things" is reflected in the way that John uses the term *kosmos*. So many interpreters have assumed that *kosmos* refers to the physical, literal world; whereas deeper reflection surely indicates that it refers rather to the world of *persons*. Thus "the world was made on account of Him [Christ], and the world did not know him" (Jn. 1:10; 1 Jn. 3:1-3) doesn't mean that Jesus created the literal planet; but rather that the world of persons was made on account of Jesus, but that world didn't know or accept / recognize Him. It is this "world" into which 'every man comes' (Jn. 1:18); and it is the "sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29) which Christ bore- not the sin of the literal planet, but the sin of the world of persons. God sent His son into the world to save it, and loved this world through giving Christ for it (Jn. 3:16)- clearly referring to the world of persons rather than the physical planet. The Lord in Lk. 11:49-51 speaks of the creation of humanity as "the foundation of the world"- for He says that Abel was slain at "the foundation of the world"- i.e. of the world of persons. In the same way as these passages in John have been misread as referring to a literal, physical, concrete world, so we too tend to see this world more as a world of things than a world of persons. For seeing

the world as a world of persons demands a huge amount from us, and the kind of sensitivity to humanity which leads ultimately to the death of the cross.

We're surrounded by broken down relationships, and likely each reader participates in plenty in your personal experience. One of the major factors in the anger and hurt which breaks relationships is the way that expectations are dashed. The young woman realizes she was in love with an image of 'my husband' throughout her courtship; and now she finds she's married to a man who doesn't fit her expectations. But he is all the same a person. By appreciating his unique significance as a person, she need no longer be angry with him for not being the person she had imagined. But there's no need to treat him as a non-person, just because he's not the type of person she imagined. But she needs to realize that he is still a person, in God's image, with all the meaning and value which accompanies that fact. It's been repeatedly found that the battered child is often the favourite child; the one most longed for, upon such great hopes and expectations were placed. The child misbehaves, fails to achieve excellence at school... and so anger is unleashed. Again, perceiving the meaning of persons can change all this. The child may not be who the parents imagined or hoped; but s/he is still a wonderful, real, alive, unique person.

**The Virtual Revolution**

The dangers of the communications revolution are testing our perception of the value and meaning of persons to the fullest extent. To kill whatever is made in the image of God is clearly enough a crime before God. It's the ultimate de-recognition of the human person. But the Lord Jesus taught that whoever hates his brother in his heart is a murderer. And so by sitting at home pressing buttons on a computer, sending emails of hate world-wide, we've done the same, at the press of a button. The communications revolution has placed us in temptation like this as never before. Not only does it enable such perpetration of evil in forms which the world would not think particularly bad. But the ease and sheer amount of communication we undertake can result in a person not having any personal 'secrets' which s/he hasn't shared with someone else; and these personal matters of the heart are what make us individuals, and define our boundaries. There's been nothing like the internet for taking away peoples' sense of boundaries in just about every sense. Further, a 'virtual' world enables people to both indulge and cover their sins more easily; and I speak not so much of viewing pornography as the opportunities to slander, gossip, be inappropriately involved, have affairs of the heart... whilst hiding behind the middle class front of the serious Christian, who can pick up wise statements and deep Bible study from a few minutes surfing of the net. The ease of quickly reading good Bible study etc. not only discourages us from personal study of God's words; but if reading others' conclusions is all we spend our time doing, we soon join the huge ranks of those who no longer seem capable of independent thought. The vast amount of information floating around also encourages our natural tendency to be more interested in ideas than people as people. We become more concerned with correcting the false doctrinal conclusions of a person we meet online than we do about their welfare as a person.

## Notes

- (1) Martin Buber, *I And Thou* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1966).

## 15-9 Grieving for others

We must watch out for the tendency to think that because a man has dug a hole and then fallen into it, well, that's his problem. But we have all done this, hopelessly so. We only have ourselves to blame. And yet God has rushed to us in Christ. He was grieved for the affliction of Israel, even though it was purely due to their own sin and wilful rebellion (2 Kings 14:26). If a man has fallen into his own hole, well he is still there and needs help, however he got there.

One of the brethren I have most reason to respect is John Thomas, but he wrote some words which seem to me to have been misused: "Do what is right; be valiant for the Truth; teach it without compromise, and all lovers of the Truth will approve you. For all others you need not care a rush". This has led to the position whereby we merely state propositional truth, in intellectual purity, and wait for the approbation of others for having stated it. And, we ignore anyone else who doesn't see our point at the time; indeed, we even despise them. We don't care for them any more. But this approach has led to ecclesiastical dying out, rather than men and women being won for Christ. For all those who do not instantly approve our message, within or without the brotherhood, we *must* care; we must think more deeply and sensitively how we might win them. We must try again, and again, and again, searching for the lost sheep until we find it. Their rejection of the message ought to pain us at the very core and heart of our beings. Jer. 13:17 records a private soliloquy of Jeremiah: "But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride". He would hide away and weep for them, and nobody would ever know. His grief was to be deeply personal ("my soul shall weep") and unperceived by others ("in secret places"). And I challenge us, each one: have we ever done this, or even come near it, in our frustration with those who reject our message? Jeremiah wept. He didn't "...not care a rush".

Paul explains his own attitude to preaching in 1 Cor. 2:3: "I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling". It could be that this is a reference to his physical weakness at the time he preached to the Corinthians. But William Barclay understands the Greek words to more imply "the trembling anxiety to perform a duty", and I tend to run with this. The words are a reflection of the heart that bled within Paul. The man who has no fear, no hesitancy, no nervousness, no tension in the task of preaching...may give an efficient and competent performance from a church platform. But it is the man who has this trembling anxiety, that intensity which comes from a heart that bleeds for ones hearers, who will produce an effect which artistry alone can never achieve. He is the man who will convert another. It has truly been said that "the need is the call". To perceive the needs of others is what calls us and compels us to witness. Bent knees, wet eyes, a broken heart...I don't mean on the platform nor necessarily in our actual presentation of the Truth, but beforehand. As part of our beings. If fused within the very texture of our human personality there is this earnest desire for others' salvation, for their sharing in Israel's Hope, coupled with a very real sense of our own inadequacy and sense of awkwardness with ourselves...this, it seems to me, is what converts.

And we must be aware that in helping people, be it in teaching them the Truth of Christ, or in materially supporting them in their needs, we must never allow our position of 'superiority' become a vehicle for abusing their person, however unintentionally. The Lord in Lk. 22:25 spoke of how in the world, "benefactors" have power over people. His idea seems to have been: 'If you show generosity in the world, you have authority over others; but you, after my example, must show generosity to others in humble acts of service but not expect authority over others as a result of this'. The giving of help or welfare in any form should therefore

never become a source of control over another person. Their integrity and independence as a person must never be in this sense ‘abused’ by us or simply lost sight of, because we have helped them.

One key aspect in perceiving the value of persons is to separate the person from their behaviour, the sinner from their sin, so that we can still love them. The way David treats Absalom is a great example. He clearly loved him, as the historical records make so abundantly clear. And yet the Psalms open another window into how David perceived Absalom. He describes him as “the cruel man” and invites God’s judgments upon him (Ps. 71:4 etc.). Yet he could do this whilst still loving Absalom the person.

### ***Hearts That Bleed***

The whole of creation keeps on going as a result of God having a heart that bleeds for people. “If he causes his heart to return unto himself”, the whole of creation would simply cease (Job 34:14 RVmg.). His spirit is His heart and mind, as well as physical power. Creation is kept going not by clockwork, but by the conscious outpouring of His Spirit, by the fact that our creator has a constantly and passionately outgoing spirit toward us. In times of depression we need to remember this; that they very fact the world is still going, the planet still moves, atoms stay in their place and all matter still exists...is proof that the God who has a heart that bleeds for us is still there, with His heart going out to us His creation. And the spirit of the Father must be in us His children. Nineveh was “a city great unto God” (Jonah 3:3 RVmg.). But it wasn’t so important to Jonah. The whole story of Jonah is to show how a man was brought to share God’s perspective- that people matter, even those we might despise and discount the most.

There is a Bible theme that the wicked will be grieved / distressed in the process of rejection (Ps. 112:10); yet we must grieve now for the Lord’s cause. We live in an increasingly dispassionate world; the mundane and the trivial are what are glorified, in the media, and in the living and conversations of those around us. Flat emotions, a narrow, totally selfish vista seem the hallmark of the post modernist era into which my generation and that below it are now entering. Yet for us there is every reason to live a life of passionate concern, of joy and grief for the sake of the Lord’s cause. If we allow ourselves to be lulled by the comfortable numbness of this world into *not* having that passion, then we will all the same come to know that same essential feeling in the grief and crying out of the rejection process. We must face it, either now or then. I have often wondered *why* it is that the little television which I watch is full of the most inane, meaningless, pointless material and displays. Why the pop songs I cannot help but hear in the many cafes in which I eat are just so empty and lacking in meaning; and how and why the very inanity and pointlessness of it all seems to be the very thing that is glorified. And yet this is the leading characteristic of the present world and our postmodernist generation. The impact on us is that it becomes all the harder to release the radical which there is latent in us all, it becomes all the tougher to really and unashamedly release and feel our passion for the Lord Jesus and the things of His ultimate truth.

God’s word is a living word. Unlike other history, we can see the intense personal relevance of all God’s past dealings with men. David at times gets ecstatic for what God had done at the Red Sea; one generation would tell the Passover story to another, they too would sing as Miriam had done (Ps. 145:4-7). Through sensitive reading of the word we can passionately enter into the thrill of God’s ways. We can perceive how we too stand day by day at the cross-roads, to eternal life or eternal death; how we too hold our futures in our hands, living out our

lives as in the judgment presence of the Father and Son. And the memory of the sufferings of our Lord can likewise jolt us out of the ‘don’t care’ mindset of this world.

For us, remembering His agony must not just be something we reconsider at the breaking of bread. Several times in the day we ought to be looking back to Him, as He was there, and as He *is* in our dim reconstructions of Golgotha’s awful scene; saying with Paul that “the son of God loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). For surely no believer who has been secured in Him can see Him there, and be passive. Surely none of us can fail to feel the touching of a raw nerve. What we have put our hand to is no hobby, no mere religion. Here are the things of ultimate truth; the things which a man cannot believe, cannot even *deal* with, cannot read of, write about, sing about, speak about, without a heart that bleeds.

### 15-10-1 The Spirit Of Prophecy

The preaching or testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy, says Rev. 19:10. I understand this to mean that our testimony to Jesus is in the spirit of the Old Testament prophets. For Rev. 22:6 associates the God of the holy prophets [a phrase referring to the Old Testament prophets in Lk. 1:70 and Acts 3:32] with the same God who is with us in our witnessing to Christ. And Rev. 18:20 speaks of those prophets rejoicing in the last day together with all preachers of the Gospel. This is why incidents from the lives and teaching of the Old Testament prophets are repeatedly alluded to in the New Testament and applied to all of us. James 5:10 puts it bluntly- the prophets are to be taken by us as our examples. Jeremiah was warned: “Be not dismayed of *them*, lest I dismay *you*” (Jer. 1:17 RV). This is alluded to by the Lord when He tells us that if we are ashamed of Him and His words, then He will be ashamed of us (Lk. 9:26). The connection surely indicates that the Old Testament prophets and the spirit of their commissioning is intended to apply to us today in our fulfilling of the great commission. Thus the prophets become our pattern for witness; they are our “brethren the prophets” (Rev.22:9). And so an understanding of them becomes programmatic for our witness today. Our audience, the world in which we live, is in essence that in which the prophets lived. Isaiah was up against the attitude that “Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die” (Is. 22:13)- and Paul quotes that passage as relevant for all Christians who hold the hope of resurrection amidst a world that does not (1 Cor. 15:32).

Firstly, we need to clear up the misconception that the prophets were merely fax machines, dispassionately forwarding God’s message to men. Their words were indeed the words of God, they were inspired, but they also had emotional involvement. All Scripture is indeed God-breathed, but this involved the prophets in breathing in of that Spirit and exhaling it, as it were (2 Tim. 3:16). The passage in 2 Pet. 1:19-21 has been somewhat misunderstood. Holy men of God indeed spoke as they were “moved” by the Holy Spirit; but, contrary to what is repeated parrot fashion by so many, the Greek for “moved” doesn’t necessarily mean ‘irresistibly carried along’, as if the prophets had no personal input into what they said. The Greek word *phero* appears several times in 2 Peter:

- “The grace that is to be *brought* unto you” (2 Pet. 1:13)

- “There *came* such a voice to [Christ] from the excellent glory” (2 Pet. 1:17)
- “This voice which *came* from heaven” (2 Pet. 1:18)
- “The prophecy *came* not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake *phero* ['as they were...'] is not in the original- it's in italics in the AV] the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21)

Clearly enough, *phero* in 2 Pet. 1 doesn't mean 'irresistibly carried along by'. The context of 2 Pet. 1:21 is a warning that as there were false prophets in Old Testament times amongst the people of God, so there will be in the new Israel. Peter's stress is that the Old Testament prophets were *holy*, they spoke according to the will of *God* and not the will of *man*; their words came from the Holy Spirit, and not the spirit of the flesh- in distinction to the false prophets who spoke of the flesh.

Now all this is not to say that some prophets were not 'carried along' against their will almost. Heb. 1:1 states that God spoke to the prophets in various manners. We can understand by this that inspiration took various forms. Consider Num. 12:6. God tells Moses and Aaron that [at that time] He reveals Himself to prophets by dreams and visions, but with His prophet Moses, He uses another method- He spoke with Moses "mouth to mouth". Whilst all prophets spoke God's word, they each had different processes of inspiration at work. Not all prophets went through the process of inspiration of which we are going to speak in this study. God reminds Israel that "day after day", ever since they left Egypt, He had *consistently* and *persistenty* sent His prophets to them- there was never a day when a prophet wasn't active (Jer. 7:25; 11:7; 25:4; 26:15; 29:19; Am. 3:7; 2:12). And yet obviously we only have the written record of a few of those prophets.

## **God And Man Together**

That said, there was of course a sense in which the impact of Divine inspiration couldn't be resisted (Am. 3:8 etc.); and yet this somehow was congruent with the freewill of the prophet, and the process happened still within the vortex of the prophet's own temperament. Note how Peter says that the prophet was a 'man of God' who was moved by God's Spirit to write Scripture; whereas Paul says that the Spirit-inspired Scriptures are what makes a 'man of God'- us- who he is (2 Tim. 3:17 cp. 2 Pet. 1:21). There is a mutuality here, in which even we in this age can have a part. Although the prophets were on God's side as it were, sharing His spirit, speaking His words, they were also men, and they were largely Jews, members of the nation upon whom He was announcing His wrath. At times, they reason with God. Amos delivered God's judgment against his people, and then pleaded: "O Lord God, forgive, I beseech thee! How can Jacob stand?... the Lord repented... It shall not be, said the Lord" (Am. 7:2-6- other examples in Is. 6:11; Jer. 4:14; Ps. 74:10). This was how well the prophets knew God; and yet again, it shows that they weren't merely impersonally reproducing a message from God. They were involved in it and highly sensitive to it.

So often in the prophets, the pronouns change. One moment we have God speaking, the next, the prophet is responding in agreement, appealing to his people, or echoing

the message in his own words. So in Is. 1:2,3 we have the direct words of God, ending with “They have rebelled against me... my people does not understand”. And then in Is. 1:4 we have Isaiah echoing back those thoughts of God: “They have forsaken the Lord”. Prophecies begin with God speaking in the third person, and end with Him speaking in the first person; and vice versa. In all these examples, we see God merging with His prophet, and vice versa (Am. 3:1; Is. 3:1,4; Is. 5:1,2 cp. 3-6; 7; Is. 10:12; Is. 11:3,9; Is. 22:17,19,20; Jer. 11:17; Jer. 23:9,11; Jer. 9:1,2; Is. 53:10,12; Is. 61:6,8; Is. 1:2,3,4; Jer. 4:1,2,21,22; Jer. 8:13,14; Nah. 1:12,13). However, there was more than an echo going on between God and the prophet. There was a kind of dialectic in the Divine-human encounter. God is influenced by man, as well as man by God.

And yet despite this unity of spirit between God and the prophets, the prophets weren't always forced to say the words. Jeremiah didn't want to say them at times, the weariness of it all got on top of him; and yet he felt unable to walk away, just as God felt with Israel. But there were times when he outright rebelled. Jer. 20:7 is made a mess of in most translations, because the obvious translation is simply too shocking. Jeremiah complains: “O Lord, thou hast seduced me [s.w. Ex. 22:16 of a man seducing a woman], and I am seduced; thou hast raped me [s.w. Dt. 22:15] and I am overcome” (Abraham Heschel's translation). Here is Jeremiah saying that he was attracted by God, he was seduced by Him, but then the whole thing became too much- he felt his soul had been raped. And yet in Jer. 15:16 he says that he had found God's word and eaten it, and as a result, “I am called by thy name, O Lord”- the language of a woman marrying and taking her husband's name (Is. 4:1). The word of God was his “joy [and] delight”- two words used four times elsewhere in Jeremiah, and always in the context of the joy of a wedding (Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11). Jeremiah saw his prophetic task as actually a marriage to God, an inbreathing of His word and being, to the point that he could say that he personally was “full of the wrath / passion of God” (Jer. 6:11). A prophet could only be incensed if God was incensed (Num. 23:8)- such was the bond between them. No wonder these men felt alone amongst men. They had a relationship with God which others couldn't enter into, which totally affected their lives and beings. The preacher / testifier of Jesus knows something of this spirit of prophecy. But in Jer. 20:7, Jeremiah felt he had been raped and not married. He resented the complete takeover of his heart. In Jer. 15:15, Jeremiah asks for vengeance on his persecutors, and in Jer. 15:18 accuses God of deceiving him. God's response is to ask him to repent of this, so that he can resume his prophetic work: “If you [Jeremiah] return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me [prophetic language]. If you utter what is precious, and not what is base, you shall be as my mouth” (Jer. 15:19). Perhaps Jeremiah had this incident in mind when he commented: “The Lord is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word” (Lam. 1:18). This indicates that at least in Jeremiah's case, he was not irresistibly carried along by the Spirit in some kind of ecstasy, having no option but to speak God's word. His speaking of God's word required that he shared the essentially loving and gracious spirit / disposition of his God.

Scholars have struggled to understand whether the Old Testament prophets were writing prose or poetry. The passion and emotion in the prophet perhaps resulted in the words having a kind of metre and style which can appear poetic without actually being poetry. This feature is a reflection of their passion. Peter Ackroyd, who was a

novelist and biographer as well as a theologian, commented: “the words of Isaiah are neither prose nor poetry but, rather, a series of incandescent utterances which effortlessly find their true form” (1). And he quotes the poet Coleridge: “Wherever passion was, the language became a sort of metre”.

The idea of prophets was well known in the world around ancient Israel. The idea of a prophet was that a person was caught up in some kind of ecstasy, transported into some ‘other’ world, and leaving behind their humanity. The true prophets were different. Their inspiration was about being attuned to the mind of God, they remained very much in the flesh and in the world, and the subjects of their prophecy related to very real, human things- injustice, a guy building an extension on his house without paying the labourers. Not flashing lights and ethereal coasting through space. The pagan prophets (e.g. the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:26-29) worked themselves into a frenzy in order to reach a state of depersonalization and loss of consciousness, in the hope that then they would be filled with Divine consciousness. True prophets like Amos were absolutely different; the inspiration process required them to be fully in touch with their own consciousness and personality, and it was exactly through their humanity that the personality of God came through in the inspired words they spake and wrote. Amos perceived the Lord’s word, and then ‘butted in’ as it were, in full consciousness: “O Lord God, forgive, I beseech Thee! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!” (Am. 7:2). This is the very opposite of the pagan prophets losing touch with their human senses and reasoning. Likewise consider Jeremiah’s response to receipt of God’s word: “Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth”. In fact we could say that whereas the false prophets aimed to lose consciousness in order to receive something from God’s consciousness, the true prophets received heightened sensitivity and conscience / consciousness in order to receive God’s word and to know His mind. The message which the true prophets received wasn’t some vague abstraction or personal transport into an unreal world. What they received from God was the sense that this world and its fate are very dear to its creator. It was because the true prophets entered into the mind of God, that this issued in the experience of words. The false prophets tended to experience something *happening*; whereas the true prophets experienced the thoughts of God, which issued in words. Their experience had form, but no content. And I can’t help adding that the Pentecostal ‘Holy Spirit’ experiences appear to me to be the form of ecstasy claimed by the false prophets. Receipt of God’s true revelation involved dialogue with God, even disagreement with Him for a moment, response, pleading, speech and counterspeech. It wasn’t a case of merely passively hearing a voice and writing it down. Part and parcel of hearing the word of God and being inspired with it was to react to it in daily life- hence Ezekiel couldn’t mourn for his wife, Hosea had to marry a whore as a reflection of God’s love for Israel, Isaiah had to walk naked (Is. 3:17). Truly “The prophet threw his whole self into his prophecy, and made not his lips alone, but his whole personality, the vehicle of the divine ‘word’” (2). The inner accord which the prophets had with the mind and word of God led to their personalities being like God’s. And mankind’s laughing them off as crazy, as mentally disturbed, was effectively their rejection and mocking of God Himself. We’re reminded of how the suffering Son of God in His time of dying, the highest and most intense expression of God’s love, was “the song of the drunkards” (Ps. 69:12). The prophets “spoke from the mouth of Yahweh” Himself; and yet the people scoffed at them (2 Chron. 36:12,16 RV). The power of inspiration was and is

so great; and to not heed God's word is therefore a personal affront to Him.

## Notes

(1) See Peter Ackroyd, *Studies In The Religious Tradition Of The Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1987) pp. 105-120.

(2) H.H. Rowley, *The Servant Of The Lord* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965) p. 118.

### 15-10-2 The Counter-Cultural Message Of The Hebrew Prophets

Israel had come to perceive of Yahweh as a god like the gods of the other nations and tribes around them. The prophets consciously brought home the fact that He is unique, and *not* at all like any local pagan deity. The pagan gods were thought to punish their people for minor infringements of ritual, or simply because deities were cruel at times. Yahweh wasn't like that; His judgments came only after passionate pleading, after being deferred time and again, and even then, they came in order to bring about correction, as a purging (Is. 1:25,26 and often), and not as an expression of irritation or mere anger of a capricious, unstable deity. "He has torn, that He may heal us" (Hos. 6:1). Amos speaks of Israel's final judgment as a day of their meeting their God, and he urges them to prepare to meet Him (Am. 4:12). This was no grim fatalism, an angry final statement. The language is shot through with allusion to how both Israel and Moses were told to prepare to meet Yahweh at Sinai (Ex. 19:11,15; 34:2). But that meeting involved a declaration of God's Name, the foremost characteristic of which was that God is a God *full* of mercy and love for His people.

### The Love Of God

The Canaanite tribes spoke of how their gods were married to their *land* and would defend it. But the prophets, especially Hosea, reveal Yahweh as married to His *people*. "Thus says the Lord, O my dear people [bath 'ami- as if they are God's partner]... make mourning... for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us" (Jer. 6:22,26). God delicately speaks as if He is married to Israel, and that even in their sufferings, He would suffer with them, as a husband suffers with his wife. "The destroyer will come upon us" even sounds as if God let Himself in a way be 'destroyed' in Israel's destruction; for each of us dies a little in the death of those we love. The idea of God being destroyed in the destruction of His people may be the basis of the descriptions of Zion as being left widowed (Lam. 1:1; Is. 54:1-8). We ask the question- if she was a widow, who died? Her husband, God, was as it were dead. The very idea of the death of God is awful and obnoxious. But this was and is the depth of God's feelings at His peoples' destruction. In a context where the first person pronouns clearly refer to God and not Jeremiah, we read: "Woe is me for my hurt! My wound is grievous... truly this is a grief, and I must bear it. My tabernacle is spoiled... my children are gone forth... there is none to stretch forth my tent" (Jer. 10:18-20). This is the almost unbelievable extent of God's pain and hurt for His people. Truly did it hurt God more than His children knew to punish them. Jer 6:8 and Ez. 23:18 speak of how God's soul "departed" from His people- but the same word is translated to hang / crucify (Num. 25:4; 2 Sam. 21:6,9,13). It's as if God was crucified in His pain for Israel. And in the death of His Son He went through that pain. And so never, ever, ever... can we nor Israel complain that our pain is greater than God's. Never. The pain of God at Israel's sin leads Him to exclaim (almost in the language of piercing and crucifixion): "Before me continually is grief and wounds" (Jer. 6:7). We can wound God by

our sin, so sensitive is He to us. In the end, we read that God's "soul" departed from them, because "the Lord has rejected you" (Jer. 6:8,30). This is the same language used about Saul-God rejected him, and so His spirit departed from him (1 Sam. 15:23; 16:14). The implication was that God's very soul / spirit is "with" us, and therefore He can be so terribly wounded by us in His heart by the rebellions of those in covenant relationship with Him. For His heart / soul / spirit is *so* close to us His beloved people.

God left Himself as a mighty man that cannot save, as a wayfaring man wandering through His own deserted land (Jer. 14:8,9). "The Lord of hosts" even calls the mourning women to come "and raise a lament over *us*" (Jer. 9:17,18). The "us" is God and Israel. The tragedy is awful, beyond words. All commentary is bathos. His love is wondrous. "Thy love is better than life", David said (Ps. 63:3)- 'more than my own life do I value God's love, *hesed*, covenant love, for me'. Indeed, Hosea's reference to *daath elohim*, the knowledge of God, has been observed as strikingly intimate, hinting as it does of God 'knowing' His people and them knowing Him, in the same way as a man 'knows' a woman. Hence the utter pain of Hos. 5:4: "The spirit of harlotry is within them, and they know not [i.e. sexually] *the Lord*'- although they 'knew' so many others, they were sexually obsessed. This was God's pain, lived out by Hosea. It was that very "knowledge of God" which He desired, rather than burnt offerings (Hos. 6:6). For as Amos put it, "You only have I known..." (Am. 3:2). No wonder the prophets needed psychological strengthening to be able to share in these tragic feelings of God. But this was part of their spirit, and it is to be the spirit of our urgent appeal to men to respond in faithfulness to God's love. When we read: "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people... Oh that I might leave my people!" (Jer. 9:1,2) we can too easily assume that these are the thoughts of Jeremiah. But the references to "my people" in the passage point us toward God as the person expressing these feelings. And then in Jer. 9:3 we have the speaker defined: "... and they know not me, said the Lord". These were *God's* thoughts. He wished He had human tear ducts to weep with... this was how He felt for them.

## The Wrath Of Love

The metaphors used to describe the anger of God with Israel are pretty awful. Her children to be slain with thirst, she was to be stripped naked by her husband (Hosea 2), gang raped by her lovers, having her nose cut off and left a battered, bleeding mess in the scrubland (Ez. 16,23), to have her skirt pulled up over her head and her nakedness revealed (Jer. 13:20-27), wishing to pluck off her own breasts for shame (Ez. 23:34). Jerusalem is to be raped, violated and humiliated, according to Ezekiel. Indeed, Ezekiel's images verge at times on what some would consider pornographic. He speaks of the woman Israel's pubic hair, breasts, menstrual cycle (Ez. 16:7,10); the gang rape by her enemies which God would bring about, leaving her mutilated and humiliated (Ez. 16:37; 23:22-49); about the size of her lovers' sexual organs and coital emissions, and how she let them fondle her breasts (Ez. 23:8,20). This is shocking language, which perhaps we skip over in our Bible reading from sheer embarrassment- and we are 21st century readers brutalized by exposure to this kind of stuff in the media. For early Israel, it would all have been even more shocking. It all seemed out of proportion to having 'merely' made a few political alliances with Egypt and Assyria. Was that really like a wife letting other men fondle her breasts and have sex with her, admiring their bodies as she did so? Did it all have to end in such brutality and vulgarity? Today, sex and violence are what attract attention. From lyrics of songs to advertising and movies, that's clear enough. And the prophets are using the same tactics to arrest Israel's attention, all the more so because nudity and sex were things simply not up for public discussion. There's an anxiety which any talk

about sex seems to arouse in us, and it was the prophets' intention to make us likewise get on the edge of our seats, anxious, rapt, sensitive for the next word... realizing that really and truly, this is what human sin does to God. The outrageous sex talk was to bring out how outrageous and obscene are our sins and unfaithfulness to the covenant we cut with God in baptism.

God paints Himself as acting with the anger of a very angry husband, whose anger is rooted in the profoundness of His love for His wife. There is a dark side to intimacy. It's why families, lovers, both spiritual and natural, experience the heights of both love and frustration / anger with each other. With a love like God's, it's inevitable that there is a strong element of jealousy and potential hurt over us. It has to be so. And yet as we know the story of the prophets never ends with the angry judgment- amazingly, given this level of anger and judgment / retribution, there is always the passionate appeal for Israel to return, to recover love, romance and intimacy in the relationship. Taking as it were a snapshot of the nature of the judgments God expressed, this is indeed hard to swallow. It's hard to read Jer. 31:16-34, how God will slay Rachel's children, leave her weeping for them, and then dry her eyes and speak of a new covenant and new relationship with her. But the point of it all is that this indeed is how radical the cycle of sin, judgment and repentance really is in the lives of each of us. If a movie were to be made of all this, none of us would be able to resist it. The story of how through love gone sour, estrangement, rape and battery, a couple triumph in love and true, eternal intimacy. But this is the wonder and power of true repentance. And it is also a powerful window into the consequence and nature of human sin. These metaphors and images of God as the jilted lover convey the reality of sin and reconciliation in a way that no amount of prose ever could. And yet it wasn't only metaphor- all this was lived out in the feelings of Hosea for Gomer. He could only have had those feelings if he very deeply loved her. The whole story, the images and ideas... surely leave us knowing once and for all that our religion and relationship with God simply can never be merely abstract contemplation of Biblical ideas, devoid of commitment and passion in response to God's love. All these wonderful ideas come down to us through reading and reflection upon Scripture. But Bible reading, understood and felt as it should be, can from now on for us surely never again be a passive, neutral, private experience. If we truly are in covenant relationship with this wondrous God, it demands our all. Our failures, forgiven as they are, will haunt us for their awfulness; and the wonder of His love will never cease to move us to real tears in the midst of this unemotional, too busy, post modern world. And the experience of God's ever new love and forgiveness will lead us to rise above all the examples of failed relationships and marriages we are surrounded with, to realize quite simply that those whom we love, we forgive. And the vastness of God's love means that He genuinely forgives us. And we too will go on risking ourselves, making ourselves vulnerable, to love again, to forgive again, knowing His love for us. But of course all this hinges around our perception of our sins and unfaithfulness being what it is.

The shocking sexual language and imagery of the prophets was in order to help Israel see that this was how far they had outraged God. It was and is a rhetoric that cannot be forgotten, shrugged off, re-interpreted. The rhetoric pushes relentlessly for a response in our consciences (2). Just as for a woman to have her skirt ripped above her head and her nakedness displayed was ultimately humiliating for her, so Israel had humiliated God by their sin (Jer. 13:25-27); their actions were just as shocking and obscene. And yet we... so minimize sin. Just a bit of injustice, a little touch of selfishness, a moment of hypocrisy... but all this is obscene treatment of our God. We read the description of the red clothing, gaudy jewellery and heavy make up of the harlot Israel in Ezekiel and Jeremiah... and this is how

inappropriate is mere external religion (Jer. 4:30). And we're all guilty of that, in some ways at some times. And we all know the downward spiral into sin... how once we start, we can't stop. But when Israel were like this, they are likened to a female camel in insatiable heat (Jer. 2:23-25; 5:7-9). We'd just rather not read that, or retranslate the words to make it seem somehow different. But we're dealing with serious matters here. Sin is serious to God.

### **Knowing God: The Spirit Of Prophecy**

The prophets shouldn't be seen as angry old men. They were filled with the wrath and emotion of God. But God's wrath is, as they frequently say, but for a moment. Always there is hope in His wrath, that it will bring about reformation. We're helped not to see the prophets as angry old men if we perceive the difference between anguish and anger. They spoke with more anguish than anger. In this context it needs to be noted that the language of "Woe!" is not to be read as angry threat and rage, but rather is it anguish, "a summons to grieve a death" (1).

Hosea dreamt or fantasized about the day when, he hoped, Gomer [cp. Israel] would return to him. And we find God through the prophets doing this often, as an expression of His love for them. He dreamt of how Israel as His vineyard would again be fruitful: "In that day: A pleasant vineyard, sing of it!... I [will] guard it day and night; I have no wrath" (Is. 27:2,3). He had wrath, and yet at the thought of Israel's blessed future with Him, He could say "I have no wrath". The God who spoke of slaying Israel with thirst in Hosea could then comment: "I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man... and I will *not* come to destroy" (Hos. 11:9).

God hasn't wound up this world and left it ticking by clockwork, dispassionately looking on as Israel and all His people make such a mess of things. He sends the rain, consciously; not a sparrow falls from the air [i.e., as the result of a man's sling stone- for birds die in their nests usually, not in mid-flight] without Him being aware, and, by implication, grieving for it. He even knows how much sparrows are sold for (Mt. 10:29). Any serious study of Bible teaching about the Angels reveals just how intensely God is working every moment, how much energy He consciously expends. We know that e.g. the decision to kill Ahab involved a large amount of discussion, suggestion and rejection of various Angelic plans etc (1 Kings 22). When we read that "Surely the Lord does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Am. 3:7), we might tend to take that as a statement of absolute principle that is obvious to all the Angels. But we find an Angel discussing with others: "Shall I hide from Abraham [who was a prophet] what I am about to do?" (Gen. 18:17). My point quite simply is that the Angels have more debate, expend more mental and physical energy than we surely realize, in order to operationalize things which we might consider to be standard and automatic in God's work with men. In our context, what this means is that when men reject the machinations and schemings of God's love, they reject an awful lot; and it grieves and disappoints Him, and appears tragic to those like the prophets who see things from His viewpoint.

(1) J.H. Hayes, ed., *Old Testament Form Criticism* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974) pp. 164,165.

(2) See Phyllis Trible, *God And The Rhetoric Of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) pp. 31-71.

### **15-10-3 Frontal Attack On Indifference**

The reality of God's anger, His hurt, His jealousy, means that God isn't indifferent to sin. And neither should we be, increasingly surrounded by it as we are, with sin presented to us as the norm of human existence. We may feel or express disapproval at sin; but God's reaction is something which language can't convey. It results in the broken heart of God. This is the message of the prophets: that we must end our indifference, quite literally, for God's sake. Sadly, many readers of the prophets seem to feel that these men are merely droning on, one prophet, one chapter, seems so much like the next. Yet read sensitively, and in a good translation, the words of the prophets expose us to a relentless shattering of indifference. Their words are onslaughts against cherished assumptions, patterns of living, challenging our endless evasions of issues, calling faith and behaviour to account. They are the very voice of God passionately imploring us to turn more fully to Him. Their task was "to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Mic. 3:8; Is. 58:1). Jer. 28:9 seems to imply that no true prophet prophesied only peace to Israel- there was always an exposure of sin and an appeal to repentance. That was part of their ministry. And it was directed at the people of God, for the most part- to us, the ecclesia. And it's indifference, lack of passion, which, it seems to me, is the besetting tragedy of our age. When did you last really shed tears? When were you moved, really wrenched in your gut, by the suffering of others, by the sin of this world, your own sin, your part in humanity's tragic rejection of God... when did you last *feel* for God in His pain, as He sees His beloved children and creation walk away from Him day after day, second after second? When did you last feel ecstatic joy, deep sadness... in this post-modern world of surface level emotion? It's in all this that the words of the prophets and their personal nature as people challenge us- and their spirit is to be the spirit of our testimony to Jesus in this world. They called upon men to "hate evil and love good" (Am. 5:15), to have some passion about our positions.

Our world's devaluing and misunderstanding of sin has likely affected all of us. We see the rich abusing the poor, manipulation of all sorts going on, petty injustices, hypocrisy in the ecclesia, falsehood, cheating in business, white lies, unkindness to ones' brethren... and we shrug and think that it's just normal, part of life as it is. And yet for the prophets, these things were a catastrophe. Saying one thing to someone whilst feeling differently about them in the heart was the reason for God passionately wishing to take vengeance "on a nation such as this" (Jer. 9:8,9)- note that the whole nation are counted as guilty, in that society just shrugged at hypocritical words. What to us are the daily minor sins and injustices of life were to them issues of cosmic proportion. Nobody in our current society would consider what you *think* to be a criminal act; and nobody did in early Israel, either. But time and again, the prophets passionately call down judgment for "evil thoughts" and "evil hearts" (Jer. 3:17; 4:14; 7:24; 9:14; 11:8; 13:10; 14:14; 16:12; 18:12; 23:17). Sins committed in private we tend to accept as irrelevant to us; yet Hab. 2:11,12 says that "the stone shall cry out of the wall" because of wicked plans hatched within the walls of that room. "There is no regard for man" was the complaint of Is. 33:8- the value and meaning of the human person was disregarded. And this was the cause of 'bitter weeping' (Is. 33:7). Perhaps we could say that the prophets are characterized by taking the individual seriously. We seem to have a hard enough job maintaining a sense of the value of persons ourselves, quite apart from weeping that others don't have such values. This level of sensitivity to human sin is quite something; and yet this is the spirit of prophecy. In the ancient world it was felt that , as Cicero put it, "the gods attend to great matters; they neglect small ones" (*De Natura Deorum* Vol. 2, 167). The God of Israel was and is quite different; for as the prophets show, what men may regard as small issues are to Him all and vitally important. That slightly unkind email, that less than truthful

passing comment on a brother, that exaggeration... these aren't trivialities to God. What to us are trivialities are crucial to Him; that's the message of the prophets. The spirit of the prophets cried out in pain and anguish because of that kind of thing; and their spirit is to be ours. There's something alive and passionate to the words of the prophets. They're not just droning on. Although they largely wrote in poetry, let not this delude us from feeling the cutting edge of their passion. Their poetry wasn't what Wordsworth thought poetry is—"emotion recollected in tranquillity". The attack on complacency and passionlessness was full frontal: "Tremble, you women who are at ease [as you stroll the supermarkets of today], shudder, you complacent ones [as you hang out with your friends, lost in small talk]; strip and make yourselves bare" (Is. 32:11 RSV- the RSV seems to me to capture the passion of the prophetic words best of all the English translations).

Who we are now is who we will eternally be; hence the intense responsibility we should attach to all our actions, attitudes and deeds. One of the many dangers of the myth of an 'immortal soul' is the assumption that we can live in this life as men, and then go on to a totally different life on death. No. We are developing now towards the character and essential personality we will eternally be. C.S. Lewis, for all his other wisdom, wrote a book about death called "The Great Divorce", his idea being that at death there is a great divorce between our present earthly life and our eternal, future life. He couldn't have dreamed up any more dangerous a philosophy. Who we are now is who we will eternally be, and so we'd better live now towards tomorrow. There will be no great divorce between the Duncan of today and the eternal Duncan of the Kingdom age.

It was tragic for the prophets that the people were so indifferent. They portrayed the tragic, passionate love of God to His people, they sung of it, wrote of it, made poetry about it [for much of the prophetic writing is poetry]. And yet they passed this off as mere "allegory" in a mocking way (Ez. 20:49), Ezekiel was "to them like one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice... for they hear what you say, but they will not do it" (Ez. 33:32). They were like buskers singing songs in the subway, which we may listen to with half an ear, even admire them for a few moments, and then walk on in our busy lives. But the prophets were speaking forth the words of passionate love of God Almighty for His people... truly as Paul Simon put it, with an uncanny appropriacy to our train of thought, "the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls". They thought that "the Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill" (Zeph. 1:12); "the Lord does not see us" (Ez. 8:12; 9:9); "my way is hidden from the Lord" (Is. 40:27; 29:15). This of course is the attitude with which we daily live. The question is, will we perceive it as the prophets did?

The prophets were up against the same passionless spirit that pervades our societies today. The Jews came to discount the existence of God as a person, and condemned any form of anger or passion: "God loves him who never gets angry" (*Pesahim* 113b); "He who gets angry is regarded as if he would worship an idol" (Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Deoth, Vol. 2, 3). "Do not get angry and you will not sin" (*Berachoth* 29b). By contrast, consider Ps. 4:5 (quoted in Eph. 4:26 and exemplified in the anger of the Lord Jesus): "Be angry and sin not". The Rabbinic commentaries changed this to "Tremble before God, and you will not sin". Likewise "the Lord thy God [is] a jealous God" (Ex. 20:5) was changed in the Targums to "I am a God above jealousy" (*Mechilta*). The prophets speak so often of God's wrath, love, hurt, pain, passion, anger, pathos... And they speak too of the terrible "repentings", the kindling of contradictory impulses, which there apparently is in the mind of God. He is angry with sinners, but He will not be angry for ever because "from me proceeds the spirit, and I have made the breath of life" (Is. 57:16-19); His passionate, constant outpouring of energy

into His creation means He simply won't be angry with man for ever. But amongst the Jews there was a revulsion against the idea of God having passion, being angry, and His children sharing those same emotions. It's the same basic approach as the obsession we have today with 'nice speak'- don't be too committed, go so far but no further, don't appear extreme. Here the spirit of the prophets must be our urgent example- we are to have passion for the positions we adopt. And of course that involves us in being careful, Biblical and prayerful about what positions we adopt. It was the passion with which the Lord Jesus held to His positions that so endeared Him to the Father. Because He so loved righteousness and hated iniquity, the Father so highly exalted Him (Heb. 1:9). This division within the Lord between righteousness and sin is perhaps reflected in the records of the wilderness temptation- sin and righteousness were so clearly divided in His own mind that the record is written in the unusual way it is.

Perhaps more than anything, the prophetic descriptions of condemnation were aimed at attacking the indifference which pervaded Israel. The power of sexual imagery is used to the full in the description of rejected Israel as a whore all dressed up with no place to go, so utterly unwanted and despised (Jer. 4:30,31). This was and is the tragedy of Divine rejection of those who have so desperately sought the approval of this world, when all too late they find this world is over for good.

#### **15-10-4 The Prophetic Attack On Pride And Wealth**

For all the issues which the prophets could have condemned people for, pride was high on their list. "I abhor the pride of Jacob", Amos cried out in dismay (Am. 6:8). Jeremiah wept in secret, his eyes running with tears, "for your pride" (Jer. 13:15-17). Isaiah gets passionate about the way that Assyria thought that "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom" (Is. 10:13). Because Ephraim trusted in his wealth, the most awful words of judgment are pronounced upon him (Hos. 12:8; 10:13,14). We shrug when we see pride and trust in wealth. Rich or poor, we all tend to trust in money. Thinking that that's life... under the sun. But the prophets went ballistic about this. We've developed established patterns of indifference to this kind of thing. But the prophet's consciences were keenly sensitive to these patterns, and they openly challenged them. They weren't just empty moralizers, bleating on about the state of the nation; their words are an assault of the mind and conscience. Amos speaks of judgment to come in dramatic terms 'just' because creditors sold their debtors into slavery just to recover the cost of a pair of shoes (Am. 2:6,7). Jer. 22:13-19 is a long and passionate condemnation of Jehoiakim for building an extension to his house, using his neighbours as workmen and not giving them the agreed wages. We see this sort of thing all the time. And shrug and think it good fortune it didn't happen to us. But that's not the spirit of prophecy. In the midst of Judah's prosperity, with a land "filled with silver and gold" (Is. 2:7), visions of doom haunted Isaiah's soul; he couldn't just go along with the swing of things, knowing that all that wealth was an illusion and being used as an antithesis to faith. Now that's something we see all the time around us and in the brotherhood; but is our soul touched like his was? Do we know the spirit of the prophets?

To trust in weapons, foreign powers etc. rather than on God alone was something about which Isaiah wailed and lamented (Is. 22:8,11). In our terms, this may translate into situations like what we do when we feel the first onset of an illness; when our car won't start... do we trust on human strength, on the pretensions of science, and turn to God if all else fails? There can scarcely be one of us who doesn't see this pattern of response in our lives. And yet, in prophetic terms, this is *awful!* That we don't first and totally turn to our God. Human "might

is not right" (Jer. 23:10); human power is fiercely criticized by the prophets. "One of the most striking and one of the most pervasive features of the prophetic polemic is the denunciation and distrust of power in all its forms and guises" (3). "Not by might, says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6; Mic. 7:16). The Jews of Isaiah's day turned to political alliances with the Egyptians to save them from the threat of Assyria. Isaiah insisted: "Do not rely on horses! Do not trust in chariots... the Egyptians are men and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit" (Is. 31:1,3). Egypt and Assyria are likened to mere tiny insects, a fly and a bee. Yet Judah were doing what was humanly sensible and smart. To trust in politics, in what seems the usual human response to an issue rather than trust in God, is in fact something which breaks God's heart. With Assyria at the height of her power, Isaiah proclaimed her downfall (Is. 14:24-26). The life of faith in God is simply the very opposite of what seems humanly sensible. To give money we'd surely be better saving; risk our lives and health for another; neglect our business or career for the sake of the Lord's work. These ought to be the *normal* decisions we make, if we are walking in step with the spirit; and yet it would appear that they are the exceptions to the rule of far too many of our lives. And the point is, God's heart broke because His people were and are like this.

### 15-10-5 The Prophets And Injustice

The prophets not only reflected God's dismay and passionate feelings, they expressed their own dismay too. Lack of justice was a major concern of the prophets. But to us, injustice may be so commonplace we don't really worry about it too much. Given all the idolatry going on at the time of Jeremiah, we'd have expected the condition for being spared judgment at the hands of their invaders to be: 'Throw your idols away!'. But Jer. 34:11,22 offers them a reprieve if they stopped abusing their brethren. When, temporarily, the Jews ceased doing that and proclaimed liberty to their brethren- the pending judgment was put on hold. When they again abused their brethren, not giving them the "liberty" which must be afforded to all those made in God's image, then the Babylonians returned. And we need to ask whether we proclaim liberty to our brethren- or abuse them by not allowing them the basic freedom which is the dignity God allows to each of His children. It's rather like Paul writing to the Corinthians, and firstly addressing the sin of their divisiveness. What about their drunkenness at the breaking of bread, false doctrine, idolatry, using temple prostitutes? Paul focuses firstly on the sin of their divisions. Likewise, there were a host of issues the prophets could've raised with Israel; but injustice is the recurring theme. Because of the injustice going on in Jerusalem, Isaiah calls her a whore (Is. 1:21). Jeremiah speaks of running to and fro in the streets of Jerusalem, searching her squares, to see if he could find a single man who did justice and wasn't greedy (Jer. 5:1,5; 6:6,13; 8:10). Why get so ballistic because people are greedy and have no real sense of justice? Isn't that part of the human deal, don't we see it every single day? Yes we do. But the challenge of the prophets is to feel its' awfulness and realize that for this, an awful judgment is coming from God. It is indeed hard to see the world from God's perspective; but this is what the spirit of prophecy was and is all about. The prophets stood in the presence of God, and partook in His "council", i.e. His inner circle of trusted friends (Jer. 15:19; 23:18). Note that in this and many other passages, Jeremiah isn't hitting at the specific sin of named individuals; rather does he criticize Jewish society as a whole for allowing such injustice. Jeremiah's running around the streets was reflective of how God was desperately and urgently in search of men who shared His Spirit, who saw what He's really getting at.

The American Rabbi Abraham Heschel made the point that it's inaccurate to think of men searching for God- although we hear the phrase so often, and even think we may've done it

(1). The fact is, God is desperately searching for man; hence the ecstatic joy of God and man meeting, with all the Angels in Heaven rejoicing over ‘just’ one repentance. Heschel came out with another phrase that rambles on my mind: “God is in need of man” (2). Indeed, the prophets present Him as searching for *a* specific man, and finding Him in Messiah. God is searching for us, longing for us, as the father watching for the prodigal’s return. And it is this spirit / disposition of God which we are to have in our pleading outreach to humanity. We’re extending the tragic and even desperate search of God for man. Our witness can certainly not be indifferent, take-it-or-leave-it, just a bald presentation of Biblical information... there must be some heart and soul and spirit to it, reflecting none less than the searching, longing heart of God Himself. Is *our* testimony to Jesus in this spirit of the prophets? With whom have you talked this week? To whom have you reached out, for whom have you prayed that they might return to their God? Why not make prayer lists of people whom we desperately wish would turn to God...? And when one does turn, this spirit will lead us to do all we can to ensure he never turns away again.

God's need for man- as it were- is brought out by the parable of the lost coin. It's been suggested that the lost coin was one of the woman's dowry coins, and thus the story speaks of how every lost person is a personal and deeply felt loss to God. However, this view has been criticized in that a drachma, which had the same value as a silver denarius, was the wage paid to a worker for one day's field work (Mt. 20:1-16). It was far less than the dowry coins. It could be that instead we have here a reference to a desperately poor housewife- who certainly had no dowry money left. The poor were so poor in Palestine at the time of Christ that they were selling their land, and many had become landless labourers. They worked for money, with which they bought food. The husband went far and wide searching for work; the Lord's parable pictures labourers waiting around for work. It's been calculated that on the basis of one denarius / day as wage, even if the worker worked 300 days / year, and had four children and a wife plus himself to support, this income would only enable them to buy enough bread to provide 1400 calories / family member / day (1). This isn't enough to sustain a person's ability to do manual work. Therefore mothers and children faced malnutrition, and the women tried to grow crops on waste land and did anything for money in order to buy bread. The smiling, full cheeked, charming Mediterranean woman with dowry coins around her forehead (beloved of those Sunday School books about Bible background) just wasn't the scene that the Lord had grown up in. The woman who'd lost her coin was searching desperately for it, because that was what she'd buy the kids food with. No coin, no food, whiny, hungry, sick kids. She needed, desperately needed, that coin; so that she could feed the hungry kids whom she loved and be the de facto domestic head which she was. And this is all a picture of God's *need* for the lost, His *need* for us, because He knows the feeding which that lost one can uniquely provide to His beloved family. And one wonders of course whether the Lord's parable wasn't drawn from real life incidents in His own childhood with Mary.

God's search for man is a repeated theme of the prophets. “Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, I saw your fathers” (Hos. 9:10). “He found him in a desert land... He encircled him, He cared for him, He kept him as the apple of his eye” (Dt. 32:10). “I said, Here am I, here am I... I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people... I called, no one answered” (Is. 50:2; 65:1,2; 66:4). “I have found David my servant” (Ps. 89:20). So it's not us as it were reaching out to God; He is fervently reaching out to us, and we have to come to realize that. We don't so much as find God, as realize that He already is earnestly with us. Every man and woman is somehow a life “bound

in the bundle of living in the care of the Lord” (2 Sam. 25:29). We come to realize that before we were formed in the womb, God knew us (Jer. 1:5).

## Notes

(1) These calculations are made in W. Schottroff and W. Stegemann, *God Of The Lowly* (Maryknoll, NJ: Orbis, 1984) pp. 129-135.

### 15-10-6 The Prophetic Criticism Of Israel’s Religion

We tend to think that if others are hypocrites, well, I’d better ensure I’m not. But this indicates a lack of perception of the glory of God, and omits the factor of how *He* must feel at all those other peoples’ hypocrisies; the glory that is intended to be given to Him, that isn’t. Because of hypocritical “songs of praise” to God, Isaiah felt physically ill- “I pine away, I pine away” (Is. 24:16). The prophets felt for God, seeing things from His viewpoint. They had the spirit of Moses, who wished to see Israel in the land glorifying God, and was willing for his name to be blotted out of the book of eternal remembrance for that to happen. In that spirit, Moses even earlier could rejoice in song that “Thou wilt bring *them* in and plant *them*” (Ex. 15:17) rather than “You will bring *us* in...”. The prophetic desire was to see God glorified rather than their own success. This is the spirit of the prophets. This is what led them to see the tragedy of insincerity, of indifference, of the don’t care attitude.

Like many of the surrounding peoples, the Jews were sure that because they had a temple, because they offered sacrifice to their God and went through required rituals, therefore they were OK. The prophets exposed all this as scandalous pretension, revealing Israel’s cherished beliefs and suppositions about these things as meaningless and false. Their surrounding world taught that if you offered sacrifice to your god, all went smoothly. And yet Jeremiah blasts them: “To what purpose does frankincense come [up] to me... your burnt offerings are not acceptable” (Jer. 6:20). Time and again Jeremiah accuses the people of purposefully inciting God to anger through their worshipping of Him (Jer. 7:18,19; 11:17,18; 25:6; 44:3-8)- whereas the onlooker would’ve likely commented that at least they were doing *something*, and Jeremiah should just calm himself down about it all. He uses a grating sarcasm in Jer. 7:21-23: “Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh... I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings...but this command I gave them: Obey my voice”. The people loved their temple: “The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord...”, they said. And Jeremiah responds: “You trust in deceptive words to no avail” (Jer. 7:4,8). And time and again, the prophets predicted the destruction of the temple by the God of Israel. This was radical stuff in those days; the idea was that the survival of a god depended upon the survival of his temple or shrine. No pagan god would threaten to destroy his own shrine. Israel’s God was so different. Likewise a pagan god looked after his own people against their enemies. But Yahweh of Israel sent and empowered Israel’s enemies against them, and gave them victory against His own people; He encamped against His very own people (Is. 29:2-4). The archenemy of Israel, Assyria, was revealed as a rod in the God of Israel’s hand (Is. 10:5 etc.), and the King of Babylon was Yahweh’s servant who would come against Yahweh’s own people (Jer. 25:9; 27:6 etc.). The will of Israel’s God was that the capital city, seen by the people as the symbol and nerve centre of a god’s power and control, was to be destroyed by Israel’s enemies (Jer. 34:1-5; 21:3-7). In the surrounding culture of Israel, capital cities were portrayed as women, the wives of the gods. They are always presented as pure and wonderful. But the prophets represent cities like Jerusalem and Samaria as fallen women, whores. It was all so counter-cultural. Yahweh’s prophet even appealed for

Israel to surrender when under siege (Jer. 21:8-10). Try to enter into how radical and counter-cultural all this was. The prophets were trying to share the feelings and positions of a God so vastly different to the imaginations and understandings of His very own people. The nervous stress of this, the psychological pressure, can't be underestimated. And we are asked to share the spirit / mind / disposition of those prophets. Not only was God on the side of Israel's enemies; yet through all that, He somehow *was* with Israel; quite simply, "God is with us", even though it is He who encamps against them too (Is. 8:9,10; 18:4). The God of Auschwitz is somehow still the God of Israel. The very torment, even torture, of understanding that was etched clearly in the prophets, and it will be in us too.

### **15-10-7 The Prophetic Experience And Prophetic Consciousness**

But how did the prophets get like this? Their own spirituality obviously played a part in it; but further, Jeremiah speaks of how he came to see Israel for who they were: "The Lord made it known to me and I knew; then thou didst show me their evil deeds" (Jer. 11:8). Ezekiel was shown "what the house of Israel is doing in the dark" (Ez. 8:12). To pass through human life with this level of sensitivity must've been so hard. Psychologically and nervously, the stress would've been awful. It seems to me that the prophets had to be somehow psychologically strengthened by God to endure living that sensitively in this crass and unfeeling world- hence God made Ezekiel and Jeremiah as a wall and "iron pillar" to Israel, hardened their faces, so that they wouldn't be "dismayed at [the] looks" of those who watched them with anger and consternation (Jer. 1:18; 15:20; Ez. 2:4-6; 3:8,9,27). This psychological strengthening was not aimed at making them insensitive, but rather in strengthening them to live sensitively to sin in a sinful world without cracking up. And He will do the same for us, too.

This psychological strengthening was absolutely necessary- for no human being can live in a constant state of inspiration without breaking. The composer Tchaikovsky commented: "If that condition of mind and soul, which we call inspiration, lasted long without intermission, no artist could survive it. The strings would break and the instruments be shattered into fragments" (4). The whole tremendous experience of having God's mind in them, sharing His perspective, seeing the world through His eyes, made the prophets appear crazy to others. There's a marked emphasis upon the fact that they were perceived as madmen (e.g. Jer. 29:24,26; Hos. 9:7; 2 Kings 9:11). For us to walk down a street for even ten minutes, feeling and perceiving and knowing the sin of every person in those rooms and houses and yards, feeling the weeping of God over each of them... would send us crazy. And yet God strengthened the prophets, and there's no reason to think that He will not as it were strengthen us in our sensitivity too.

The prophets weren't fax machines, computer hardware that prints out whatever message comes into it. There was a personal identification between them and the word they spoke. And that, as now, is what gives human words authenticity and power- when it is apparent that the person and his words are one. Their emotions were God's; Ezekiel even lost his wife in order for him to be able to enter more into how God felt. This was an exhausting task. No wonder they needed this psychological strengthening. The prophets weren't merely informing men ahead of time that God's judgments were coming; rather were they sharing with the people the Divine pathos, His feelings and sense of tragic rejection. The prophets were therefore not mere fax machines; their own feelings were involved in the act of transmission of God's feelings to men through words. Even despite the special psychological strengthening which they received, sometimes the whole prophetic experience seemed too much for them, as it does for us: "Therefore I said, Look away from me... do not labour to

comfort me for the ruin of my people" (Is. 22:4). The prophets believed their message, to the point that it overcame them with grief that men wouldn't heed them. Is this how we feel at the rejection of our message? Is our testimony to Jesus really in the spirit of these prophets...? Can we identify with Micah when he lamented and wailed, going stripped and naked, because of the import of what he was prophesying, and human rejection of it (Mic. 1:8,12)?

The voice of the prophets didn't go entirely unheeded. A tiny minority responded. Isaiah had his school of disciples, referred to in Isaiah 8. The books of the prophets were presumably written up (under inspiration) by their disciples, and the biographical sections added by them. So the very existence of the books of the prophets itself indicates they had some converts who hung on and valued their every word. And yet despite this, the prophets felt lonely men, despite the converts they made- Micah felt like a tree left alone, naked and bare at the end of Summer (Mic. 7:1). Jeremiah "sat alone" (Jer. 15:17). Not only was their perspective on human sinfulness so very different to that of their audience. They preached a message which was counter-cultural and attacked the very bases of the assumptions which lay at the core of individual and social life in Israel. They appeared to back Israel's enemies. Their message was therefore rejected. Jeremiah lamented: "For twenty three years... the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened" (Jer. 25:3-7). The prophets saw the love of God, but saw too how Israel spurned it and refused to understand it. It must've been a tragic and awful experience. The very essence of God's Name was that He has a perpetual and passionate love for His people; but they didn't believe it, nor were they even very interested (5). The prophets spoke of the amazing grace and eternal love of God for Israel, how His wrath endured but for a moment (Is. 57:16; Jer. 18:23); and yet Israel asked: "Will he be angry for ever?" (Jer. 3:5). It was more than frustrating for the prophets; they shared God's feelings of having poured out so great a love, to see it ignored and disregarded, no time to look at it, too busy sowing my seeds, weeding my garden, having coffee... Jeremiah mourned Israel's lack of spiritual sensitivity and failure to live up to their potential- they had eyes, but didn't see (Jer. 5:23), they were God's servant, but a blind one; His messenger, but unable to hear any message (Is. 42:19). So the prophets weren't satisfied just because a minority responded to their message of God's love. They were heartbroken because the majority rejected it. I suspect we tend to think that 1 response in 1000 is good, 1 in 10,000 isn't bad. But what about the other 999, or 9,999, who receive our tracts, hit our websites, hear our witness- and don't respond? Is our witness in the spirit of the prophets? Are we happy that the tiny minority respond, and don't spare a thought for the tragedy of the majority who don't? Not only their tragedy, but the tragedy for God? Don't forget the vast amount of faith involved in the prophets' preaching- for only very rarely did prophets do miracles to authenticate their word (6). Therefore they'd have been perceived as just ranting on in an obnoxious way. They weren't taken seriously; and yet the prophet felt that the Lord was *roaring* from Zion through his prophetic words (Am. 1:2; Joel 3:16). This essential loneliness and rejection of the prophets by the majority was a significant part of their spirit.

And yet, and here's the paradoxical nature of the spirit of prophecy, the prophetic experience wasn't merely negative. Micah realized that the apparently negative message he had would actually "do good to him who walks uprightly" (Mic. 2:7). Jeremiah found God's words to be the joy and delight of his heart (Jer. 15:16). And of course, the prophets did enjoy some response. Isaiah had his "sons", his school of disciples who heeded him; Jeremiah had his few faithful friends; and there always was a righteous remnant whom the prophets had converted. All the prophets have the feature of strangely mixing declarations of fierce

judgment with prophesies of God's grace, of His final acceptance of Israel. Some of the finest descriptions of God's coming Kingdom on earth, based around Jerusalem and the land of Israel, are to be found wedged between the most angry predictions of God's wrath and judgment against His people. This in itself reflects the 'two minds' of God toward His people, and the resulting tension within the prophet's personality too; the 'struggle' between law and grace, between justice and mercy. Hosea especially mixes such prophecies, e.g. that God will "slay her with thirst", rend her like a lion, with declarations that God passionately loves Israel as a mother, a lover who'll forgive anything, a husband... The wrath of God, His grief at sin and being rejected, is intertwined with His amazing grace and love. That the extent of God's anger arises from the degree of His love is perhaps reflected in the way the Hebrew words for "lover" and "hater" are so closely related- *oheb* and *oyeb*. Hos. 2:9 appears to make a word play based around this. The gravity and emotional enormity of each 'side' of the total equation, the huge tension of the equilibrium that keeps them in perfect balance in God's character and words, was reflected in the prophets personally; and it will be in us too. The result of this is that the anger of both God and His prophets becomes understandable as more an expression of His and their sorrow, the hurtness of their love, even their weariness. God says that He has "had enough" of Israel, even saying "I am weary to bear" them (Is. 1:11-15). Is. 43:24 specifically speaks of God's weariness with His people- and this too was part of the prophets' spirit. And yet shining through all that is God's hopefulness for His people, and His grace: "The Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore will He exalt Himself [in judgment] to show mercy to you" (Is. 30:18). This wasn't an angry God hitting back at a rebellious people; this is the God of Israel looking at judgment only as a way to reveal His grace and mercy in the longer term.

All the same, the tension within God is apparent. Hosea's the clearest on this. God wants nothing more to do with His adulterous people; and then He pleads with them to come back to Him, breaking His own law, that a put away woman can't return to her first husband. "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?... mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together" (Hos. 11:8). And Jeremiah has more of the same: "How can I pardon you... shall I avenge myself on a nation such as this? Shall I not punish them for these things?" (Jer. 5:7-9,28,29). God reveals Himself as oscillating between punishing and redeeming, judging sin and overlooking it. God is open to changing His stated plans (e.g. to destroy Nineveh within forty days, to destroy Israel and make of Moses a new nation). He isn't like the Allah of Islam, who conducts a monologue with his followers; the one true God of Israel earnestly seeks dialogue with His people, and as such He enters into all the contradictory feelings and internal debates which dialogue involves. 'God loves the sinner and hates the sin' has always seemed to me problematic, logically and practically. Love is in the end a personal thing; in the end love and hate are appropriate to persons, not abstractions. And the person can't so easily be separated from their actions. Ultimately, it is persons who will be saved or condemned. The prophets reveal both the wrath and love of God towards His people, in the same way as a parent or partner can feel both wrath and love towards their beloved.

These oscillations of feelings, the sharp opposition between judgment and mercy, were felt equally by the prophets, who were breathing in God's spirit. Consider all the other oppositions and paradoxes which there were in the prophetic experience:

- Speaking for God against Israel, when they themselves were members of Israel
- Appearing to be on the side of their own peoples' enemies

- Holding an understanding of Israel's God that was contradictory to Israel's own understanding of their God
- Understanding why judgment should come, and yet like Habakkuk crying out with the question "Why?" (Hab. 1:2-4). After twice approaching God with this question, and each time being given fresh insights into the awful nature of the judgment to come as a response, Habakkuk ends up with a trembling body and lips that 'quivered at the sound'... and yet, at the very same time, feels that he still "will rejoice in the Lord" (Hab. 3:16,18). What a torn man he was.
- We've seen that the prophetic experience made them feel married to God. But the prophets were also Israelites, and they felt like this: "We have all become like one who is unclean... we all fade like a leaf... our iniquities take us away" (Is. 64:6, and note Daniel's prayer of confession of Israel's sins in Dan. 9, where he feels as if he too has sinned with them). At times, the prophets are paralleled with Israel- Jeremiah was a "prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5), and yet this was Israel's role (Is. 49:2). Both the prophets and Israel are described as "the servant of the Lord". But God and Israel were in the process of divorce, as they knew. The prophets were both on God's side, and Israel's. They were torn men. Just as God Himself was. He appeared "like a man confused" (Jer. 14:9).
- At times pleading with God to change the word which they themselves had pronounced and knew to be justified. Is. 62:1-7; 51:9 even appears to be Isaiah's challenge to the Lord to not let His judgment remain on Zion- Isaiah will not keep silent, nor will his fellow prophets, until God acts. He begs God to not restrain Himself, and to take note of the desolation caused (Is. 63:15; 64:8-12)
- The prophets appeal for their people to repent to avert God's judgments; and yet they proclaim a message of grace, that because "*I have* swept away your transgressions [therefore] Return [repent] to me, for *I have* redeemed you" (Is. 44:22). The fact of God's forgiveness leads to repentance- by grace. And yet the prophets also appeal for Israel to repent *so that* they might be forgiven.
- Seeing the world through the eyes of both God and man- Jeremiah said that God's wrath was his wrath, "I am full of the wrath of God" (Jer. 6:11), and yet he stood before God "to turn away thy wrath from them" (Jer. 18:20).
- Sometimes wishing to abandon their very own people (Jer. 19:1), just as God felt at times
- Oscillating between anger and grace
- The very prophetic call was "to pluck up and break down... to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10)
- Being betrayed and hated by their own people, and yet feeling such pain for the judgment to come upon them- despite being so badly treated by Judah and his own family, Jeremiah was still struck with pain at the thought of their judgment: "My anguish! My anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly..." (Jer. 4:19-21)
- Giving visions of impending judgment, and then, within moments, visions of Israel's blessed latter end

These contradictions, paradoxes, oppositions, call them what you will, were felt deeply within the prophet's personality. The bi-polarity resulted in some of them exhibiting bi-polar emotions- e.g. Jeremiah one moment is cursing the day of his birth, the next, he is ecstatically joyful. The phenomena of depressed, bi-polar believers was once something I felt awkward about, even ashamed of. But now, it makes sense to me. Research into the bi-polar condition is still limited. But what has been established is that it is the presence in the person of seriously conflicting loyalties, emotions, persuasions, even belief systems, which has something to do with it. In some ways, it's more of a condition, a state of being, than a disorder. It doesn't surprise me that Jeremiah appears to have acted in a bi-polar manner. God can have multiple relationships with people simultaneously, feeling joy at one event and deep sorrow at another event, even though the events are happening at the same time. He also sees to the end of history. His nature allows such multiple feelings without any disorder. But for a mere man on earth, invited to share in the inner council of God, the experience of these things was and is deeply destabilizing. Yes, God made men like Jeremiah a brazen wall, hardened their faces... and yet all the same, the experience of all this would've led to a certain element of emotional bi-polarity. Perhaps this opens some kind of window into understanding the emotional and psychological experience of the believer, especially those involved in preaching.

### **15-10-8 Hosea: Case Study**

I've written elsewhere about the love of God in and through Hosea (7); here I'll try to not repeat what I've said elsewhere. Hosea's love for Gomer was an image of God's love for Israel. But he wasn't merely acting a role; his feelings throughout the book are genuinely his feelings and actual experience. Therefore we can conclude that he really did passionately love Gomer. He was a spiritual man, and yet he fell so deeply for this very unspiritual woman, doubtless aware that she wasn't really worthy of him, knowing in himself that likely she wouldn't reciprocate his love and would betray him. And yet he went ahead and did it, a spiritual man marrying an unspiritual and immoral woman, because a) he must've been a very passionate man and b) quite simply, because he loved her with a love that was so great, a deathless love, love that would go to the death if it could for her, but circumstances didn't thus arise, and he went on living, but with that passion of love for her. Now every part of this mentality reflects that of God. He knew, for He knows all things, that Israel would betray Him, just as Samson knew Delilah would, yet still he trusted in her and loved her. And yet God still went ahead, because He is passionate, and because He is love itself for Israel. And this God is our God...

It seems to me that the statement that God told Hosea to go marry a promiscuous woman was perhaps (and I'm not at all dogmatic about this) not made in so many words. The book of Hosea is Hosea's inspired write up of his life. As his life and self-understanding unravelled, he realized that his passionate attraction to that faithless woman was in fact a command from God, and he realized more strongly that his marriage had in fact been a parable of God's love for Israel. It was perhaps with hindsight that he reflected that effectively, God had asked him to love Gomer with the love of God towards Israel (Hos. 3:1). Perhaps this is why God isn't recorded as telling Hosea to marry Gomer, but, to marry a promiscuous woman.

Throughout the book, Hosea clearly speaks on God's behalf, even though he at times speaks in the first person. It's hard at times to realize whether Hosea is talking about his own marriage, or about God's feelings to Israel. And that's understandable, given the view of inspiration we have been discussing. The feelings of Hosea were God's feelings; He was

inspired with the spirit / mind / attitude of God Himself. Thus in Hos. 2:4-25 we appear to have a monologue in which Hosea speaks to his wife and kids; but he speaks to them as if it's God speaking. So close was his identity with God's feelings as a result of the pain of his failed marriage and family life. The way Hosea redeems his wife, partly in cash and partly in kind, suggests he wasn't wealthy- he gave absolutely all he could scrape together for that worthless woman. And this was the cost to God, even His feelings, in redeeming His people- ultimately, through the blood of His own Son. And think of how Hosea accepts the children Gomer produced as his children- when they were the children of her whoredom. Presumably she went to the idol shrines and was a prostitute. She describes them as what she received from her lovers (Hos. 1:14). And the idols of Israel are described by Hosea as their lovers, with whom they were unfaithful to Yahweh (Hos. 2:7-15; 8:9; 9:10). It all fits together. Gomer got pregnant with the idol worshippers, she was unfaithful to Hosea by sleeping with them, just as Israel were doing the same to Yahweh by worshipping those idols. No wonder Hosea came to know the heart of God through his experience with Gomer. He knew, it seems, ahead of time, that Gomer was a wife who was going to become adulterous. Adultery of course implies that she wasn't adulterous at the time of marriage. Additionally, Andersen and Freedman argue on grammatical grounds that "a wife of whoredoms" in Hos. 1:2 means a wife who would become adulterous (8). No young man would surely marry a woman whom he knew would be adulterous later on. And yet perhaps in a way Hosea is saying that he did know this, but, his love for her was so strong, he married her. Just like God, when He met idol-worshipping Israel in the wilderness. They carried through the desert their god Remphan and the tabernacle of Moloch with them, as well as Yahweh's tabernacle. And yet it was there that Yahweh, the God who knows the future and the destiny and spiritual path of every man, fell in love with them and spread His skirt over them in love and delight and betrothal (Ez. 16:23). Just as Hosea did. For he married Gomer bat Diblaim (Hos. 1:3)- which was apparently the name for a temple prostitute (9). Note how Hos. 3:1 refers to the dibla, the raisin cakes used in the Baal cult, from which the word Diblaim comes. Hosea knowingly married a temple prostitute, just as God married Israel, in the hope that their intense love and covenant relationship would reform her and make her responsive to their love.

It's hard to understand what was happening in Hos. 3:1- it appears Hosea attempted to force through to realization his fantasy about re-marrying Gomer and starting over, he redeemed her again to himself for marriage. But still she went astray from him. Another suggestion is that Hos. 3:1 actually speaks of a second wife, who according to the analogy of Ez. 23, might have represented Judah. In this case we see the extreme love of Hosea, and God; having gone through all that heart break over Gomer, he was still so full of love that he was prepared to risk all yet again in another relationship. Note that when God tells Hosea to "go yet" and marry this woman, He uses 'Yahweh' about Himself, rather than speaking in the first person: "Go yet, love a woman... according to the love of Yahweh toward the children of Israel" (Hos. 3:1). Perhaps this was in order to demonstrate the grace and passionate love so inherent within God's very Name.

## Sensitivity

There was a tremendous sensitivity in Hosea to both God and to the sin of His people, honed and developed by his own relationship with Gomer. At the start of Hosea's prophecy, Israel were prosperous. They worshipped Yahweh, and assumed He was with them. And yet Hosea discounts their worship of Yahweh as being effectively idolatry. Time and again Hosea accuses Israel of idolatry, using words to describe their idolatry which are word plays on language associated with Yahweh. He speaks of their *kabod* [glory] (Hos. 9:11; 10:5)- a word

usually used about the glory of Yahweh. They worshipped *lo'al* (Hos. 7:16)- and he uses *al* to refer to Yahweh in Hos. 11:7. They worshipped *sor* (Hos. 9:13)- the same consonants as *sur*, the “rock” of Yahweh (Dt. 32:31). He calls Yahweh *qados* (Hos. 11:9), but they worshipped *qedosim* (Hos. 12:1). We tend to assume that Hosea’s denunciation of idolatry meant that Israel worshipped both Yahweh and various other images and idols of their pagan gods. But that seems to be an over-simplification. Archaeologists have actually not found much evidence of such gods. Summarizing much research, Cogan concludes: “There is no evidence of Assyrian interference in the Israelite cult prior to the 720 BCE annexation of Samaria [after Hosea’s time]... Israel was free of any cultic obligation” (10). And yet, Hosea speaks for all the world as if there were shrines etc. to other gods all over the place. My conclusion is that the idols, shrines etc. to which Hosea refers were therefore actually understood by Israel as a form of Yahweh worship. But he points out to them that actually, their worship of Yahweh is a form of idolatry. And all this has relevance to us. For actually things like daily Bible reading, attending church, going through the formalities of a religion, can become a form of fetishism rather than parts of the dynamic, Spirit filled life which they ought to be a vital part of. Worshipping Yahweh in the “high places”, i.e. the pagan shrines, was Israel’s besetting sin. It’s rather like the way they turned the bronze snake of the wilderness into an idol. They, like us, never simply turned their back on the true Way. Rather did they mix it with the way of the flesh, the way of the world, and pronounced that as in fact Yahweh worship. And it was all this which Hosea was so deeply sensitive to, as demonstrated by the careful word plays he made, in order to demonstrate that their worship of Yahweh was in fact idol worship.

Another example of Hosea’s sensitivity is his prophecy that the blood of Jezreel would be visited upon the house of Jehu (Hos. 1:4). At Jezreel, Jehu had killed Ahab’s family in a quite literal bloodbath. And God had commented that because Jehu had done this and thus fulfilled His word, Jehu’s family would reign for the next four generations (2 Kings 10:30). So why, then, does Hosea start talking about punishing the house of Jehu for what they did to the house of Ahab? Jehu became proud about the manner in which he had been the channel for God’s purpose to be fulfilled, inviting others to come and behold his “zeal for the Lord” (2 Kings 10:16). Jehu and his children showed themselves to not really be spiritually minded, and yet they prided themselves in having physically done God’s will. And because of this, Hosea talks in such angry terms about retribution for what they had done; the house of Jehu’s act of obedience to God actually became something his family had to be punished for, because they had done it in a proud spirit. We see this all the time around us. Men and women who clearly are instruments in God’s hand, like the Assyrians were, doing His will... but being proud about it and becoming exalted in their own eyes because of it. And Hosea is so sensitive to the awfulness of this, he goes ballistic about it.

## The Vital Importance Of Human Behaviour

Hosea 4 described a law suit (Heb. 4:1 Heb.) between God and the inhabitants of the land- and it’s over lack of integrity, mercy and knowledge of God. These things are paralleled in the law suit with murder, stealing and adultery- things which most people would shrug at are considered by Him to be criminal matters. To seek human help rather than Divine appears a mere common failure. But Hosea uses the same Hebrew words to describe his wife’s desertion [“she walked / departed from me”, Hos. 2:7,15] as he does to describe the embassage to Assyria as departing / walking there (Hos. 7:11). To seek human help in distress is to be unfaithful to our God. And yet when health fails, a lump appears, the car won’t start, we lose our job... to whom do we instinctively turn? Here is the huge relevance

of all this to 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity, who have striven to insure and protect themselves against calamity to an unprecedented extent.

### **Counter-Cultural Challenges**

Our instinctive tendency is to rely upon human strength in time of trouble, to take the insurance policies of the world, to do what seems the humanly sensible thing to do, to take humanly wise precautions. If a person does that and also proclaims a trust in God, we tend to think that's fair enough. But Hosea absolutely lambasts Israel for trusting in political alliances. He calls them a silly dove, fluttering between Assyria and Egypt. Hosea seriously advocated a national defence policy of total trust upon Yahweh, and nothing else. What he was suggesting was against every human instinct. But the spirit of the prophets was to live and proclaim life to be lived in a counter-instinctive way, to do what seems humanly foolish, because of our faith. We have ample opportunity to show that spirit of the prophets, in a society which increasingly seeks to insure and re-insure itself against every possible 'act of God'. Yet Hosea went even beyond all this- he spoke of how Israel would be left "without a king" (Hos. 3:4), and that the ruling dynasty would be overthrown. This would've been seen as seditious and revolutionary, a desire to overthrow the King.

### **Tragedy**

The deathless love of Hosea for Gomer, the very intensity and height of it, in itself highlights the tragedy of God. That His love, yes, the passion and longing of God Himself, was rejected by His people. There are some reasons to think that the book of Hosea was rewritten (under inspiration) during the captivity. Isaiah had explained (Is. 54:7) that although God and Israel had departed from each other, they would come together again by Israel being regathered- i.e. by their return from Babylon to the land. And perhaps Hosea was rewritten at the same time, as an appeal for the Jews to 'return' to their God, i.e. to return to Judah. And yet, so tragically, whilst they all avowed their allegiance to Yahweh, generously supported the few who did return... the majority of the Jews didn't return to their God. They chose the soft life in Babylon, where they remained. It's why the close of the book of Esther is so sad- the Jews are there in prosperity and popularity in Babylon, no longer weeping by the rivers of Babylon.

Consider how Hosea names his child [if indeed he was the father of it], 'Not my people'. Consider his hurt, to reject a child from his family. This was God's hurt. God, like Hosea, had no other children, no other people. For God to say to Israel 'You are not My people' would leave God without a people, as it were alone in the earth. Hosea shared the tragic loneliness of God.

### **God At Stake**

For Hebrew men like Hosea, the chastity of virgins and the faithfulness of wives were the most important thing in their personal lives (cp. Dt. 22:13-30). And so, the point is being made, God values our faithfulness supremely. The man had a deep sense of shame before the whole world if the woman he trusted betrayed him (Jer. 2:37). The shame of God over Israel was before the whole cosmos, not just some village in Palestine. No wonder Jeremiah wept at the thought of what was being done to God in this way (Jer. 8:22-9:3). The image of the unfaithful wife played deeply on male fears of female sexuality. Hosea was a Hebrew male. And they all feared their women in one way- that she might be unfaithful to him. And this

was and is the fear of God for our sin, our unfaithfulness. The Jews who first heard Hosea and others would've been led into taking sympathy with the man, agreeing that the punishment for the woman was appropriate to her sin (Jer. 2:30-37; 13:20-27). And yet of course the point was that it was they who were the woman in all this. We've all seen jealous men in relationships, querying every guy who calls their home number, wanting to know whom the wife's been out with... and on a far higher and altogether not petty level, this is the kind of God with whom we are in relationship. The men of Old Testament times feared their woman's unfaithfulness as it placed his whole honour and status as a man at stake. Hos. 2:7,12 reveals Hosea's hurt and anger that his wife considered other men to be the providers of her food and needs; for this was his honour, to provide for his wife, and for other men not to do that. And so we could say that in our unfaithfulness, in our turning to other supports other than Him... no less that God Himself is at stake. God is at stake. That's how he sees it. That's how much He's risked Himself for us, when He could have never even gotten involved with us. No less than God Himself is at stake. And perhaps I need to stop writing and you need to stop reading for a moment, to reflect on the tragedy of that.

It's not only that God's essential 'Godhood' was at stake. Just as Hosea's great love for Gomer made him so obviously and tragically vulnerable, so God's love for us on this tiny planet has done the same for Him. A great lover is the most vulnerable of persons to hurt and depression. The tragedy of unrequited love is awful, biting in its tragedy. And the love of God, so infinitely above the dearest of human love, makes Him a vulnerable and potentially tragic figure, just as Hosea was. And yet Hosea's hope and fantasy will ultimately come true for God. The most broken of relationships, that between God and Israel, the deepest betrayal... will one day soon be gloriously resolved in a new world. And we are playing our parts towards that end; for if nothing else, we are called to be God's faithful Israel, His dutiful wife...

### **The Baal Cult: An Insult To God's Godhood And Hosea's Manhood**

By allowing her lovers to provide her food and clothing, she was insulting her husband Hosea (Hos. 2:7). Our lack of faith that God really will provide, our seeking of those things from others apart from Him, is a similar insult to Him at the most essential level of His being and our relationship. The parallel in the God / Israel relationship is clear. The Baal cult was a fertility cult. The idea was that by sleeping with the temple prostitutes, Baal would provide fertility in family life and also good harvests and fullness of bread. Yet Yahweh was the giver of bread to Israel (Ex. 16:29 cp. Dt. 8:18; Ps. 136:25; Ps. 146:7). For Israel to trust Baal for these things was a denial of Him. Hos. 2:18 implies that Israel even called Yahweh "my Baal". And so when Gomer participated in these fertility rituals, she was living out the very picture of Israel's unfaithfulness to their God.

According to Ex. 21:10,11, a husband should provide for his wife food, clothing and sex. The ancient Near Eastern cultures generally felt that in the case of divorce, a husband could recover everything from his wife, on the basis that they had never become part of her property, as she had not been a faithful wife. This could be the idea behind the Hebrew of Hos. 2:11: "I will take back the grain to myself", along with "my grain... my must... my wool... my flax" [i.e. material for her clothes]. Gomer had taken these things from her lovers, and thus she declared herself not to be Hosea's wife. Israel had 'taken' these things from the Baal fertility cult, and thus declared themselves not to be Yahweh's wife. And if we trust in our own strength to provide these things- our jobs, salaries, investments, pensions, families-

we are effectively denying our relationship with God. He has promised to provide the basics- and this we need to accept in faith.

Israel's mixture of Yahweh worship with Baal worship is demonstrated by the reference to their being "lovers of raisin cakes" (Hos. 3:1). According to 2 Sam. 6:19, these cakes appear to have been part of the legitimate worship of Yahweh- and yet in Song 2:5 they are referred to as an aphrodisiac. There was a heady mix of Yahweh worship with participation in the sexual rituals of the Baal cult. It was this mixture which was so abhorrent to God- and time and again, in essence, we likewise mix flesh and spirit. A brother may express the most awful hatred and spite in 'upholding the faith' against one whom he perceives as apostate- and thus show the same mixture of flesh and spirit. A sister may indulge in gossip, kidding herself it's all for the cause of Christian love and concern... and the examples multiply, hour by hour, in daily Christian experience. We see it again in Hos. 3:4- the people were using "cult pillars... ephods" in their Baal worship. The patriarchs set up pillars in faith; and an ephod was part of Yahweh worship. But yet again, the same external things were used in a wrong context with wrong motives. Excavations of the Elephantine community reveal that the Jews mixed Yahweh and Baal worship to such an extent that they believed that Yahweh , like Baal, had a consort called Anat. Inscriptions from Quntillet Ajrud show the names Yahweh and Baal mixed together, including one which appears to speak of "Yahweh and his asherah". Ez. 16:21 and Ez. 23:39 are quite specific about this anyway- Israel offered sacrifice to idols in Yahweh's own temple.

### **Reflecting The Struggle Of God**

The passion and love of God leads Him time and again to apparently contradict Himself. He says that He will cast Judah out of their land, they would go to Babylon and serve other gods there, "where I will not show you favour" (Jer. 16:13). But actually Esther and her people were shown favour there [s.w. Esther 4:8; Esther 8:5]. God was gracious [s.w. 'show favour'] to those in exile (Is. 30:18,9; Am. 5:15; Mal. 1:9). But Jer. 16 goes on to state that God would not ever hide His eyes / face from the iniquity they had committed, i.e. the reason why they were in captivity (Jer. 16:17). But actually He did do just that- He hid His eyes from the sin of Judah and the sin of the exiles (Is. 65:16); the hiding of His face from them was in fact not permanent but for a brief moment (Is. 54:8). God then outlines a plan- He will recompense their sin double, and this would lead them back to Him (Jer. 16:18). But this was to be an unrepeatable, once-for-all program that would "cause them to know mine hand... and they shall now that my name is The Lord" (Jer. 16:21). This double recompensing of Judah's sin happened in the exile in Babylon (Is. 40:2), and therefore the joyful news was proclaimed to Zion in Is. 40 that now the Messianic Kingdom could begin. But there wasn't much interest nor response to the call to return to Judah in order to share in it. The exile didn't cause God's people to repent nor to know His Name. It wasn't the once-for-all program which He intended. Now none of this makes God out to be somehow not serious or unreliable. Rather is it all an indication of His passion and how deeply He wishes His plans of redemption for us to work out. He's not ashamed to as it were humiliate Himself, lay Himself open to petty critics, in His passion for us. Thus God was so [apparently] sure that the exile would bring about Judah's repentance and return to Him: "Thy lovers shall go into captivity: surely then shalt thou be ashamed and confounded for all thy wickedness" (Jer. 22:22). But actually the very opposite happened. It's rather like "They will reverence my son" (Mt. 21:37)- when actually they crucified Him.

We have commented elsewhere how sometimes God speaks as if He has rejected Israel, and other times as if they will eternally be His people. Such is the extent of His passionate feelings for them. And the Son of God entered into this- He said that no man would eat fruit of the tree of Israel for ever (Mk. 11:14), when in fact Israel one day will fill the face of the earth with fruit (Is. 27:6). We too, in the spirit of the prophets, are to enter into these feelings of God. God's threats to punish His people and His desire to forgive them don't somehow cancel each other out as in an equation. They exist within the mind of God in a terrible tension. He cries out through Hosea of how His many 'repentings' are "kindled together" as He struggles within Himself to give up His people as He has threatened (Hos. 11:8). And this struggle was reflected within the emotions and through the speeches / writings / poetry of Hosea. Hosea's speeches have an air of turbulence and struggle about them, which reflected the spirit / mind of the God who inspired him. The very way he was told to marry, in marked contrast to Jeremiah who was told not to marry (Jer. 16), perhaps indicates the duality of God's feelings toward Israel- a desire to marry them and yet not to do so. The extent of God's wrath with Israel, and His harsh, angry language against her, was an outcome of His love for her. "For the wrath of God is the love of God", wrote Emil Brunner long ago. It's like when we see a child run out in front of a car and narrowly escape death; the mother is angry and shouts at the child. Whilst we the unlookers breathe a prayer of thanks to God in much calmer terms. And this may help explain to us what appears the harder side of God at times. Hos. 2:11 speaks of God uncovering Israel's "nakedness"- used in Gen. 9:22,23 as a euphemism for her genitals. This uncovering of her nakedness is parallel with exposing her lewdness (Hos. 2:12). This will be the shame of the rejected at the day of judgment; and it's why any personal game plan that depends upon looking good to our brethren when we're rotten in God's sight will end in the most acute shame ultimately. But the promises and prophecies and even fantasies of Israel's future glory always occur within a few verses of such outpourings of wrath. The prophets are full of this, and Hosea especially, following the feelings of Hosea toward Gomer.

Let's remember that God's own law was pretty clear about adultery. The adulterous woman was to be punished with death- for one act of adultery. Even if she repented. And in any case, it was a defiling abomination [according to the Mosaic Law] to remarry a divorced wife. But here in Hosea, Hosea doesn't keep the law. He lets his wife commit multiple acts of adultery, and he still loves her and pleads with her- even though he was a man in love with God's law. And this reflects the turmoil of God in dealing with human sin, and His sinful people. Hosea outlines his plan in Hosea 2. He will hamper her movements so she can't find her lovers; if she does find them, he will take away her food and clothing, so she appreciates his generosity to her; and if she still doesn't return, he will expose her naked and shamed in front of her lovers. But there's no evidence Hosea ever did that. He just... loved her, was angry with her as an expression of that love, loved her yet more, yet more... And this perhaps too reflects God's mind- devising and declaring judgments for Israel, which are themselves far less than what He has earlier stated in His own law, and yet the power of His love means He somehow keeps bearing with His people. Even in the context of speaking of His marriage to Israel, God says that He will punish them "as women that break wedlock are judged" (Ez. 26:38; 23:45). And yet, He didn't. His love was too great, His passion for them too strong; and He even shamed Himself by doing what His own law forbade, the remarriage to a divorced and defiled wife. Perhaps all love involves a degree of paradox and self-contradiction; and a jealous, Almighty God in love was no different. This, to me, is why some Bible verses indicate God has forsaken Israel; and others imply He hasn't and never will. Somehow, even right now, the Jews you meet... are loved still by their God. And he still fantasizes, in a way, over their

return to Him. Imagine His utter joy when even one of them does in fact turn to Him! That alone motivates me to preach to Israel today.

### **Divine Fantasy**

In Hos. 2:16-23 we appear to have a fantasy of Hosea about his family. After nostalgic dreaming about the early days of their relationship, Hosea fantasizes about once again wooing Gomer, becoming betrothed to her, marrying her in some sort of outdoors wedding ceremony in which the animals and physical creation witness the vows and enter the joy, entering a new covenant with her, and renaming their children from 'Not my people' to 'My people'. As the children were to be renamed, Lo-ammi becoming Ammi, so the valley of Achor would become a door of hope (Hos. 2:17), and Jezreel, scene of Israel's rebellions, would become the place of joyful reconciliation between God and His people. The valley of Achor had previously been a block to Israel's entry to the land; now it becomes the entrance to it. In that awful place, God wanted to stage an outdoor wedding ceremony with His remarried people. Is. 65:10 mentions Achor as a place of special blessing in the Kingdom of God on earth- it's as if God's grace rejoices in inverting things, pouring out His richest blessing upon the places of our darkest failures. And we in daily life, in the interactions we have with others, are asked to reflect this same kind of grace.

This fantasy was and is the fantasy of God for His people. For doesn't love involve an element of fantasy, imagination, wild hope? If God loves His people with passion, is it so inappropriate that He should have such fantasy about them? And this God is our God! Although He may appear silent, our response to the new covenant must give Him great joy, although this doesn't cancel out the sorrow and tragedy of all His other rejected love. It makes me for one want to preach the harder to persuade men and women of His love. Let's remember that the events in Hosea's life, according to the information in Hos. 1:1, occurred over a span of at least 30, and perhaps even 50 years. His love for Gomer was the love of a lifetime, the hope and pain of a lifetime. And this in its turn reflects the long term love of the eternal God for His people. Hosea's fantasy for Gomer was unbounded. He fantasized of how when she returned to him with all her heart, with the children renamed, actually the whole of creation would join with him and her in some sort of ceremony of renewal (Hos. 2:16-23). The heavens would echo back the earth's joy. The wonderful thing is that this will happen when finally the Lord Jesus returns and Israel returns to their God. His fantasy was also God's. And God's fantasy for His people will in the end come true. And yet the whole language of Israel's rejection and then a *new* covenant being made between God and her is in essence marriage language. Jer. 31 speaks of how Rachel weeps for her slain children, but also as a virgin takes her tambourine in hand and dances, entering a new covenant with her *ba'al*, her Lord, her husband, who has obliterated the memory of all her sins in a way that only a Divine being could do (Jer. 31). Women in love are stereotypically associated with emotions of giddiness, hysteria, excitement, joy... and this is the language applied to weeping Rachel, weeping over the children God had taken from her. And yet... according to the New Testament quotations and expositions of Jer. 31, this is the very same 'new covenant' into which we enter in baptism. This is God's joy over us, and it should be ours over Him.

The hopefulness and fantasy of God for Israel comes out in His statements that Israel definitely will repent "As the thief is ashamed when he is found, so *is* [note the present tense] the house of Israel ashamed" (Jer. 2:26). This was God's fantasy for His people. There's another in Jer. 3:22: "Return, ye backsliding children. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the Lord our God". This latter sentence is God's fantasy about Israel, imagining them

saying those words. How bitter was His disappointment therefore- and how great His delight in those of us who in our weakness do come unto Him and recognize Him meaningfully as our God. Indeed the whole of Jer. 3:22-25 is full of God fantasizing about the sort of words Israel would say upon their repentance, and how they would take responsibility for their sins rather than blame them on their fathers (Jer. 3:25). This apparent certainty that Israel would repent and thus obviate the threatened judgments must have conflicted within the thinking of the Father- with His certainty that all was already too late for them. Hence passages like Hos. 11:8 speaks of the burning pain within the thought processes of God Almighty.

Hosea spoke in God's Name. He would've known how that Name was a memorial of the characteristics of God, His pity, mercy, forgiveness etc. as outlined in Ex. 33:19. And yet Hosea uses those very words in saying that now, God will not have mercy, pity or forgiveness toward Israel (Hos. 1:6). But Hosea spoke in the Name of Yahweh; and predicted that the Yahweh who had been their elohim from the land of Egypt, would still be their God (Hos. 12:9). In this we see Hosea's personal involvement in the tension of God; for he spoke in God's Name, with all that Name implied. And we too carry that Name, having been baptized into it. And we speak in that Name to this world, bearing within us the same conflict between the reality of future judgment, and the earnest grace of God to save this world.

## Notes

- (1) Abraham Heschel, *God In Search Of Man* (New York: Farrar, 1955).
- (2) Abraham Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Noonday Press, 1951) p. 241.
- (3) James Muilenburg, *The Way Of Israel* (New York: Harper, 1961) p.89.
- (4) Rosa Newmarch, *The Life And Letters Of Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky* (New York: Vienna House, 1973 ed.) pp. 274,275.
- (5) It has been argued that the very name of God, YHWH, is related to the Hebrew root *hwy*, passionate love. He is the one who was and is and will be the passionate one. See S.D. Goitein, *Vetus Testamentum* Vol. 6 pp. 1-9. Whether or not this is the case linguistically, the declaration of God's Name in Ex. 33:19 defines the Name as primarily concerning God's grace and mercy.
- (6) Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1969) p.138.
- (7) [http://www.carelinks.net/books/dh/mm/6-3-1The\\_Love\\_Of\\_God\\_In\\_Hosea.htm](http://www.carelinks.net/books/dh/mm/6-3-1The_Love_Of_God_In_Hosea.htm) and [http://www.carelinks.net/books/dh/ww/4-5-1extent\\_of\\_grace.htm](http://www.carelinks.net/books/dh/ww/4-5-1extent_of_grace.htm)
- (8) F. Andersen and D.N. Freedman, *Hosea* (London: Doubleday, 2004 ed.) p. 159.
- (9) H.W. Wolff, *Confrontations with Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 17.
- (10) M. Cogan, *Imperialism And Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries BCE* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974) pp. 103,104.

## Prophecy, Post Modernism And Inspiration: A Response by John Stibbs

Tchaikovsky's view of inspiration [the manic phase of bipolar?] it would seem is what was called by post modernists the modernist myth of the 'great artist' or in his case the 'great composer', as a conduit from the divine...buying into the idea that such prodigious talent could only come from God [but who often needs a muse to get him in the 'mood']. In post modernism there is no such thing at least in the visual arts [because there is no 'divine']...all can be attributed to the exteriors of things or 'its', i.e. 'mind' or even consciousness itself is directly attributed to or is a result of chemical and / or electrical processes. All folks are equal and what is needed to be an artist can be taught, thus we are all just artisans and the concepts are of literal signs, the meta narrative having been deconstructed in semiotics, no narrative therefore is more important than another ['flatland']...except the meta narrative of post modernism itself of course! But for musicians its different it seems as there is still a recognition of talent because, I would suggest, it is performance based, [and all are not equal in that way at least] though it is no longer seen as from the divine.

Inspiration of the Biblical kind I would suggest is not so much a man, or woman, being the conduit of the divine as is or has been supposed by what is essentially modernist religious fundamentalism [Christian scientific rationalism]. It was from this that there arose the notion that every word is God breathed or attributed to some kind of magical possession by divine ethereal disembodied spirit, like some kind of channelling from the 'spirit world'. These it seems were rationalisations of the unknown encountered in heightened or altered states of awareness within the consciousness level of the culture and described in available terms which were culturally bound and values system laden. What the consciousness of post modernism has allowed is for us to deconstruct the myth and to know that it is part of the world or cosmos that we know not some kind of fiat from another world inhabited by 'spirit-beings' such as angels and of whom God is the king. It is in fact a state of mind or level of consciousness that is quite common and is experienced by creative minds such as Tchaikovsky and others, but is not related to survival or existence of the individual or group. Albert Einstein [a spiritually mature man] is another whose concepts in science came as 'a blinding flash' of inspiration or in other words what has come to be known as 'peak experiences' of an altered state of conscious attained by a natural kind of meditative frame of mind somewhat similar to the manic phase of bi polar or that of a savant [whose brain chemistry or make-up 'allowed' such 'focus'], and try as he might he could never recreate to the same extent again because he failed to see where it came from. Many men and women in the past have achieved altered states of consciousness by using mind altering drugs, or experiences [meditation, yoga etc in the east] as a matter of course often not of their doing... many poets, artists, writers etc. used drugs prescribed by doctors, Vincent van Gogh is a case in point, as is the poet Browning and many others even Newton. Just as an aside here- Sufism for instance uses dance and music to attain an altered state of consciousness..not unlike an hypnotic trance. Anyway, the point is that in the past these 'peak experiences' could only be described [in the West at least] in the language of the times... the whole process of 'cultural' development is not unlike the individual maturation process, each stage or step may answer previous questions but opens up the awareness to more questions in a seemingly endless quest for 'truth'. This post modern 'flatland' of external processes i.e. the view that internal processes are an outcome of chemical or electrical processes, is boring and more importantly doesn't really explain everything, the truth of such science is relative... it just poses more existential questions of a 'higher level' of consciousness. But to people on one certain level of consciousness there is no recognition of any 'higher' level only the levels through which one has already come. This is not unlike the maturation process which evolves through a process of differentiation and identification. So it's no wonder that prophecy, and the Revelation is a good example [because it 'comes' from a higher level of consciousness which expresses a

much wider worldview], has to be lived through and only understood in retrospect... though if we meditate on it we may be able to glimpse a part of this 'truth' which is relative to us as we have great difficulty thinking beyond the level of consciousness in which we are now living. This is not unlike Newtonian mechanics as compared with quantum mechanics, which truth may also be superceded. We know that quantum works in the real world, but we don't fully understand why. But I think we are now on the cusp of a new much wider, inclusive and compassionate level of consciousness hence all the turmoil in the heavens and upon the earth.

## 16. Salt Of The Earth: The Power Of Influence

We have written of how our hearts should bleed for the world around us. Of how we should have a steady, unvarying, undefeatable determination to love men as Jesus loved them, and never, no matter what they do in response, to seek anything but their eternal good. This basic desire should be unquenchable within us. The flame may flicker pretty low at times, but this essential commitment to others' salvation should always be alive within us. The essence of it all is influence; how we can inspire others in the way to the Kingdom, both amongst our brethren and in the world around us. We have to face up to the fact that we, yes, you and me, make a real and actual difference to the lives of others; and that influence is either positive or negative. There is no middle ground. Our example- and let's not forget, we all set an example of one sort or another- will either edify others towards righteousness, or edify [AV "embolden"] our weaker brother to sin (1 Cor. 8:1,10). We 'edify' others in only one of two directions; this is the point behind Paul using the same Greek word in both verses.

### *Salt Of The Earth*

We are the salt of the earth (Mt. 5:13). Salt inevitably affects, by reason of *what it is*, whatever is next to it. We are lights in a dark world. Lights give light. If the salt doesn't have the influence of salt, it is thrown away. Our poor record of preaching by personal contact is very worrying when seen in this light. We have hidden behind leaflets and press adverts and giving money. But if we aren't the salt, if we don't show *our* light in our little world; are we in fact the salt or the light of the earth? This unconscious spirituality, this natural witnessing, is the essential reflection of our experience of the Lord Jesus. He didn't say 'Do good works so that men may see the light'. He said "*let your light shine*" - and *then* men will see your good works and glorify the Father. Paul puts the same principle another way when he says that we're all mirrors (2 Cor. 3:18 RV). A mirror by its very nature, because of what it is, reflects the light which falls upon it to others. If we have *really* seen the light of the Lord Jesus Christ, we will *inevitably* reflect it to others. Many of the Lord's parables portray the [preaching of] the Gospel of the Kingdom of God as a kind of secret force: treasure hidden in a field, the tiniest seed in the garden, wheat growing among weeds, a pinch of yeast worked into dough, salt on meat...these are all images of something which works from within, changing other people in an ongoing, regular manner.

### *We Do Have Influence*

We need to realize that we have more influence upon others than we may think. It can be that an illiterate sister in a male dominated society can think that her attendance at ecclesial meetings cannot encourage anyone. It can be that the Christian stockbroker feels that it is impossible for him to influence those he works with. But we do have influence. Consider how Saul's armour bearer would not kill him when he was mortally wounded (1 Chron. 10:4). Although he was one of Saul's men, in the anti-David camp, yet David's example of

not killing Saul must have deeply influenced him. We do make a difference. We have become so humiliated by a shame based society that we can underestimate the value and power of our own personhood.

We are all members of the body of Christ; we each, therefore, have a potential influence for good upon the others in the body. Our comfort abounds by reason of the fact we are in Christ- in that whatever we each suffer, we suffer so that we may be able to comfort others in the body (2 Cor. 1:4-7). Thus Paul could tell the Corinthians that he was afflicted for their comfort. Therefore just as surely as we suffer, so we will be comforted- in that others in the body have suffered in essence the same things, and have thereby been prepared by God to comfort us. But these wonderful statements all rely for their fulfilment upon human effort. They are not automatic. If the ecclesia does not respond positively to each other, the promise of receiving a hundredfold family, possessions etc. will not come true.

But we ask, of course: ‘How can I myself exercise a greater and more positive influence upon others?’. It would be inappropriate to give specific examples of how this could be done. For each human life and context will vary. But surely the essence is to so meditate upon the love of God, and the grace that is in Jesus, that we are moved to some form of inevitable response. And that response will, in its broadest essence, relate to what we can do to transform the lives of others for good. Consider the following windows into the love of God:

- In Ezekiel’s time, God knew that if He had sent Ezekiel to the Gentiles, they would have responded positively. But instead He sent Ezekiel to Israel. The question arises, Well why didn’t God send a preacher to the Gentiles at this time, if He knew they would respond to the message? Presumably God didn’t simply because He wanted to show how special was His love for Israel, a love which excluded others.
- The whole situation is analogous to the way in which the Lord knew that cities like Tyre and Sidon would have responded to the Gospel in the first century; had it been preached to them. But the message was taken to Jewish villages like Chorazin and Bethsaida instead. Such was God’s love, His especial and exclusive love for them (Mt. 11:21). Sodom likewise would have repented if the message of Lot had been backed up by miracles; but, that extra proof wasn’t given. But such a concession was made to Israel through the ministry and miracles of Jesus (Mt. 11:23).
- Likewise God could save all or offer that salvation to everyone; but He doesn’t. His love and passion is focused upon a tiny minority of His creation.

### ***We All Have Influence***

When the Romans began persecuting the early church, only the leaders were seized, while crowds of obvious Christians went unpunished. This was perhaps because paganism was utterly dependent on its elite, and most cults could easily be destroyed from the top. This explains a few Bible puzzles- why devout men could carry Stephen to burial and yet be unharmed; why the apostles could remain in Jerusalem [they were seen as unlearned and ignorant fishermen] whilst the others in the Jerusalem ecclesia had to flee (e.g. the great company of priests who became obedient to the faith). And yet Christianity spread yet further. Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.63-64) expresses surprise that the “tribe of Christians” [indicating their unity] had not disappeared after the death of their founder, “the [so-called] Christ”. Unlike other religions, the faith of the followers was not in the leaders- if the

organization and leaders were taken away, would our church continue? The early church did and flourished. We must beware lest our system of elders and organizations doesn't take away our individual commitment to preach and personally care for people, and especially for the brotherhood. First century Christianity was a mass movement, rooted in a highly committed rank and file; and therefore it had the advantage of the best of all marketing techniques: person-to-person influence. This in the end is how we can preach far more effectively than through mass meetings or organized campaigns [not that I am saying not to hold these].

We all have more influence on each other than we may think. Quite naturally, the Thessalonians imitated the ecclesias of Judaea and also Paul personally (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14). And in turn, they became models to all the believers in Macedonia (1 Thess. 1:7). Leadership is essentially a process of influence, rather than a brother standing up and lecturing others. But the Lord used images such as salt, yeast and light to describe *all* who are in Him. They speak of indirect, constant, transforming influence rather than a frontal assault on the unspirituality of others. There is a word play in 1 Cor. 16:15, masked in the translations: the household of Stephanas ‘addicted’ themselves to the Lord’s service (Gk. *Tasso*), and the ecclesia is bidden “submit” (Gk. *Hupotasso*) to them. Enthusiastic service by individuals truly influences the whole community.

The history of Israel so often has ‘influence’ as one of its themes:

- In Ezra 9, Ezra showed a fine example of feeling that the failures of the community are our personal failures- so identified was he with his brethren. But then in Ezra 10:2 we read of Shecaniah saying that “we” have married unbelievers, even though 10:26 makes it clear that he himself wasn’t guilty [even though his brothers and father had been]. Ezra’s selfless example of solidarity with his weak brethren inspired this man, as it should us.
- “Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest” (2 Chron. 24:2). But when Jehoiada died, Joash listened to, and was influenced by, the wicked princes of Judah (:17). It is clear that for all his apparent strength of character and zeal for God, Joash was simply a product of those he was with. And so it can be that 21<sup>st</sup> century mankind, our young people especially, can tend to be people with no real character, their very personalities influenced by others rather than being real, credible people. Insofar as we can break free from all these moulding influences, we will be real, credible persons. And our independence, our realness, is what will attract others to the message of Divine influence which we preach. Those raised in Christian homes need to pay especial attention to the possibility that they are where they are spiritually because of the good influence of others upon them. There is no harm in this; but we need to strive to have a faith that is not merely the faith of our fathers, but a real and personal response to the love of God which we have for ourselves perceived in the man Christ.
- When Joash went to visit Elisha just before he died, he addressed him in the very words which Elisha had used to Elijah years before: “O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!” (1 Kings 13:14 cp. 2:12). What is the lesson here, in the similarity of language? Surely it is that how Elisha had related to Elijah as his spiritual father, so now others were relating to Elisha in just the same way- as *their* spiritual father. The child had become the father, in spiritual terms. He had brought forth a spiritual child in his own image and likeness.

- If all Israel had been obedient, then Saul would have been too (1 Sam. 12:14). If a majority are spiritually minded, this can at times and in some ways influence a potentially weaker minority; even though the reverse is more often true. And yet Saul made the people “follow him trembling” because they weren’t, *en masse*, spiritually stronger than him (1 Sam. 13:7).

Repeatedly, the New Testament speaks of converting others as a bringing forth of children. This means that our level and style of spirituality is likely to be replicated in those we convert. Thus Amaziah “did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord...according to all things as Joash his father had done” (2 Kings 14:3). What spirituality he had was according to that which his father had displayed. Dt. 6:1,2,6,7 stress that Israel must *do* the law so that their children would do it also. Whilst on one hand we each have sovereign free will, there can be no doubt that we are affected by others. John the Baptist rhetorically asked his hearers: “Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Mt. 3:7). The answer, of course, was ‘Well, you, John’. And John continues: “Bring forth *therefore* [i.e., because I am the one who taught you] fruits meet for repentance”. John recognizes that his converts will be after his image in one sense; as Paul put it, what his hearers had heard and seen in him as he preached, they were to do.

It's especially easy for young people to assume that they have little influence, that they can chose to act as they like and their choices won't affect anyone much beyond themselves. Yet we read of how God "visits" (Heb. to arrange, set in order, ordain) the sins of the fathers unto the third and even fourth generations- i.e. the number of generations which an old man is likely to see gathered around him (Ex. 20:5; 34:7; Num. 14:18; Dt. 5:9). The choices of youth affect family life, which means our children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren are affected by the choices we make in carefree youth.

### **Telly**

It isn't often that I single out a specific issue to rave against in my writings. But I have to admit, I do have a ‘thing’ about the damaging influence of television. I don’t mean to say that physically possessing the box is a sin, as some have implied. What I mind is the terrible effect of spending hours watching much of what is presented on it. In the 1960s, media (TV, radio, movies) ranked eighth behind factors like teachers, relatives etc. in influencing the values and behaviour of teenagers. Now, media is the highest ranking influence on teenagers. There have been countless surveys done on the negative moral influence of television; one is spoilt for choice in quoting statistics. A well documented piece of research by Josh McDowell found that the average person in this world viewed over 9,230 sex acts per year on television. Of those acts, 81% were depicted outside of marriage. After 10 years of average television viewing, a young person between the ages of 8 and 18 will see 72,900 scenes of premarital or extramarital sex<sup>(1)</sup>. In Britain, 98% of homes have a TV. The average household has it switched on for 35 hours / week. The average adult spends 18 hours / week watching it—that’s 8 years of his whole life on average! And the figure seems higher still in the USA. And British children are watching around 30 hours / week. Thus by the age of 17, the average young person has logged about 15,000 hours of watching TV- two years of their young lives. No wonder creativity has been diminished and passivity has increased in this generation.

There is no doubt at all that television has a major influence especially upon young people-world-wide. It is far from just a Western problem. If we let our children watch it uncontrolled, we are agreeing that we have signed them over to this kind of influence. If we teach them bodily self control, warn them against fornication...how can we resign our God

given influence as parents and youth workers to the television? Just so...that we can work and relax for longer hours...? I would say that the single biggest danger for our youth is the influence of the TV. If uncontrolled, it is a force stronger than any other influence- including parental influence. I can understand those Christian parents who don't have one, and who don't allow their children to go to the movies unaccompanied, if at all. Immorality is not to be even thought of or spoken of by a Christian (1 Cor. 6:18; Eph. 6:3). Let's get serious. Either these verses mean what they say, or they don't. Do we want to bring these into our homes and before the eyes of our children...or not?

### ***The Influence Upon Jesus***

Jesus as the perfect man was a function both of His Father and mother. There must have been certain similarities of personality type between the Lord and His mother. Thus in Lk. 2:33 Mary "marvelled", and the same word is used about Jesus in Mt. 8:10 and Mk. 6:6.

If we ask where He obtained this humility and ability from, it is clearly an inheritance from His dear mother, who stored up things in her heart and didn't reveal them to others, just quietly meditating over the years. Both of them must have heard so much that was wrong and immature over the years; but they said nothing, in the Lord's case, biding His time. It has been observed that it was unusual for the villagers to describe Jesus as "the son of Mary" (Mk. 6:3)- even if Joseph were dead, He would have been known as Jesus-ben-Joseph. It could well be that this was a reflection of their perception of how closely linked Jesus was to His mother.

The influence of Mary upon Him is reflected in His many allusions to her words, both conscious and unconscious.

- Mary's words of Lk. 1:47 "my spirit hath rejoiced" are alluded to by Jesus unconsciously in Lk. 10:21 [the only time the Greek phrase " spirit...rejoices" is used]. " In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit" and thanked God that the humble not the wise had been chosen- showing exactly the spirit of Mary's words of Lk 1:52,53, the words she had probably sung to Him around the house as a child. Unconsciously [?] Jesus was alluding to His mother's attitude.

- The Lord had called His mother "Woman..." in Cana. She had also said and later sung to Him perhaps: "Be it unto me according to thy word" (Lk. 1:38). In Mt. 15:28 we have the Lord addressing the Canaanite woman: "Woman....be it unto thee even as thou wilt".

- Mary's praise that "He hath done to me great things" is surely behind her Son's words in Lk. 8:39, where He bids a man go home " and shew how great things God hath done unto thee" .

- Mary had felt that God had "Filled the hungry [i.e. their stomach, cp. the womb of Mary] with the good thing [Gk.]"- Jesus (Lk. 1:53). He calls Himself this good thing, using the very same Greek word in Mt. 20:15: " I am the good one" ; Jn. 1:46; 7:12 [where the " good thing" is Messiah]. Her perception of Him became His. And so with us; if we perceive our children as future brethren, so, hopefully and prayerfully, they will be. And notice how some of the Lord's very first words on opening His ministry were "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled". It's as if He stands up there before the hushed crowd and lays down His manifesto with those words. This was the keynote of what He had to say to humanity. He was saying 'This, guys, is what I essentially and most

fundamentally seek to inspire in you'. And He saw His dear mother as the epitome of the converts He was seeking to make. I lay great store on this allusion. For it makes her truly our pattern.

Mary's inspiration of the cross is especially powerful. Mary "performed [fulfilled] all things according to the law" in her dedication of Jesus (Lk. 2:39). In doing this, she anticipated the spirit of the cross and whole ministry of Jesus, where He performed [s.w. fulfilled] all things of the law- Lk. 18:31; Jn. 19:28; 30; Acts 13:29. These passages each use the same three words for all things, law, and fulfilled. She brought the Lord up in the way of the cross; and He continued in that path.

The humility of Mary was the pattern for the Lord's self-humiliation in the cross. Here above all we see the influence of Mary upon Jesus, an influence that would lead Him to and through the cross. Her idea of putting down the high and exalting the lowly (Lk. 1:52) is picking up Ez. 17:24: "I have brought down the high tree, have exalted the low tree, have dried up the green tree, and have made the dry tree to flourish". And yet these very words of Ezekiel were quoted by the Lord in His time of dying. With reverence, we can follow where we are being led in our exploration and knowing of the mind of Christ. His dear mum had gone around the house singing her Magnificat. He realized that she felt the lowly who had been exalted [and perhaps in some unrecorded incident before her conception she had been recently humbled?]. And Jesus had realized her quotation of Ez. 17:24. And He had perceived His linkage and connection with her, and how she saw all that was true of Him as in some way true of her, and vice versa. And now, in His final crisis, He takes comfort from the fact that like His dear mother, He the one who was now humbled, would be exalted. How many other trains of thought have been sparked in men's minds by the childhood instructions of their mothers...?

God recognized her "low estate" [humility] and exalted her above all women, just as He would His Son among men. The same Greek word is used in Acts 8:33: "In his humiliation ['low estate'] his judgment was taken away". It occurs too in Phil. 2:8: "He *humbled himself*". In the cross, indeed throughout the seven stage self-humiliation of the Lord which Phil. 2 speaks of, He was living out the spirit of his mother. She taught him the life and the way of the cross. She was His pattern. Hence the way she insisted on being there at the end, and the comfort she would have given Him, and the love He showed by asking for the only one who really understood Him to be taken away, for her sake as well as His own. The Lord directly alluded to His mother's pattern of humiliation and exaltation by using the same word again in Mt. 23:12: "Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself [s.w. be abased- we must either humble ourselves or be humbled, it's such a powerful logic] shall be exalted". Thus Jesus alludes to His mother's words in order to set her up as our pattern ["whosoever"]. And yet He Himself showed the ultimate obedience to her pattern in the death of the cross.

For this and many other reasons, the Lord's mind was upon His mother in His time of dying. The spirit of Christ speaks of " thy [male] servant ...the son of thine handmaid" [female servant]- He saw the solidarity between Himself and His mother when on the cross, He felt they were both the servants of God. Ps. 86:8-17 has many references back to Mary's song. He had that song on His mind on the cross. Her example and her song which she had taught him as a little boy sustained His faith in the final crisis. This surely shows the value and power of the upbringing of children when young. In the Lord's case, His mother's influence sustained Him through the cruellest cross and deepest crisis any human being has ever had to go

through. It was as if He was humming the song in His mind, which His dear dear mum had sung around the house as she cared for Him, cooked, sewed...

### ***Eternal Influence***

The Lord was “subject unto” Mary (Lk. 2:51)- to train Him for the time when we would be subject to Him as we are now (1 Cor. 15:27,28; Eph. 1:22; 5:24), and all the world subject unto Him (1 Pet. 3:22; Heb. 2:8). And so, wondrous thought that it is, the training of His mother has effect even now; with literally *all* subject to Him, He was prepared for this by having been subject unto His mother. Lk. 1:45 records Elisabeth’s comment on Mary: “Blessed is she that believed”. In Jn. 20:29, Jesus unconsciously alludes to His mother’s blessedness even after His glorification by speaking of blessed are those who have not seen but have believed. Mary must have many times recounted the story of Elisabeth to Jesus, and His memory of it influenced His sentence construction even after His glorification. This gives a window into the extent to which we will be still who we are now in the Kingdom. Divine nature won’t totally change who we are nor the influence of our parents upon us. This is a great encouragement to parents- who they influence their children to be, will be what they eternally will be. For Jesus alluded to the memory of His mother even in Divine nature.

### **The Influence Of Jesus**

One of the most surpassing wonders of the Lord’s character was that He could live for 30 years in a small town in Galilee, never ever committing sin, and never ever omitting an act of righteousness...and yet when He stood up and basically proclaimed Himself to be Messiah, the Russian Bible states that the people were scandalized. They were shocked that this carpenter’s son should think He was anything much more than them. Yet whenever we try to be a bit more righteous than our fellows, it’s always noticed and held against us. Yet the Lord Jesus was both perfect, and also in favour with men. He came over as the ordinary guy, and yet He was perfect, and the light of this world. In this there is a matchless example for us. This wondrous feature of the Lord’s achievement in His own character is reflected by the way His own brothers, who knew Him better than any, perceived Him to be just an ordinary person. When He started implying that He was the Son of God, they thought He’d gone crazy.

And yet there was something altogether arresting about the person of Jesus. For the crowds just flocked to hear Him. I think we can easily over-estimate the role of the miracles in achieving this. It seems to me that His message and His person were a greater draw card, generally speaking, than His miracles. We have each been touched by God’s grace, and His influence upon us leads us to reach out to influence others by lives of grace. The grace of the Lord Jesus meant that “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9). And this cannot be received passively. The Corinthians’ response was to make themselves poor, so that their poor Jewish brethren might be made richer. *Every* person who has been enriched in the Lord Jesus will in turn respond in a life and even a body language that somehow transforms others. But how, putting meaning into words, does the Lord Jesus transform human life? The man who has seen and known Jesus will not keep on sinning (1 Jn. 3:6). To know the spirit of the man Christ Jesus means that we become like Him. There is something magnetic in His character and person. We become like what we love; and the more we meditate upon Him, the more we will love Him and become like Him. “To this end was the son of God manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). This does not simply mean that Jesus destroyed sin on the cross. He was manifested there in such a

way that the believer who sees Him there, who reconstructs Golgotha's awful scene, cannot be passive. A spirit of living and dying as He did was breathed out to us, and remains with us. There has to be a change, a radical transformation, in the person who comes into contact with the spirit of life and death which there is in Jesus. The love of God is manifested within us, in our lives, as a result of the gift of Christ on the cross (1 Jn. 4:9). Because "he laid down his life for us...we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother in need, and shutteth up his compassion from him, how doth the love of God abide in him?" (1 Jn. 3:16,17 RV). Responding to the death of Jesus, perceiving the meaning of the cross, the love of God as it was and is there...this brings forth a love and generosity of spirit in practice. It was in this sense that Jesus in practice destroyed the power of sin through His cross. It was something practical, not a mere theological transaction whereby an angry God was appeased by spilt blood.

We must beware lest our theories of the atonement obscure the connection between salvation and *life*- both His life and ours. Having been reconciled to God by the death of Jesus, we are "saved by his life" (Rom. 5:10). This is not only a reference to His resurrection. When He died, He outbreathed His breath of life towards His people who stood beneath the cross. His death, and the manner of it, inspires us to live the life which He lived. And this is the eternal kind of life, the life we will eternally live in the Kingdom with Him. His death was not solely the merit that supplies forgiveness. The cross was His life the most fully displayed and triumphant, forever breaking the power of sin over our street-level human existence by what it inspires in us. Our lives, the ordinary minutes and hours of our days, become transformed by His death. For we cannot passively behold Him there, and not respond. We cannot merely mentally assent to correct doctrine about the atonement. It brings forth a life lived; which is exactly why correct understanding of it is so important. We are inspired to engage in His form of life, with all the disciplines of prayer, solitude, simple and sacrificial living, intense study and meditation in the Father's word which characterized our Lord's existence. For His cross was the summation of the life He lived. We quite rightly teach new converts the need for attending meetings, giving of time and money to the Lord's cause, doing good to others, Bible reading. But over and above all these things, response to the cross demands a life seriously modelled upon His life.

And even further: "When he shall be manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as He is" (1 Jn. 3:2 RV). Jesus was manifested upon the cross, and 'seeing' / perceiving Him there leads to a transformed life. And yet He will be manifested / appear [AV] at the Lord's return; and through seeing Him as He truly is, we will be transformed into an existence like Him. Yes, our natures will be changed in a twinkling of an eye. But have you ever asked *how* this will happen, putting meaning into words? John says that it will be through our 'seeing' of Jesus in that actual and new way which we will then. Seeing Him as He is will mean that our very natures are changed; and this is exactly what is going on now in a moral sense as we see the essence of Him manifested in the cross. In this sense His death was a foretaste of His second coming. There in the cross was the judgment of this world, just as there will be at His return. And in our response to Him there we have a preview of how it will be to come before Him at the final judgment. As I reconstruct in my own mind His death, His demeanour there, His spirit which He breathed towards us as He bowed His head, the overwhelming impression I have is one of love and passion to save us. And I am persuaded that thus it will be as we stand before Him soon.

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## **Notes**

(1) ‘The teen environment survey’, reported in Josh McDowell, *Why Wait?* (San Bernadino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers) p. 40.

## **17. Some Thoughts On Preaching**

*(by Alan Eyre)*

### **17. 1“THIS GOD IS OUR GOD”**

The God, or god, people believe in, worship and preach unmistakably moulds their message. Muslims proclaim the god they worship when their terrorist bombs leave maimed and bleeding schoolchildren in blasted buses. An Iranian Shi’ite who visited a Bible Exhibition in Sydney mocked at the Saviour we honour: “Your hero told you to turn the other cheek. What a fool! Our heroes blow up jumbo jets!” I was driving through the vine-growing valley of Eshcol when an Orthodox Jew riding with me suddenly grabbed an Uzi machine gun and began firing at some unarmed Arab children. I asked him if his God would approve of such unprovoked barbarity. “Of course”, came the answer, “my Scriptures tell me Adonai is a God of war and I am His battle axe”. I had a neighbour once who boasted, like those in James 4 and 5, that he kept his heathen workers submissive by always keeping back some of their pay by fraud. He always dressed in white and never missed a Sunday in the church where he was an elder. The workers were told that he was indeed a model Christian, so he was the kind of god that Christians worshipped. In the end they murdered him in the name of his ‘Christian’ god. Mother Teresa of Calcutta so imprinted the spirit of her merciful God upon her Indian neighbours that many Hindus were inspired to change the very concept of divinity.

We are no exception to this rule. As we preach, so our God (or god) is publicly revealed to all.

It is a pity, almost a tragedy, that the most important biblical doctrine of all gets only a passing mention in our statements of faith, and is only rarely touched upon in our public proclamation. It is the profound truth: *God is love* (I John 4:8). In one *Instructor* “children under eight” are taught that God is “glorious spirit substance”, and that they “have to be very careful” of what they do or say, and that if God isn’t pleased with them they will be “driven away [from Him] in shame and disgrace”. These little tots are taught about the different fates of the responsible and irresponsible dead and the names of sons of Israel. But there is not a word, not one word, about how happy Jesus was when children sat on his knee, not one word about the fact that God loves them all and wants them to live for ever in a peaceful Kingdom right here on earth. There is nothing at all about the fact that God loves them so deeply and dearly that long ago He sent His Son as a baby born in a stable, a baby who grew up to be such a wonderful, wonderful person that all the world ever since knows what God is really like.

The God of the *Instructor* is defined thus: “He is kind yet inflexible” <sup>(1)</sup>. That may have been Calvin’s God but it is certainly not the God of the Bible. How can we possibly tell people that we read and believe the Bible and yet preach a God like that? Abraham did not believe that his God was inflexible when he prayed for Sodom. God was not inflexible with Pharaoh, or Rahab, or Ruth, or David, or Manasseh, or Ahab, or Simon the Samaritan, or the Ninevites, or a host of others. He hears the cry of every contrite heart. He strengthens the weak hands

and the feeble knees. Only the wicked slothful servant thought that his Master was hard and inflexible (Matthew 25:24). Our God turns, repents, changes His mind and His plans, sometimes with inexplicable caprice, and loves the unthankful and the unholy until it hurts. The God we proclaim is a God of whom it is said that in the days of Noah, man's sin grieved Him so much that "His heart was filled with pain" (Genesis 6:6).

As we preach, we must proclaim the God of the whole Bible, not Adonai the cruel God of the Israeli army, not the benevolent grandfather God of the television evangelists who is so soft that he will cure AIDS for a few dollars, and not the puritanical God of the capitalist "Christian right" who will bless you with boundless material prosperity if you only work hard enough. No, the "God of truth" (Deuteronomy 32:4) whom we preach is the God who is love. Our message could not be better expressed than by John Thomas, in his matchless English prose:

"[The true faith] precludes entirely the idea of appeasing the wrath of God. God needs not to be appeased by man; and every system, therefore, which is predicated upon the notion that it is necessary, is not only unscriptural, but *essentially* false. God is already reconciled to the world, which He has always loved; although it acts the part of, and therefore is, the enemy of God. "He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life". The fact of a divine religion being instituted is proof of the love He bears the human race. He seeks to appease men by His goodness, which invites them to repentance. His love is manifested in all that He has done for the world. He has sought to enlighten it, and to exalt it to a participation in the divine nature by the ameliorating influences of the truth. He has sent messengers to it with their lives in their hands, ready to lay them down in the divine work of beseeching mankind to be reconciled to God" (2).

This is a God for "all men everywhere" (Acts 17:31). This truth will draw the Hindu, the Muslim, the Buddhist, the Chinese, the dissatisfied Christian, close to the true and living God, the God who forgives, loves and saves.

Here then is our God, the God we must preach, in every book from Genesis to Revelation.

**Genesis.** The God who promises a way of redemption, and who is grieved at sin. The God who will spare if it is in any way possible. The God who is interested and involved in the petty domestic problems of a heathen king. The God who expects us to forgive our brethren, even those who hate us, freely. 3:15; 6:6; 18:16-33; 20:17; 50:15-21.

**Exodus.** The God who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands. 34:6,7.

**Leviticus.** The God who does not bear grudges and expects that we do not bear them either. The God who helps us up when we are down and remembers us even when we forget Him. 19:18, 26:36-45.

**Numbers.** The God who accepts mediatorial prayer for the foolish. The God who was so anxious that His people would not forget Him that he made them wear a hem of blue that would remind them of heaven every day. 12:13, 15:37-41.

**Deuteronomy.** The God who loves the stranger and the alien, the widow and the fatherless. 10:18.

**Joshua.** The God who loves and saves those who have faith, regardless of their origins. 6:22-23.

**Judges.** The God who, when people cry out for help in desperation, listens and delivers. 6:6-8.

**Ruth.** The God who provides rest for the weary soul. 1:9, 2:12, 3:1.

**I Samuel.** The God who is ready and eager to give even the most stubborn of men a chance. 15:30-35.

**II Samuel.** The God who will promptly and absolutely forgive the most heinous of transgressions, including adultery and murder, whenever and wherever there is genuine repentance. 12:13.

**I Kings.** The God who turns wayward people's hearts towards Him. 18:37.

**II Kings.** The God who will bless the preaching of a teenage girl so that a prominent opponent of God is converted. 5:1-14.

**I Chronicles.** The God who is exalted as head over all, is ruler of all things, and who gives strength to all. 29:11-12.

**II Chronicles.** The God whose love endures for ever, 20:21.

**Ezra.** The God who is gracious, righteous, and who punishes us less than our sins deserve. 9:8,13,15.

**Nehemiah.** The God who gives life to everything, and who is deeply moved by human suffering. 9:5-9.

**Esther.** The God who saves and delivers through the willing sacrifice of those who love Him. 4:14.

**Job.** The God who responds to mediatorial prayer from his saints, even on behalf of those who are totally unworthy of it. 42:7-10.

**Psalms.** The God who is a personal God, fully and intimately involved in people's day to day lives. All the Psalms!

**Proverbs.** The God who is a shield to all who take refuge in Him. 30:5.

**Ecclesiastes.** The God who gives satisfaction and enjoyment through daily work, the family and every daily experience of life. 3:13.

**Song of Songs.** The God who blesses love between man and woman because it is a reflection of His own. 8:6.

**Isaiah.** The God who willingly gave His beloved Son to be a guilt offering for us all. 53:10.

**Jeremiah.** The God who is a faithful husband to the wayward people whom He loves. 31:32.

**Lamentations.** The God who is good to those whose hope is in Him, even when times are hard. 3:25.

**Ezekiel.** The God who tends His sheep, searches for the lost, and brings back the strays. 34:15-16.

**Daniel.** The God who is able to save and rescue so dramatically that even the heathen marvel. 3:17,29.

**Hosea.** The God who speaks tenderly to the weak and erring, and who continues to show love even to those who spurn it. 2:14,19,23.

**Joel.** The God who is gracious ad compassionate, who turns and has pity, and leaves behind a blessing. 2:13,14.

**Amos.** The God who, astonishingly, reveals His thoughts to man. 4:13.

**Obadiah.** The God who sends deliverers when His people are oppressed. 21.

**Jonah.** The God who is concerned for the big, sinful cities of the world. 4:11.

**Micah.** The God who is the Light of His people despite their sins. 7:8-9.

**Nahum.** The God who is slow to anger and great in power. 1:3.

**Habakkuk.** The God who in wrath remembers mercy. 3:2.

**Zephaniah.** The God who is mighty to save. 3:17.

**Haggai.** The God who grants peace. 2:9.

**Zechariah.** The God who speaks kind and comforting words. 1:13,17.

**Malachi.** The God who blesses married life and seeks godly offspring. 2:15.

**Matthew.** The God who causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous alike. 5:45.

**Mark.** The God with whom all things are possible. 10:27.

**Luke.** The God who is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 6:35.

**John.** The God who so loved the world that He gave His own Son to save it. 3:16.

**Acts.** The God who raised up His servant and sent him to bless us. 3:26.

**Romans.** The God who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. 3:26.

**I Corinthians.** The God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 15:57.

**II Corinthians.** The God who spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. 2:14.

**Galatians.** The God who rescues us from this present evil age. 1:4.

**Ephesians.** The God who is great in love and rich in mercy. 2:4.

**Philippians.** The God whose peace passes all understanding. 4:7.

**Colossians.** The God who reconciles us to Himself, making peace through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. 1:20.

**I Thessalonians.** The God who appoints us to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. 4:9.

**II Thessalonians.** The God who is faithful, who strengthens us and protects us from evil. 3:3.

**I Timothy.** The God who pours out grace abundantly. 1:14.

**II Timothy.** The God who rescues us from every evil attack and will bring us safely to His heavenly Kingdom. 4:18.

**Titus.** The God who saves us through the washing of rebirth. 3:5.

**Philemon.** The God whose grace and peace fill our homes. 2-3.

**Hebrews.** The God who remembers our sins and lawless acts no more. 10:17.

**James.** The God who gives us every good and perfect gift, and who does not change like shifting shadows. 1:17.

**I Peter.** The God who calls us to eternal glory in Christ. 5:10.

**II Peter.** The God who is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish. 3:9.

**I John.** The God who is love. 4:8.

**II John.** The God who gives grace, mercy and peace, in truth and love. 3.

**III John.** The God who does good so that we might imitate His goodness. 11.

**Jude.** The God who is able to keep us from falling. 24.

**Revelation.** The God who will wipe away every tear. 7:17.

This is our God. A consistent God from Genesis to Revelation. A God who shares our thoughts, emotions, heartaches, sorrows, sins and victories. A mighty God who saves. The one true and living God. Not just the Creator and sustainer of galaxies and black holes, but a God who pours out love, mercy and grace upon all. A God for every nation under heaven, to be adored in every tongue on earth. A God before whom every earnest seeking soul will tremble and bow the knee. He is the God we rejoice to proclaim.

When we thus preach the one true and living God, many contrite hearts will open, but hearts which selfishness has filled with hate become as hard as stone. The god of this world will blind the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. We commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. That is how Paul viewed the challenge of witnessing (2 Corinthians 4).

The Bible informs us clearly that there are dire responsibilities consequent upon preaching the true God. How can we preach a merciful God but pass by the helpless on the other side? How can we teach others about the love of God, yet scandalize other people? How can we quote the Scriptures, yet deliberately or thoughtlessly neglect the poor and needy, or turn a deaf ear to their cry?

Preaching can be so many empty words about a cosmological God who is “glorious spirit substance”, one not three. If God is love, so must be His witnesses. They must *be* love, as He is. The spirit of the preacher must be the spirit of God - “rising early” so as to send His messengers “again and again because He had pity” (2 Chronicles 36:15). I know one sister who instructed her many converts at 4am because that was the only time she had available. One ecclesia wanted to take a candidate to a river to baptize him, but it was dry. They decided to read I Kings 18 and pray for rain as Elijah did. On that very day the long drought was broken.

God is love. God is longsuffering and tolerant, but He is not mocked. Those who claim to be His and eat at His table, but actually worship the idols in their own hearts, will perish utterly (Ezekiel 14:4). Those who imagine that the Lord does not see what they do in secret will be in no better case (8:12). In our preaching we must, like Paul to the knavish Felix, “discourse on righteousness, self-control and the judgement to come” (Acts 24:25). God extends His loving arms as a Father, but he cannot defile Himself in the hog pen. We must encourage the repentant sinner to forsake his sins and accept the love, respect and benevolence of God Almighty. It is our privilege to rejoice and make merry with every one who is welcomed into our Father’s house (Luke 15:11-32).

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#### **Notes:**

(1) Adult question 14.

(2) John Thomas, *Elpis Israel*, page 157.

## **17.2 THE ORGANIZATION OF PREACHING WORK**

“A small band of Jesus’ disciples spread this message: ‘He who was shamefully executed is and remains the coming Ruler in the future time of God. He who was dead has come alive again. The present age of the world is nearing its end. Jesus will appear a second time in

glory and authority. Then God's rule will be made secure over the whole earth'. This was their immense task: to challenge the people of Israel in the face of imminent catastrophe, and more, to shake *the whole of mankind* out of its sleep in the face of certain destruction so that *all men* might be prepared for the coming of the Kingdom. People from depressed and mean circumstances suddenly knew that their new faith was the determining factor, the moment of decision for the history of humankind. For this tremendous certainty, the primitive church gained the strength she needed daily from the writings of the Jewish Law and the Jewish Prophets; in the witness of holy surrender to death in a watery grave; in their communal meals celebrated to proclaim the death of Jesus; and in the common calling upon God and the name of Jesus. "Lord, come!" was their ancient cry of faith and infinite longing. That the Messiah Jesus rose from the dead and that God's Kingdom will break in at His second coming was the message of His first followers. Death must come before resurrection, the resurrection of the flesh; the promise of a future millennium is linked to the prophecy of judgement, a prophecy that attacks the prevailing order and conditions of mankind at their roots"<sup>(1)</sup>.

The organization of the preaching of the Gospel is a work of the Spirit. In the first Christian century the Lord gave instructions through unmistakable open visions (Acts 18:10; 16:9; 22:21). But the evidence is abundant that, in general, the apostles and other brethren and sisters made plans, sanctified them by prayer, and then carried these plans out. "Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing'" (Acts 15:36). The Lord's interference was minimal. On one occasion he diverted Paul and Silas, on another he told Paul to remain in a particular city when he was disposed to call off an ongoing Bible campaign (Acts 16:6-10; 18:9). But there is little evidence of deliberate and open divine manipulation of events. Overall, in the first Christian century, as now, the Spirit of the Lord guided affairs and organized the worldwide mission through work planned by his servants and also by the hidden ways of Providence, by much use of so-called 'coincidence'. He richly blessed the decisions which his preachers made, only overriding them when absolutely necessary. With just a few notable exceptions, the Lord's first century witness was conducted on exactly the same principles and in a similar manner as it is done by us today. Personally, I find this a great encouragement.

The links between the Spirit of Jesus and the preachers were: prayer, fasting, and the laying on of hands (Acts 13:3). The laying on of hands was not a sacrament; it was a simple gesture of sponsorship and of identification with the missionary work. These simple sacred acts sanctified the plans and endeavours of the preachers, enabling them to feel an integral part of the Spirit's work. There is every reason why they should be utilized by us today.

The Spirit tells us in Revelation 1:13 that the Lord Jesus is in the middle of our ecclesial world. Sometimes Revelation chapters 1 to 3 are interpreted as if Jesus is a kind of travelling inspector doing the rounds of various ecclesiases. But it is not like that at all. He is right "in their midst", just as he promised (Matthew 18:20). He is also the founder of every ecclesia. After that, we build (I Corinthians 3:10-12).

As far as these early preachers are concerned, their prayer was for *boldness* (Acts 4:29). It took a mere two verses of the record for that prayer to be fully answered, for immediately afterwards they "spoke the word of God boldly" (v.31). Boldness, audacity almost, is the mark of all the preaching work recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. It was dynamic, forthright, confident. The preachers knew that if their faith was strong, whatever they did in the name of the Lord, and wherever they went, it would be blessed. "You know", wrote Paul,

“that the Lord will reward everyone for what good he does” (Ephesians 6:8). Finger biting uncertainty as to whether it is God’s will or not is simply faithlessness. If He has given a general command, then He will accept the particulars. If we zealously and unitedly sow and water, God will give the increase (I Corinthians 3:7).

I once worked on a campaigns committee with a brother as chairman who was so afraid of, as he put it, “going against the will of God”, that before deciding on even the smallest matter he insisted that we use match sticks to cast ‘lots’. This was not the spirit of our early preachers: they *knew* the will of God. We too can know what activities are acceptable to Him, and in which He will find pleasure. A brother may have a sudden impulse to preach in (say) Eskimo and head off to the Arctic. Preaching among all nations is God’s will, so we can’t possibly go wrong! Unless, of course, we are only doing it for our own vainglory.

In the primitive church ecclesial life was dynamic, a vibrant partnership with the Lord Jesus himself. He was *really* among them, backing their efforts, strengthening their weak hands, and fulfilling his purposes through them. “But, brothers”, Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “when we were torn away from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you...but Satan stopped us” (I Thessalonians 2:17-18). The whole work was cast in terms of a spiritual crusade, without carnal weapons, in which the well-laid plans of the preachers might be temporarily thwarted and disrupted by Satan - usually Jewish envy, but involving other pagan influences too. But they were confident that their ultimate triumph was certain and guaranteed (Romans 16:20).

Wherever new lightstands were lit, there had to be local leadership. Considering the immorality of those times, the qualifications for ecclesial leadership demanded by the Lord were quite startling (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1). A recent survey in a country where there have been missionary converts for a century and a half revealed that not one ecclesia in the sample could claim that all its elders met all the scriptural requirements. In several smaller ones, it was acknowledged that not one elder passed the ‘test’ in every respect and could be considered “blameless”. Yet the apostle insists that these requirements for brand new ecclesiases in Crete *must* be met (Titus 1:6).

What are we to make of this? It has to be that the aim, the goal, and the standard are always beyond us. If none of us dare claim that we are “blameless”, who will be an elder? Especially when James tells us that it is a very serious responsibility, not to be lightly undertaken (3:1-2). Surely the first century ecclesiases must have coped with this problem, but we are not sure how they did.

Historians and commentators have failed to find a human factor which satisfactorily explains the spread of the Gospel in the first and second centuries of the Christian era. They have likewise found our brotherhood to be uniquely inexplicable in modern times. Our demise as a denomination has been predicted many times, the present spectacular expansion never. We have no headquarters here on earth, we are disorganized, quarrelsome, excessively hypercritical of each others’ efforts, stubborn, zealous, over-confident, timid - all at the same time! Because of so many bogus claimants to Holy Spirit powers in the churches around us, we tend to “quench the Spirit” which Scripture says we must not do (I Thessalonians 5:19). Yet, as in the first century, so in these last days the great work goes on - simply because it is a divine and not a human work.

How was the first century missionary work financed? We do not know and the Lord has not seen fit to tell us. It could hardly have been much different from our informal system today, except that, from the evidence we have, the early Christians were much more open-handed and generous with their resources than we are. It is certain that the work was not centrally funded like many aggressive fast-growing modern cults and sects whose aim is to peddle a branded religious product not a living faith. Their tendency to depend heavily on special bureaucracies with complex vested interests in various developments and regions, and to whom individual preachers are personally accountable, is neither healthy nor scriptural. This nowhere appears to be the biblical pattern. There must be scope for individual preaching, ecclesial preaching, and preaching by national and international associations of brothers and sisters. But these must be kept as informal as possible. In the early days, there was obviously much informal brotherly co-operation, with brothers and sisters travelling around, sharing tasks and helping one another when problems arose (Romans 16).

We read of Scythian believers in Colossians 3:11. Scythia was outside the Roman Empire, in the modern Ukraine. According to Ukrainian sources, the Christian faith was first preached to the Scythians by Andrew, the first disciple whom Jesus called to his service (John 1:40). He is known in the Ukraine as Pervozvannyi, the first called. Certainly, some Scythians in what is now the Ukraine had already been converted to the truth of the Christian gospel within thirty years of the ascension of Jesus to his Father. The first Christian preaching was in the synagogues of the Jews. Andrew, like all the twelve apostles, was a Jew, and preached to Jews. But there were no barriers to making converts from among the native tribes, and though generally considered “barbarians”, the Scythian believers were quickly given equal status in the Christian church. Later in the first century, many Christians from within the Roman Empire were exiled to Scythia, several hundred of them settling in the capital city of Kherson, where very successful Bible campaigns were held, led by a brother named Klementos. However, the authorities viewed this effort with alarm, and Klementos was executed (900 years later his body was exhumed and taken to Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital!). A very similar pattern of preaching and ecclesial growth must have occurred in Crete, Illyricum, Africa, Dalmatia, Spain and other areas mentioned in the New Testament letters.

It seems beyond doubt from the available literature that the principal method of witness everywhere in the first two centuries was to invite friends to observe the breaking of bread, so as to see for themselves how love prevailed in the midst of a heartless world. In many parts of the worldwide brotherhood today this method has great potential for enlightenment and conversion. Other methods used in the first century include Bible classes in homes, schoolrooms, public halls and synagogues, open-air meetings in market places and public squares, and impromptu proclamation on shipboard or in private transport (Acts 10:27; 19:9; 17:17; 27:33; 8:31). Times hardly change. These are common enough methods among us today. They have the advantage of spontaneity and are very cost-effective.

In absolute numbers and in rate of growth, it has been pointed out that the first hundred and fifty years of the early Christian missionary expansion and the last hundred and fifty years are roughly comparable. So we need not feel ashamed. We are not saved by membership in any “church”, big or small, but by individual faith in the truth of God. It is not more organization that we need. It is greater generosity and more sacrificial service. Two things are required for true love to flourish: effort and sacrifice. God has loved us into the truth. If we can take our cue from Him, we will be as instruments in His hand.

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## **Notes.**

(1) Eberhard Arnold: *Die ersten Christen nach dem Tode der Apostel*, pages 3-5.( Alan Eyre )

## **18. I Have A Dream: The Church In The Last Days**

There are some parts of Scripture which are especially relevant to the last days. They draw a picture of the latter day community and individuals which must become our pattern. I have a dream, a vision of our community along these lines. And there is no lack of evidence that through all our personal and collective struggles, we are getting towards it.

### **Of Preaching**

#### ***Latter Day Preaching “In all the world”***

The great commission bids us go into all the world with the Gospel; and there is an evident connection with Mt. 24:14: " This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" . This definitely suggests that the great commission will be mightily obeyed in the last days. "Shall" be preached is matched by Mark with "must be preached". This could be read as the Lord giving a command that the Gospel must be preached to all the world as a witness in the last days. There are many other Biblical implications that there will be an unprecedented spread of the Gospel to the whole planet in the last days:

- Dan. 12:4 speaks of a time in the very last days when "many shall run to and fro (an idiom often used concerning response to God's word: Ps. 119:32,60; 147:15; Amos 8:11,12; Hab. 2:2; Jn. 8:37 RV; 2 Thess. 3:1 Gk.), and knowledge shall be increased...many shall be purified, and made white (in baptism), and tried (in the tribulation)". This increase of knowledge of the Gospel is to be spread world-wide by many running to and fro in the last days. The great commission will be fulfilled then as never before.

- The parable of the marriage feast highlights the tragedy of Jewish rejection of what could have been theirs. There will be an ever-increasingly vigorous preaching campaign by the "servants", seeing that " they which were bidden were not worthy" (Matt. 22:8) - the Greek implying not enough numerically. As a result of this preaching, " the wedding was furnished ('filled' - numerically) with guests" (Matt. 22:10). This indicates that in some ways, God does work to a number. Once the required number of converts is made, then the supper can begin. Their appeal being to " the poor...maimed...halt and...blind" suggests that the marginal and desperate within society will be those who respond- and this is happening right now in the triumphant progress of preaching in our day. The servants are sent " into the highways" (Matt. 22:9), the Greek meaning 'a market square'. This must be designed to recall the parable of the labourers standing idle in the market place at the 11th. hour (Matt. 20:6,7). The very short probation of those 11th.-hour workers will match that of the latter-day converts. And again, it was the old and weak who nobody wanted to hire.

- In the parable of the great supper, which is similar but not necessarily the same as that of the marriage feast, the same point is made. The servants going forth " at supper time" (Luke 14:17) fits more naturally into the context of a preaching appeal just prior to the second coming than to the first century. The " supper" , i.e. the Kingdom (Luke 14:15; Matt. 22:2), is

prepared, and at " supper time" - 'Kingdom time' - the appeal is made. " All things are now ready" (Luke 14:17) explains the unmistakeable sense of urgency in the commissions given to the servants to preach. This again indicates reference to an eleventh hour preaching campaign just prior to the second coming. The 'decorum of the symbol' suggests that the animals being killed for the meal would necessitate a brief period of invitation immediately prior to the feast, rather than them being on the table for 2,000 years.

- A careful reading of Mt. 10:16-39 reveals many links with the Olivet prophecies concerning the latter day persecution of the saints; verses 17-21 are effectively quoted in Lk. 21:12-18. However, Mt. 10:16 prefaces all this by saying that these tribulations will attend those who go out preaching the Gospel in that latter day period. At this time, when many " shall be offended" (spiritually stumble) and " the love of many shall wax cold" for the truth (Mt. 24:10,11), the " Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Mt. 24:14)- i.e. the full establishment of the Kingdom. At that time, " What ye hear in the ear (in quiet halls at the moment), that preach ye (then) upon the housetops" (Mt. 10:27). This seems to be giving special encouragement to persevere in preaching during the last days. There is a connection here with Mt. 24:17, which advises those upon the housetops to go with Christ at the time of his coming. This implies that at the moment of Christ's coming there will be zealous " upon the housetops" preaching by the faithful. And when the number of the elect is made up, then the Lord comes. The Lord is to remain at the Father's right hand until all His enemies are placed under His feet- and those enemies are those who are the unconverted (Mt. 22:44; Eph. 2:12,16,17; 4:18; Col. 1:21).

- Before every 'coming' of the Lord there has been a period of persecution and zealous preaching: Noah preached righteousness before the flood, as Lot probably tried to before the Lord's coming down in judgment on Sodom (would God have wrought such wholesale destruction without giving the people a chance to repent? Cp. Nineveh and Jonah). The schools of the prophets preached from the street corners and temple steps to warn of the coming of the day of the Lord at the hand of the Babylonians and Assyrians. And of course the dramatic coming of the Lord in judgment upon Israel in AD70, was heralded by Paul and his committed band of zealots staging the greatest preaching campaigns this world has seen.

- Dan. 11:32,33 speaks of how in the time of the end " The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits...instruct many" .

- Paul speaks of his preaching as being like a priest bringing the offerings of the Gentile converts as an acceptable sacrifice to Jerusalem (Rom. 15:16). This is very much the language of the prophets concerning the Messianic Kingdom- as if to imply that the Kingdom is brought about by our successful preaching? Hence it is in keeping with this to think that there would be a burst of conversions to herald in the Kingdom.

- The dragon/ beast made war with the seed of the woman " which keep the commandments (word) of God, and have the testimony (i.e. preaching) of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17); it was because of " the word of their testimony (i.e. preaching) (that) they loved not their lives unto the death" (12:11), and then Rev. 12 goes on to describe how this final witness amidst tribulation is resolved by the coming of Jesus and the establishment of the Kingdom.

- Joel 2:32 seems to prophesy of multitudes calling upon the name of the Lord in the 'last days'. The preliminary fulfillment of this in Acts 2:21 must surely be repeated in the ultimate

'last days'. And it may be that it is multitudes of Diaspora Jews who respond, as it was in Acts 2...

- All the trees of the world will be clapping their hands when Jesus returns (1 Chron. 16:33 etc.). Yet trees are symbolic of Gentile nations. There will be, therefore, a remnant everywhere looking out for the Lord's return.

- Further evidence that some from all nations must be acceptably in Christ before His return is found by considering the account of the " hauling in" of the fish nets in Jn. 21:6,11. It is the same word as in Jn. 12:32: " When I am lifted up from the earth [in death], I shall *draw* all men unto myself" . The nets were not torn [*schizein*] in that there must be no division amongst true preachers of the Gospel who all teach the same basic Gospel- contrast this with how John frequently mentions the *schizein* which occurred amongst those who would not fully accept the Lord's message (Jn. 7:43; 9:16; 10:19). The 153 fish caught in the net may refer to 153 being the total number of species of fish recognized by the Greek zoologists. The Lord's cross will draw all men- i.e. men from all nations- unto Himself through our preaching, through our undivided drawing in of the nets. The drawing in of nets is used by the Lord elsewhere as a figure for His return and judgment- only when they are all drawn in can the bad fish be cast away. So the conclusion has to be faced: there must be fish caught in the net, i.e. Men and women who have responded to the true Gospel, amongst " all men" , every species of humanity, before the Lord's return. If we are convicted that we teach the true Gospel, then it follows that there must be true Christian communities amongst " all men" before the Lord returns; and thus His return will be hastened by our establishment of those groups. When the Gospel goes into all the world, then shall the end come.

- When the wedding is "furnished with guests" as a result of the final appeal to absolutely all men, 'all you can see / perceive', then the wedding starts (Mt. 22:9,10 Gk.). "Furnished" translates *pletho*, which carries the sense of being filled up. When the full number of guests are seated, when a certain number of true converts to the Kingdom feast have been made, *then* the King comes in, and the wedding starts. This is what imbues our latter day witness with such a sense of urgency. Every baptism could be the last.

### **"All nations"**

The great commission of Mt. 28 has evident reference to Dan. 7:14, where the Son of Man is given authority and power over all *so that* people of all nations, races and languages should serve Him. We must remind ourselves that out of the 5,000 or so languages in the world, the vast majority have no true Christian representatives; and only about half of them have the Bible in their own language. And as of the year 2001, only 12% of the world have English as a first or second language; yet the majority of our community are English speaking. If, as indeed we believe, we alone preach the True Gospel...then we have a long way to go in fulfilling this. Either that, or the scope of God's acceptance of men from all these languages and nations over time and over space today is far wider than we as a community have thought. However, I personally am driven instead to understand that the Truth must be taken into literally all the world by our community in these last days. Rev. 5:9 presents us with the picture of men and women redeemed from *every* kindred [tribe / clan], tongue [*glossa*-language], people [a group of people not necessarily of the same ethnicity] and nation [*ethnos*- ethnic group, lit. 'those of the same customs']. This means that, e.g., not only redeemed 'Yugoslavs' will stand before the throne in the end; but Macedonians, Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrans, Bosnians...every ethnic group, with every custom, will have

representatives who will have believed the Truth and been saved. This idea is confirmed by considering how 70 bullocks had to be sacrificed at the feast of ingathering (Num. 29), prophetic as it was of the final ingathering of the redeemed. But 70 is the number of all Gentile nations found in Gen. 10. And it is written: “When he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel” (Dt. 32:8). A total of 70 went down with Jacob into Egypt; and thus 70 seems an appropriate number to connect with the entire Gentile world. My point is, representatives of *all* of them will be finally ingathered. It could be that this conversion of all men occurs during the final tribulation (Rev. 14:6); but it seems to me that the context demands that people from every nation etc. are already redeemed in Christ and await His return.

It seems highly doubtful to me that over the past 2,000 years, the Truth has been taken to every ethnos, tribe, clan, custom and language, especially in Africa and Asia. So it follows that only once we have done it in our generation will this come true. The brethren in those parts especially have work to do yet, it seems to me. And we should all support them as best we can. I have a real belief that given the current rate of progress in preaching, the current generation *could* witness literally world-wide representation of Christians believing true, sound Biblical doctrine- *if* we *all* do our bit. And it seems no accident that representatives from so many nations can be preached to in cities like London, New York, Sydney...where the Truth has been so long established. It is very difficult for me to reproduce in writing the kind of picture I have in my mind. But it is a thrilling and all consuming, all-demanding vision.

### ***Witnessing In Who We Are***

And so the great commission, with which all the Gospel records conclude [yes, John’s too- if you look for it!], ought to be the mission statement for the true ecclesia. This is the objective of the community of believers. And it is now being marvellously obeyed by so many. We must carry on with our commission regardless of whether others in the community fall away, press on even when our closest friends in the Lord lay fallen in their tracks- through all the casualties, all the losses, the discouragements, we will carry on, from victory unto victory. For God’s prophecies of the latter days foretell our ultimate success. And so much success has and does attend the sustained efforts to spread the word that so many are making. Now this may not mean that you personally are converting people; but looking at the wider picture world-wide, this is what is happening. The Truth is spreading as never before. And to those involved in this world-wide movement of witness and success in it, there is an excitement akin to that in the early chapters of the Acts.

But, *how* to make this earth-shattering witness? As the concrete of our generation’s “progress” has hardened, people are desperately looking to other *people*. And time and again, the faithful witness of the Christ-life lived out in our flesh has brought people to Him. Behind the placid masks of the faces we see every day in the streets, there lies a world of twisting souls, living with frustration and the fear of failure and meaninglessness. And they turn to the likes of ourselves for some way of escape, if they see in us a difference. By simply *listening* to people first of all, we come to see the cracks underneath the masks. On one hand, people are like frightened animals who will dart away at the first sign of intrusion into their privacy. On the other hand, they so want to open up and listen and be lead. We must move conversations from the general mindless chatter to the more intimate issues of hopes and fears, yours and theirs. Again, the credibility of our lives will encourage them in this. They must sense in us the same heart / mind that beat and throbbed in Jesus Christ; that same

earnest concern for people and their salvation, to God's glory. As our members travel in total hundreds of thousands of kilometres to meet each other, struggling together with the stark and actual problems they face in common, a witness is made by our unity. There is no 'organization', no membership dues...and yet this body of people show by their transformed lives that they are something super-human; they are the body of Jesus on earth. The message and person of the real Christ becomes intelligible as it is seen focused in specific lives, whose transformation is the ultimate verification that we really do 'have the truth'. The true propositions which we teach are confirmed in the language of living experience which flows from us.

The acceptance of the teaching of Jesus produced a response in a person's relationships with other people (Jn. 1:12; Mt. 7:15; 11:2; 12:33; 25:31; Lk. 10:29-37). No true Christian is a secret believer; the light burns before the eyes of others. Ours isn't just a religion like anyone else's; it is *real*, creative life. There is congruence between belief and action, an honest admission of our humanity, just as there was then, and this yet further compels a response in those who see it. Paul could tell the Philippians to think on whatever *things* were true, honest, just, pure etc.; and then boldly say that "Those things [which he has just listed] which ye hath both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, these things do" (Phil. 4:8,9 RV). What they had learnt and heard from Paul, they had seen in him. He was the word which he preached made flesh, after the pattern of his Lord. Paul could speak of "my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17). His ways, his life, his person, was what he taught- there was congruence between his teaching and himself. And this congruence was consistent- in every place and in every ecclesia, be it in Corinth, Jerusalem or Rome, Paul the person was reflected in the teaching of Paul. The lack of congruence between the message and the life is what is turning people away from the true church in these last days; and yet the opposite is true now as never before. Congruence between life and teaching, to the point that they are one and the same, is powerfully attractive, especially in these days of shallowness of personality, playing out of roles and other forms of hypocrisy. This was why people believed in Jesus. Jn. 8:30,31 records how He spoke about how the Father was with Him, "that I am he", with full reference to the Yahweh Name. "As he spake these words, many believed on him", as He spoke the words, it was evident that they were more than words, they were an expression of the truth that was in this Man.

People are tired of words, of language...which in any case doesn't convey as well as we may think any lasting impression. People need to see what we believe lived out. They need to see, e.g., that our understanding of the representative nature of Jesus issues forth in our praying and in our feeling for this man "whom having not seen ye love". And perhaps this is why it can be observed that Jesus almost never "went out of his way" to help people but rather walked along and helped the people He met in His path.

## Of Prayer

Israel's deliverance from Egypt is in many ways a type of our redemption at the time of the Lord's return. The focus of the Passover feast was the lamb, and this should be the centre of our thinking in these last days. Some very intense Hebrew words are used to describe their association of themselves with it: " Draw out ('seize') and take you a lamb...strike ('lay the hand on', a word used about rape) the lintel...with the blood" (Ex. 12:21,22). And the run-up to Passover was to feature a business-like searching of the house for leaven (Ex. 12:19), reflecting the close self-examination which we should undertake individually and ecclesiastically (" your houses" ) in this prelude to the Passover-coming of our Lord. Not surprisingly, in the

light of this, Passover night was to be " a night of watching" (Ex. 12:42 RV mg.), strongly suggesting " watching in prayer" (Eph. 6:18; 1 Pet. 4:7; 2 Cor. 11:27?). Similarly those who are found " watching" at the Lord's midnight coming (cp. that of the Passover angel) will be found acceptable (Lk. 12:37). The picture of Israel in their family units huddled together around the Lamb, desperately focusing their attention on that saving blood, watching and praying, examining themselves- this is us, right now. For there can be no serious doubt that the second coming is almost upon our generation. The run up to the final tribulation will provoke a " praying always, that ye may be accounted worthy...to stand before the Son of man" (Lk. 21:36). Perhaps this intense latter day praying of the faithful is what Rev. 8:1 refers to, in speaking of "silence in heaven" when the seventh seal was opened- for this is one of Revelation's continual allusions to the temple service: "In the Temple, when the incense was offered, the people retired from the court and prostrated themselves in silent prayer" (1).

In these last days the times are tough now spiritually, getting tougher. Only " for the elects sake those days shall be shortened" and we will be saved by the second coming. Thus 2 Pet. 3:12,15 reminds us that by our prayers and spiritual development, the days before the second coming will be shortened. If they were not, even the elect would lose their faith (Mt. 24:22)- showing how those of us who are alive at Christ's coming will *barely* survive the spiritual traumas of the last days. The virgins were sleeping when they should have been watching; and Peter says that the righteous in the last generation (see context) will *scarcely* be saved (1 Pet. 4:18).

" The Lord...is longsuffering to us-ward" of the last days. This longsuffering of Jesus suggests the parable of the persistent widow, whose continued requests should match our prayers for the second coming (the vengeance of our adversaries which she requested will only come then). " Though he bear long" (s.w. 'longsuffering') with us, " God shall avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him" (Lk. 18:7). The " us" whom Peter refers to as experiencing the Lord's longsuffering ('bearing long') are therefore to be equated with " the elect" in their fervent prayers for the second coming. The days being shortened- a strong idea in 2 Peter 3- for the elect's sake therefore refers to the hastening of the second coming on account of the elect's prayers (Mt. 24:22). In view of the later references to Matt. 24, it is not unreasonable to think that Peter is consciously alluding to Mt. 24:22 concerning the shortening of the days for the sake of the elect's prayers, through his allusion to the parable of the persistent widow of Lk.18:7.

Despite the power of prayer in bringing about the Lord's return in vengeance, Lk. 18:9-14 continues in this same context to warn that despite this:

- Perhaps the Lord won't find such faith in prayer when he returns
- Many will pray but be so sure of their own righteousness that their prayers are hindered
- The disciples will tend to despise the little ones in the ecclesia.

*May we not give way to these latter day temptations!*

There is a triple emphasis on Israel praying to God in the lead up to Christ's birth (Luke 1:10,13; 2:37). We have seen from Joel 2:17 and many other passages that the remnant will likewise devote themselves to prayer in the last days, as will spiritual Israel.

The foolish virgins realize the need for prayer all too late; they knocked on the door with great zeal, asking for it to be opened; seeking but not finding. Knocking is sometimes used as a figure for prayer (Mt. 7:7). The basis for these foolish virgins is surely in Prov. 1:28,29: "Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer...they shall not find me: for that they hated knowledge". Having a laid back attitude to developing a real knowledge of the Lord through the oil of the word is therefore effectively hating knowledge. As we see the Lord's coming approaching, our daily reading according to the *Companion* ought to be a bare minimum. There must be a *feeling* of and for those things of which we read, and a holding of them in the heart through the course of each day.

### **Of Israel**

Joel prophesies how latter day Israel will be exhorted to howl in their prayers, clothing themselves with sackcloth (Joel 1:13); exactly as Jeremiah had pleaded with Israel in the last moments before the first Babylonian onslaught: " Gird you with sackcloth, lament and howl" (Jer. 4:8). There will be a call to Israel to repent in the last days, and a remnant will respond. This Elijah ministry [and maybe our present witness to Jewry prepares the way for this?] must occur "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord". We could interpret the putting forth of leaves on the fig tree as the signs of an initial repentance and indication that real spiritual fruit is developing. This preaching starts to produce some degree of response from Israel, and then " all (is) fulfilled" in the full manifestation of Christ's Kingdom. The parable says that as surely as Summer follows Spring, so those who see the blossoming of the fig tree in the parable, will see the Kingdom. Maybe this is to be taken literally; there may be a literal gap of a few weeks/months (as between Spring and Summer) between the first signs of Jewish repentance, and all being fulfilled. It may well be that the "all" which will be fulfilled in Lk.21:32 is to be equated with " the times of the Gentiles" being fulfilled (Lk.21:24). The Greek *kairos* translated "times" is also translated "opportunity"; the Gentiles' opportunity to hear the Gospel is fast running out. And isn't it incredible that after years of fruitless trying, over 50 Israelis have been baptized in the last 2 years! And so we ought to be witnessing "to the Jew first" world-wide in our community, as well as supporting the work of preaching in Israel itself. Paul makes the point that for the sake of the tiny group of Jews who did still hold and practice the truth, Israel would not suffer the judgments of Sodom in totality (Rom. 9:29 cp. Is. 1:9). This would indicate that there will also be a latter day Jewish remnant which will stop the faithless Israel of today receiving the judgment of permanent destruction.

The latter day "time of Jacob's trouble" is based upon Jacob's meeting with Esau at Jabbok. Jacob's reliance on his own strength and subsequent semi-faith in God's word of promise typifies the Jews of today; his time of trouble truly humbled him, and his wrestling in prayer brought out the great faith which he was potentially capable of, as the last days will do for the Jews. Jacob's prayer is peculiarly apt to a repentant Jewry: " O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac (going back to their roots), the Lord which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country (since 1948)...I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan (cp. the Atlantic, Mediterranean; the airways of Eastern Europe; through the immigrant ports of Haifa, Tel Aviv...); and now I am become two bands. Deliver me, I pray thee, from the hand of my brother (cp. the Arabs), from the hand of Esau: for I fear him...and Thou saidst, I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea" (33:9-12). The reference to the Jewish fathers will be the result of listening to the Elijah ministry, which will turn " the heart of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6). And this message of 'back to the promises,

the Hope of Israel' is exactly the message we can take to the Jews in our communities today. My dream is that world-wide, we will make this witness.

### **Of Love**

The days of Sodom are to be read as types of our last days. It is recorded for our learning "that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot dwelt" (Gen. 19:29). Thus in the type of the last days, the prayers and loving spiritual concern of the faithful remnant really can have an effect on the salvation of our weaker brethren. Note that Abraham's prayer that Sodom would be saved if ten righteous were found there, was not answered; but God knew the real spirit of his prayer, that Lot should be saved, and that God's justice should be upheld in not destroying the righteous with the wicked. It was this which God recognized and answered, even though Abraham had not specifically verbalized those thoughts in prayer. Our true spiritual love for our brethren, expressed in such intense prayer, will likewise be heard in these last days.

The great commission is repeated in John's Gospel but in more spiritual language. The whole world is to know the Gospel because of the unity of the believers (Jn. 17:18,21,23); and it follows that a situation will arise in which the extraordinary nature of true Christian solidarity over linguistic, ethnic, social and geographical lines will make a similar arresting, compelling witness as it did in the first century. For the great commission is to have special fulfilment in the last days. The Lord had prophesied that His followers over time "shall become one flock" (Jn. 10:16 RV); they would be "perfected into one, that the world may know" (Jn. 17:23 RV). He surely hoped this would have become true in the first century. As the Gospel spreads world-wide in the last days, the unity of the believers will become all the more comprehensive, and this will of itself provoke yet more conversions. Indeed, this is already happening. The solidarity between true Christians in Islamic or ethnically-divided areas is producing more converts than any amount of press advertising. It could have been like this in the first century- for Eph. 3:9 speaks of how the unity of Jew and Gentile would "make all men see" the Gospel. This is the urgency of Paul's appeal for unity in Ephesians- he knew that their unity was the intended witness to the world which the Lord had spoken of as the means of the fulfilment of the great commission in Jn. 17:21-23. But sadly, Jew and Gentile went their separate ways in the early church, and the possibility of world-converting witness evaporated- to be granted again in our last days. The unity between believers in your area ought to be a startling, arresting testimony to the men and women around you- rushing along in their lives, clutching all their petty jealousies and distrusts of others.

Compare the following passages:

"I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth" (Is. 62:6,7)

with

"Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him" (Eph. 1:15-17).

The ideas of praying without ceasing and making mention occur in both passages. Surely Paul had the Isaiah passage in mind. It seems that he saw the ecclesia as the spiritual Zion. In the same way as Zion's watchmen were exhorted to pray for her without ceasing until the Kingdom is established there, so Paul prayed for the spiritual growth of his brethren. The implication is surely that once a certain level of spirituality had been achieved, then the Lord will return to establish His Kingdom. When the harvest is ripe, then the sickle is put in. Jn. 17:23 speaks of how the church will "be perfected into one" (RV), as if this process is ongoing and comes to a finality at the Lord's return. This is an urgent imperative to unity amongst us- and yet as these [apparently] "last days" wear on, we become increasingly disunited. This ought to be a true worry to us.

### **Of Knowledge Increased**

There are distinct Biblical implications that the latter day generation of God's people will have their eyes opened to the understanding of God's word, especially the prophecies, in order to fortify them against the pressures of the time of the end.

#### ***Natural Israel***

The repentance of Israel must be associated with an opening of their eyes to God's word. There is no other way men can come to repentance. Jer. 30:24 prophesies Jacob's final homecoming, and then comments: " In the latter days (not now) ye shall consider (understand) it" . *Then Israel will consider and understand the words of their prophets.* " The Lord hath poured out upon (Israel) the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes (quoted in Rom. 11:8 concerning Israel's blindness to Christ)...the vision of all (God's word) is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed...(but) in that day shall the (spiritually) deaf hear the words of the book" (Is. 29:10,11,17,18). This will be when the book is *unsealed* at " The time of the end" (Dan. 12:4). We have shown elsewhere that Israel's minority repentance must occur prior to the Lord's return. Therefore there must be an upsurge in Biblical activity amongst those who will become the faithful remnant in latter day Israel. This will be brought about by the Elijah prophet- remembering that the Elijah prophet is framed in Malachi as a teacher of God's word, not just an imparter of it. Likewise John, in the spirit of Elijah, *taught* the people about the Lord's advent.

#### ***Spiritual Israel***

Malachi's prophecy of the faithful remnant earnestly speaking to each other about the word in preparation for the Lord's coming can be equally applicable to spiritual Israel. The flagship verse concerning the opening of our eyes to latter day prophecy must be Dan. 12:4,10: " Shut up the words, and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro (an idiom often used concerning response to God's word: Ps. 119:32,60; 147:15; Amos 8:11,12; Hab. 2:2; 2 Thess. 3:1 Gk.), and knowledge (of Daniel's prophecies) shall be increased...many shall be purified, and made white, and tried (in the tribulation); but the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand" . This is all in the context of the Angel rejecting Daniel's plea for insight into his own prophecies. All he was told was that they would be fulfilled in the far distant future, but he was comforted with the thought that the faithful at that time would understand.

Thus Dan. 12:4 LXX reads: " Seal the book until the time of its accomplishment" - *then* it will be unsealed and the meaning become apparent to our generation. " None of the wicked

shall understand; but the wise shall understand" suggests that this true understanding of God's word motivates the faithful remnant in holding on to a righteous lifestyle in the morally chaotic latter day world. Time and again Israel are condemned because their lack of *understanding* of the prophecies led them into sinful behaviour (Dt. 32:29; Ps. 94:8; Is. 44:18).

### ***Other Hints***

There are a number of other hints outside Daniel that there will be a progressive growth in Biblical understanding amongst the latter day faithful. In the spirit of Daniel, Habakkuk was told that the full understanding of his vision concerning the latter day judgment of Babylon was "yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie", and *at that time* the one who reads and understands it will "run" - using the same idiom as in Dan. 12:4 concerning the latter day believers 'running' in response to their understanding of God's word (Hab. 2:2,3). The Olivet prophecy repeatedly talks about 'seeing' or (Gk.) understanding things and then acting upon this knowledge. The English translation somewhat masks this. Thus Mt. 24:15 "Whoso *readeth*" uses a Greek word which really means to recognize, distinguish- and he who recognizes, understands, let him "understand" or, better, *meditate*. Or again, "When ye shall see (Greek, to know, perceive) the abomination that maketh desolate..." (Mt. 24:15). This might suggest that the "abomination" isn't necessarily something physical. The idea seems to be 'When you understand that the abomination that makes desolate is in place, then...', rather than 'When you see (physically) on the telly or in the newspaper an abomination in Jerusalem, then...do something about it'. "When ye shall see (Gk. perceive, understand) all these things, (then you will) know that it is near" (Mt. 24:33). "Behold (same Greek: perceive, comprehend) the fig tree..." (Lk. 21:29). The emphasis is undoubtedly on the need for understanding of the signs, not just observing them.

And all over the world, people are turning to the Bible. Free advertising of *Bible Basics* on the internet recently produced up to 700 replies *daily*- from all over the planet [even Iraq!]. And brethren and sisters, in the turmoil of the last days, are underlining and analyzing Bible verses with a verve and urgent seeking for truth and living hope and concrete guidance which the last days have brought us to.

### **Is It For Real?**

Now, brethren, sisters. Is all I have written here merely a fantasy? Just a heavily skewed way of looking at certain passages? Or is this a realizable vision, reflecting the Biblical picture of what we both should and *will* be about in His work in this, the time of the end...? I wouldn't have opened my heart to you in this way unless I believed that this is all for real; that in our praying, our preaching, our Bible study, our repentance, our love...we, the last generation, must and will rise up to new heights, making the dream come real.

### **Notes**

- (1) Hugh Schonfield, *The Original New Testament: Revelation* (London: Firethorn Press, 1985) footnote on Rev. 8:1.

## **19. Wounded Christian Soldiers**

## **19-1 Christians Who Fall Away**

There are times when one has to face up to facts. I have heard it said several times, by brothers and sisters of wide experience in our brotherhood, that one in three of those baptized somehow falls away. And many more go to sleep spiritually, on their own admission. So, even call it one in four, one in five. “How many times can a man turn around, and pretend that he just hasn’t seen?” somebody sung, in a haunting melody. My observation, and again it accords with the view of many others amongst us, is that the majority of those who turn away do not do so because of the pull of the world and the flesh, or because they find some new doctrine. Yes, I know there are such cases. But the majority seem *initially* to start stumbling because they are in some sense offended by others in the community. And many of those who now sit on the sideline of our work as a community, and I make no comment on their standing with God, do so because they have been hurt by others amongst us. Rom. 16:17 makes a clear Biblical case for this. Those who cause divisions cause “occasions of stumbling” (RV) and should therefore be avoided- because, the implication is, division causes stumbling. It’s as simple as that. People stumble, in Paul’s experience, because of divisive people within the ecclesias.

Before we start apportioning blame, remember the words of James: “In many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man” (James 3:1). And none of us are perfect. We all offend others at least by our words. We all stand condemned, for James is full of allusions to the words of Jesus. And clearly enough he has in mind the Lord’s teaching that whoever offends his brother will be condemned. We would rather not see that connection, plain though it is, for it condemns us all. All things that cause offence will be expelled from God’s Kingdom (Mt. 13:41; 18:6). Quite simply, we will be saved by grace. Our actions towards others at times and in some ways could rightfully condemn us all, to a man and to a woman. Yet recognizing this, we seek to go onwards. To try the more earnestly not to offend, to win back those who have stumbled. The Greek text of those words of James is ambiguous. Purposefully so. The RV translates: “In many things we all stumble. If any stumbleth not in word, the same is a perfect man”. We have all been caused to stumble, and we have all caused others to stumble. That’s the idea. Hence the relevance of what we are going to think about, for each of us. For this reason, James says, we should not consciously seek to be leaders in the community, knowing the risk we run. Brethren especially need to bear this in mind, particularly those who have been used to the ‘career structure’ of their employment or that of many churches which they may have formally been part of. Respect is earnt naturally, from a life lived, from who we *are* more than what we do publicly, and is *never* to be demanded nor consciously sought after in ecclesial life.

### ***Don’t Stumble***

The key for us personally is surely to not be caused to stumble. By doing so we will have allowed others to come between us and a God who seeks passionately above all else to save us. “Let no man take thy crown”, my dear mother used to quote to me in times of spitefulness and rejection by my brethren. And it’s really so. Those who ultimately fall away from God because of the behaviour of His children have allowed their faith to be based in the word of men rather than the word of God. It’s so easily done. At our conversion, we think all in the brotherhood are wonderful. We, the sinners saved by grace, have joined a community of redeemed, spiritual men and women. And we think they all know more than us, are more developed spiritually than us... until inevitably we come to be disappointed. So often one hears a recent convert preaching to others about how wonderful their new church is, and how

worthy they are to join. This I always discourage. For conversion is ultimately into Christ, and not into any human organization. We are to receive the Gospel from others not as the word of men, but as the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13).

### ***Realize Our Need For The Brotherhood***

Of course the offended person insists that they will go on believing, but, because of our behaviour, they are stepping aside from us. But the Lord taught that nobody can reach His Kingdom in isolation. He is the true vine, we are the branches (Jn. 15). To leave the tree is to leave Him. And severed from me, He said, you can do nothing, in spiritual terms (Jn. 15:5). Much as some think they can. And in the end, like a slow cancer, the brother or sister who was offended by whatever, will eventually die in that they leave the vine of Christ. It is from the body of Jesus that there comes nurture and nourishment, supplied by every member of the body (Eph. 4:16). And we, all of us, are the body of Christ. To cut ourselves off from it, formally or informally, openly or deep within our hurt hearts, is to deprive ourselves of the nourishment which He is willing to give through our brethren. It follows from Paul's inspired figure that not *all* our brethren are no good. There's a lot of goodness out there- those who give up lands, houses, parents etc. for the Lord's sake *will* find within His ecclesia a hundredfold of these things. But we will only share in these things if we are willing to look at the positive side in our brethren. For in many things we also offend others. Yet we know well enough we basically are sincere and willing to give to others. And as we expect others to relate to that good side in us, so we should to others. Nobody in the brotherhood is totally, purely evil- at least, seeing we cannot judge in that sense, we should not think that of any. We have to assume that each of our brethren is secured in Christ, and will be in the Kingdom. They have the Christ-man formed in them, however immaturely. Paul wrote to Corinth as if he assumed they would all be ultimately saved. Reflect on the implications of how he wrote to them: "know ye not that *we* shall judge Angels?" [in the Kingdom].

Realizing the need of each believer for the brotherhood will lead us to be more than careful before ever evicting anyone from our association. Indeed, forced expulsion from any social group is highly damaging to the victim. The Lord appreciated this when He said that when His followers were cast out of the synagogues, then they would be likely to stumble (Jn. 16:1,2). They were excommunicated exactly because of their faith in Him; and yet He foresaw that in the aftermath of that rejection, emotionally, sociologically, economically, they would be likely to stumble. Eviction of anyone from our fellowship ought therefore never to be done lightly, if ever. For by doing so, we are likely to make them stumble from the path to eternity; and nobody would want such a millstone around their neck at judgment day. We may in this life appear to be 'keeping the truth pure', 'doing the right thing' - but the Lord will judge the effect we had upon another's path to Him.

### ***Know Our Desperation***

The worst thing about being offended is that we end up so self-righteous. All we can see is the wrong in another. When we ourselves are desperate sinners, our "hidden man" of faith struggling against the man of the flesh within us. How we perceive others is related to how we are perceived by God. These events of 'offence' and hurt at the hands of others must surely occur in our lives, to force us to perceive them as God perceives us. Thank God, in that sense, that actions of unkindness and insensitivity make us have to love others with an act of the will rather than an emotion. They impel us, for the sake of our salvation if nothing else, to see the Christ in them. For otherwise we will wallow in bitterness and rejection of our

brethren. And this, to God, means that we have rejected ourselves from His fellowship. To love our brother, and not just grimly tolerate him or her, is the essence of ‘doing righteousness’ (1 Jn. 3:10). This is how important it is. And so another key to not being offended is to have a constant sense of our own desperate need for grace, and our undisturbable joy that we have indeed been saved by that grace. That all our sin, of omission and commission, of word, thought and deed, of how we *are*...has been swallowed up in victory. Eph. 1:8 speaks of “the riches of his grace, which He lavished on us”. God has been extravagant with His grace. And in dealing with those whom we consider to be hard, spiteful and unreasonable towards us in the brotherhood, we have the ideal opportunity to reflect such grace. It hurt God, to an extent we cannot fathom, to lavish that grace upon us in the death of the cross. And of course it must hurt us to show it to others.

The Bible itself continually reflects a distinction in the mind of God between the person and the behaviour, the sin and the sinner. When we allow ourselves to be offended and to offend others, we have ceased to make that differentiation. We so easily equate the person and their behaviour, and thus they offend us. Consider how we are in the habit of saying: “We’re all sinners”. You may think I’m being pedantic, but Rom. 3:23 says otherwise- that “all have sinned”. And there’s a slight and subtle difference. We have committed sin, and therefore we can be called sinners. But the Biblical focus is on the action committed rather than the branding of the person with a label.

### ***Frank Forgiveness***

It’s easy to forgive the man or woman before us on their knees, begging our forgiveness. But to show patient kindness and grace in the face of unrealized or unrepented of unkindness...here we learn what grace and forgiveness is really all about. The world spends its time hurting and being hurt, being snapped at and snapping back. But for us, the fact we are new creations should be the *rule* by which we live (Gal. 6:16). The reality that we are new beings means that we have to learn how to live all over again. And we learn through forgiving the repeated irritations of others. And living like this, if only we can even begin to, will unleash a real empowerment into our lives. These things are the essence of spiritual life, of what it means to be a Christian. Perhaps we have all focused on the minutiae of Biblical interpretation and the external things of our Christianity to the point that we have missed these most basic things. The irrelevant so easily becomes paramount, and the trivial becomes vital. Because our deceitful, clever flesh would ever want it that way. But the truly crucial spirit of life is to patiently forgive and reflect the grace which we have known- day by day, hour by hour. You can’t learn this from a proof text or by Bible marking or by sitting through talks at Bible Schools. You learn by practice, in ongoing situations, by doing it with your irritating, offending brethren. It’s the only way. To forgive by grace means that we will not measure forgiveness- as can so easily happen in cases of offence. Jewish tradition said that one should forgive a personal trespass three times. And so Peter thought he was being generous by offering to forgive seven times. The Lord’s command to forgive seventy times seven surely meant that forgiveness should come from such an upwelling of personal gratitude to the Lord that we do not in any sense measure it. We give it, generously, and without counting.

### ***Christ-Centredness***

The dominant theme in the new life must surely be a focus upon the man Christ Jesus, a sustained meditation upon Him, a life that is disciplined after His pattern, a way of being that

is committed to following behind Him on His ‘last walk’ to Golgotha, bearing His cross. A daily life that is lived as in a personality cult behind Him. If our focus is unshakably, unswervingly upon Him, if as John puts it we “abide in him”... then how others behave toward us will not in the end cause us to fall away from Him. One cannot leave the love of their life because a third party was unkind to us. Rather does it draw us closer to the One who has truly loved us.

In the end, it will all seem so pathetic. There we will stand before the judgment throne of Jesus. Before Him who loved us, bled for us, died for us, and who then called us to the knowledge of His grace and His love. And we, we didn’t go on responding to His invitation and the utter pouring out of His love toward us. Why? Because *she* swore at me. Because *he* over there was always so biased against me. Because *they* over there falsely accused me. Because *she* divorced my innocent son. And the Lord’s response would not need to be spoken. The look of His sad eyes would say it all: ‘And *I*. What did *I* do wrong to you, apart from love you, die for you, have thousands of Angels working in your life striving for your eternal good, both before and after your birth...?’ It will all appear so childish. Sadly, we know that there will be such scenes at judgment day. Guilty as the offenders may be, much as the Lord may raise these issues with them and judge them accordingly, the offended person must still bear total responsibility for walking away from the Lord’s love. If He is truly the light of our world, if that is no pretty figure, no mere abstraction, not just words written on a kitchen poster or a fridge magnet, but a true reality in our existence...we will never leave Him. Come what may. If we were asked to give our lives for Him in sudden death, we probably would be willing to. We would stick with Him. And yet so many of us find it hard to do this when the distraction to our faith comes from the most unexpected source, i.e. our own brethren. Yet the call for actual self-sacrifice in coping with them is just as real as if we were asked to give our lives for the Lord’s cause in a dramatic death.

So many people are therefore hostile to the idea of ‘church’, but very open to the teachings of Jesus. The person and teaching of Jesus have not lost their appeal; in my opinion, they never can. He Himself was an anti-establishment figure, and many of His words had revolutionary overtones. Yet so many people are put off by anything that smacks of institutionalization and hypocrisy, which is how ‘church’ is perceived. Tens of millions of people world-wide have allowed themselves to stumble because the idea of ‘church’ has put them off. They perceive rightly enough the great scandal of Christianity today, so-called ‘nominal Christianity’. They realize how large numbers of people have covered themselves with a thin, ‘decent’ veneer of ‘Christianity’, allowing themselves to become respectably involved with it. These cynical onlookers think of Christians as sitting on a comfortable cushion, protecting them from the hard realities of life, while changing its place and shape to suit their convenience. And yet they are left with the reality that there is a hunger in the heart of men, themselves included, that only Christ can ultimately satisfy. It is these millions of people that we ought to be reaching. They have been caused to stumble, so understandably so. And yet in the true, honest proclamation of a totally unabusive Gospel, lived in the lives of ordinary, true people...they ought to be able to find what they are looking for.

Our personal focus on Jesus is perhaps helped by continually remembering that He did not seek to set up a religion; He came to lead men and women after Him as a person. Yet it can happen that some people give up so much of themselves to comply to their religion, with the result that they do not follow Jesus personally with their whole selves. By perceiving themselves as part of a system, they give up much of their independent thinking, their rationality, their curiosity, even their sexuality and sensuality, their anger- the essence of

what makes them unique. These are the types who have no real passion for anything; whose passivity may lead them never to argue, to always get along, in their jobs, in their ecclesiastical bodies, in their marriages etc. And of course this is not bad in itself. But what I am trying to say is that if we are following a Man, the individual who is Jesus, then we will follow Him with all that we really are. If we are merely part of a human religious system, or we allow ourselves to feel that's all we are, then there is the likelihood that we will end up losing who we really are beneath the expectations and demands of the human side of the believers amongst whom we live.

The teaching of Jesus was very much centred around Himself. Other religious teachers tend to say 'This is the truth, these are the ideas I have put together: follow them'. But Jesus says: "I am the truth; follow *me*". His formula was not "Thus saith the Lord", but rather "Truly, truly *I* say unto you...". The personal pronoun forces itself upon our attention as we read His words:

"I am the bread of life; he who comes to *me* shall not hunger"

"I am the light of the world; he who follows *me*..."

"I am the resurrection and the life...whoever lives and believes in me shall never die"

"I am the way and the truth"

"Come to *me* ...learn of *me*".

He called people to Himself- to come to Him, learn of Him, follow Him. He knew, too, that the example and achievement of His death would exert a certain magnetism upon men and women: "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto myself". He is drawing them not primarily to a church, to a statement of faith, to a 'truth'...but to Himself. And from knowing Him we are meaningfully led to all these other things. If our focus is primarily upon Him, then we will not stumble from our walk with Him because of human beings, even if they are our brethren. Notice, in passing, how the Lord so stressed the importance of humility, and remember that He *was* the humblest man, for Him to have been exalted as highly as He was. And yet He says things which on the lips of any other man would have been arrogant and egocentric. To know your strengths, to know who you are and where you are going, to be sure of what truth you do possess, is not incompatible with a genuine humility. We can so easily confuse humility with the lack of self-respect which tends to be common to most human beings.

It does us good to reflect soberly and deeply upon the events of the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. To reconstruct in our own minds what really happened, that we might know Him the better. That on a day in April, on a Friday afternoon, on a hill outside Jerusalem, 1970 years ago...there really was a man led out to crucifixion. And that three days later, in a dark tomb, a tightly wrapped body came to life, and in a microsecond was standing outside his burial garments. The only sound would have been of the graveclothes collapsing or subsiding as the support of the body inside them was removed. The napkin wrapped around His head (cp. Jn. 11:44) would suddenly have become a crumpled turban. The clothes would have been like a discarded chrysalis from which the butterfly has emerged. John saw the linen clothes "lying", but according to one authority the Greek word can apparently stand the translation "collapsed". That John saw the clothes "lying" is repeated

twice, and the first time it is placed in an emphatic position in the Greek sentence- ‘He saw, as they were lying [or ‘collapsed’], the linen clothes’. John also records his deep impression that the head napkin was not with the other clothes, but by itself. Apparently it was normal practice to bind the body and the head in graveclothes, but not the neck. It could be that John is saying that he was most struck by the way there was a slight gap between the collapsed body bindings and the head napkin- the gap where the neck of Jesus had been. This head napkin was “wrapped together”, but here we can with fair confidence say that the Greek word means more ‘twirled’. The word aptly describes the rounded shape which the empty napkin still preserved. And so John saw the stone slab, the collapsed graveclothes, and the shell of the head cloth, with a gap between the two where the Lord’s neck had been. And John “saw [this] and believed”. Now of course it is possible to reconstruct the whole scene otherwise. What I am saying is that in our personal following of the Lord we love, we each need to try to reconstruct for ourselves how it would have been. The artless style of the inspired records encourage us in this- one only has to compare them against the fantastic Apocryphal Gospels, with their descriptions of Jesus bursting from the tomb in power and glory, to see in the most obvious terms what is inspired and what isn’t.

## **19-2 Not Giving Or Taking Offence**

### ***Let Nobody Come Between***

Many find that human leaders or elders come between them and a personal following of Jesus. Yet we need to remember that Jesus never delegated his personal authority over His people to anyone. This is where the Catholic idea of the Pope as the personal representative of Jesus is so wrong. Much as we should respect our elders, this respect shouldn’t come between us and the Lord Jesus. Note how Paul never demanded power over his converts. He made himself vulnerable to them, in the hope that they would respond to him in an open relationship: “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you...As a fair exchange- I speak as to my children- open wide your hearts also” (2 Cor. 6:11-13). Put together two scriptures in your mind: “You must obey [the Pharisees] and do everything they tell you”; and, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees” (Mt. 23:3; 16:6). Surely the Lord is teaching that we should respect elders but never cease personally analyzing what they teach for ourselves. Once we stop doing this, we start resigning our own personality and will be unable to follow our Lord personally, i.e. with our own persons. And then we will be ripe for being caused to stumble, if those elders we are listening to then offend us. For ‘we’, with all that we are, will have been dominated by them.

We must respect elders (and indeed all people) for who they are as persons, and not for any ‘office’ they may appear to hold. Notice how in Phil. 1:1 Paul omits the definite article (“the”) in addressing bishops and deacons. Those words indicate what they do for people, rather than any position in a hierarchy. Jesus seems to have outlawed the use of any official titles for His ecclesia (Mt. 23:8-12). Note how Paul deals with ecclesial problems in places like Corinth. He doesn’t write to the elders and tell them to sort it out and clean up the ecclesia. He writes to every member of the ecclesia. He confronts the whole ecclesia with his concerns over pastoral issues- not just the pastors. He tells the whole ecclesia of his concern about how they have not dealt with flagrant sin amongst them (1 Cor. 5; 6:1-11). The Lord’s teaching in Mt. 18:15-18 doesn’t ask us to refer our concerns about others’ behaviour in the

ecclesia to the elders. He asks us to personally take the matter up with the individual. His church was to be built on individuals who followed Him personally and closely.

The depth of God's grace and the extent of His acceptance of us is hard to plumb. We can too easily conceive of Him as a cross between a traffic cop and Santa Claus- handing out fines to the naughty and presents to the good guys. But His grace is acceptive of us all who are in Christ. And the Lord's 'receiving' of the crowd reflects how even His body language reflected this same characteristic which was paramount in His personality. Increasingly it seems to me that "the Gospel of God" is not so much an invitation to *do* anything as a declaration of what God has done for us, in being willing to accept us as "in Christ". And, perceiving that grace, we cannot but respond practically. We all need to become more inspired by grace. Our sense of grace becomes deeper the more we appreciate the seriousness of sin. And our sense of failure depends on how high our standards are. A personal focus upon the person of Jesus shows us the height of the standard, and the depth of our falling short. It sets us up to grasp the wonder of the grace of His salvation. And thus in a committed spiritual life, one thing leads to another. If we are personally focused upon Jesus, we come to be awed by our own failures and then inspired by His grace. And thus we naturally become less critical and less demanding of others, less offensive and less easily offended. Many Biblical characters worked their way through this problem of being distracted by others in their community. Ps. 43:1 begins with David lamenting how he had been unfairly judged by an "unmerciful nation" of Israel, but concludes with him focusing back on his personal relationship with the Father: "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?...hope thou in God...who is the health of my countenance and my God" (:5).

### **Peter Our Pattern**

After Peter's 'conversion', the Lord told Peter in more detail how he would die: "when thou shalt be old (i.e. more spiritually mature?), thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee (as Christ was carried to the cross) whither thou wouldest not (even at that last moment, Peter would flinch from the cross). This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God" (as Christ's death also did: Jn. 7:39; 12:28; 13:32; 17:1). Having said this, the Lord invited Peter: "Follow me" (Jn. 21:19). Following Jesus is always associated in the Gospels with carrying His cross. 'Live the life of cross carrying now, Peter'- that was the Lord's message. And they went on walking, with Peter walking behind Jesus. But he couldn't concentrate on the crucifixion life. Like Lot's wife, he turned around, away from the Lord, and saw John also following, the one who had leaned on Jesus' breast at the last supper (is this detail included here to suggest that this was a cause of jealousy for Peter?). And he quizzed the Lord as to His opinion of John. Peter got distracted from his own following, his own commitment to self-crucifixion, by the powerful fascination human beings have about the status of others and the quality of their following. The Lord replied that even if John lived until His return, without ever having to die and follow Him to the literal death which Peter would have to go through, well, so what: "What is that to thee? Follow thou me". 'Don't worry in that sense about the other guy. Don't let him distract you from following me'. That was and is the basic message. By all means compare this with the way the Lord answers the question "Are there few that be saved?" by insisting that we personally strive to enter by the narrow door (Lk. 13:23,24).

This was the same message the Lord had taught Peter through the parable of the 1<sup>st</sup> hour labourer getting distracted by the reward of the 11<sup>th</sup> hour one. He had that tendency to look on the faults of others (Mt. 18:21), to compare himself with others (Mt. 19:21 cp. 27; 26:33).

And so, so many tragic times we do the same. We are distracted from the quintessence of our lives, the following, to death, of the Lord, by our jealousy of others and our desire to enter into their spirituality rather than personally following.

John's Gospel has a somewhat strange ending, on first sight. The synoptics end as we would almost expect- the Lord ascends, having given His last commission to preach, and the disciples joyfully go forth in the work. But John's Gospel appears to have been almost truncated. Christ walks away on His own, with Peter following Him, and John walking some way behind Peter. Peter asks what the Lord's opinion is of John, and is told to ignore that and keeping on following Him. John inserts a warning against possible misunderstanding of this reply- and the Gospel finishes. But when we appreciate that the language of 'follow me' is the call to live the life of the cross, then this becomes a most impressive closing scene: the Lord Jesus walking away, with His followers following Him, in all their weakness. And thus John's Gospel closes with a warning- to not let others distract us in any way from a personal following of the Man from Nazareth to His ultimate end, day by day.

### ***Not Offending Others***

Causing others to stumble from the path to the Kingdom is the leading characteristic of the condemned, according to the Lord's words in Mt. 13:41. Compare His words: "It is inevitable that offences come; but woe to that man by whom they come" with "The son of man goes as it is written of him; but woe to that man (Judas) by whom the son of man is betrayed!". The Lord sees those who cause offence as being as bad as Judas. It's serious. We are the body of Christ. It has been truly said that Jesus has no face, no hands, no legs on this earth apart from us. Positively, this means that we beseech men and women "in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 2:10 RV). The logical retort to the first century preaching of a risen Jesus would have been: "OK, but where is He? Show me the body". And the answer was: "Well here He is. Right in front of you. And in my sister over there, and in my brother here right next to me". And this is why, against all odds, the Gospel spread- with no written New Testament initially, no dramatic appearances of the risen Christ to the doubting. Negatively, this means that others come to know the man Jesus, whom having not seen they come to love, through the testimony of His people. We are Him to this world. But once someone is converted, they ought to come to see the Lord Jesus for who He is, with David we should be able to say that we see the Lord [and he meant, according to the New Testament, the Lord Jesus] ever before our face, so that we will not be moved by anything (Acts 2:25). And yet if this stage is not gone through, the convert will continue perceiving Jesus as His brothers and sisters, with the result that he or she will think negatively about the Lord for the sake of those who are in Him. The goal of all our preaching cannot be merely baptism. It is the inculcation of a life in Christ, a personal knowing of Him. This is why the first piece of literature I like to give anyone is a *Bible Companion* daily Bible reading planner. For they must discover it all for themselves, above all. So, to not give offence we must ever remind ourselves that we are Christ to our brethren. In us they see a reflection of Him.

Acting as He would act is really the whole key to not giving offence / causing others to stumble. He above all valued the human person to an extent no other human being has ever reached. When asked to pay the temple tax, which apparently few people paid in Galilee at that time, the Lord did so "lest we should offend them"- even though, as He explained to Peter, He was exempted from it, as the Son in His Father's house (Mt. 17:27). He could have appealed to higher principle. But the Lord was worried that somehow He might make these apparently mercenary, conscience-less legalists to stumble in their potential faith. We would

likely have given up with them as not worth it. But the Lord saw the potential for faith within them. And only a few verses later we are reading Him warning that those who offend the little ones who believe in Him will be hurled to destruction (Mt. 18:6). Could it not be that the Lord saw in those hard hearted, hateful legalists in the ecclesia of His day...little ones who potentially would believe in Him? And His positive, hopeful view of them paid off. For a year or so later those types were being baptized, along with a great company of priests. People change. Remember this, and given that fact, try to hope for the best, as your Lord does with you. People *can* change, and they *do* change, even those whom at present you just can't abide in the brotherhood.

But the Lord continues His theme of giving offence to others when He says: "It must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! [The Lord must have said this after such careful introspection, knowing that He was the rock of offence to many, and that Jewry were to be 'offended' by Him]. *Wherefore* if thy hand or thy foot *makes you a cause of stumbling* [i.e. to others], cut them off..." or else you will be condemned (Mt. 18:7 Gk.). This is how important it is to search our lives and see what may cause others offence. And, in His relentless way, the Lord continues: "See that ye despise not one of these little ones" (Mt. 18:10), the little ones He has Himself just been so careful not to offend, by paying up His taxes. We offend people by 'despising' them. And, on and on and on, Jesus incisively takes His teaching further- in the parable of the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep. To *not* seek others' salvation is to despise them. We may not think we are despitful people. But effectively, in His eyes, we are...if we neglect to actively seek for their salvation until we find it. To not offend others is thus made parallel to seeking their salvation. And the shepherd seeking the lost sheep matches the man who plucks out his eye and cuts off his hand lest they offend others. So you see the parallels throughout Matthew 18:

Lest we offend them	Pay the temple tax, go fishing, make the effort
Lest we offend others and are cast into condemnation	Pluck out our eye, cut off our hands and feet
Lest we offend the little ones and are cast into the sea	Receive the little ones as if they are Christ, see the Christ in them
Don't despise others	Go out looking for the lost sheep with unlimited effort
Lest we are cast "to the tormentors"	Give unlimited forgiveness to your brother, try to "gain your brother"

The self-willed effort we must make to not offend our brother is quite something. Just imagine looking at yourself in the mirror, wedging your finger nails under your eye socket, and pulling out your eye. This is the conscious effort we must make not to offend, and thereby to save. It's really quite something. Note that the parallels tabled above show that to not offend is to save. If we seek above all the salvation of others, then we will not offend them. We will, quite simply, *care for them* as the Lord cares for us.

### ***Respecting Others***

To not offend others, to seek to save them, means that we will not despise them. 1 Cor. 11:22 accuses some brethren of despising others [s.w. Mt. 18:10] in the ecclesia by “shaming” them. If we perceive the value of persons, the meaning of others personhood, we will not shame them in our words, gestures, body language or actions. No “shameful speaking” should proceed out of our mouths (Col. 3:8 RV). Of course, the true believer in Christ cannot be ashamed- for whilst some stumble on Christ, the rock of offence, the believer in Him will not be shamed (Rom. 9:33; 10:11- s.w. 1 Cor. 11:22). For his or her sure hope of the Kingdom “maketh not [to be] ashamed” (Rom. 5:5). Again, if our hope of the Kingdom is real to us, nobody will make us ashamed, will in reality make us feel despised, or make us stumble. The reality ahead will transfix us so that all human unkindness toward us gains no permanent lodgment in our hearts. We do well to review our way of talking and acting to ensure we do not shame others. Think again of the shaming effect of phrases like “No true Christian smokes”. “No brother of Christ worthy of the name ever uses bad language”. What of the brother who smokes, the sister who does sadly swear under her breath in frustration...? These are none the less brethren who have believed in the Lord and are secured in Him, sitting in exalted, Heavenly places in Christ. They are therefore and thereby every bit equal to the brother who confidently makes those statements from a platform. Quite simply, we should not speak nor act in a way that shames or demeans another person. Carefully consider whether we have to use phrases like “As we all know...”, “No true Christian will...”, “No Christian worthy of the name can...”. They may be valid for use in the right contexts. But, just think about it. Consider your ways. Let *sensitivity to others* be the controlling rule of your speaking and being. We all tend to have pet phrases or set patterns of behaviour when we meet certain views or personality types who irritate us. We need to examine these, truly willing to pluck out the eye that causes offence. And when we feel we are truly in the right and they are wrong, then is the time for the unlimited forgiveness and seeking of the lost until we find them- with that positive, seeking, hopeful spirit of the Lord.

### ***Receiving Others***

To not offend others we must “receive” them (Mt. 18:5). It is written of Jesus that when crowds of materialistic, fascinated people followed Him, “He received them , and spake unto them of the Kingdom” (Lk. 9:11). He didn’t just turn round and read them a lecture about the Kingdom. “He *received* them”. Presumably Luke means to reflect how he perceived something in the Lord’s body language that was receiving of that crowd of peasants- whom we would likely have written off as just dumb groupies with no more than surface level interest. And we too must receive one another, even as the Lord has received us (Rom. 15:7)- and this includes receiving him who is even weak in the faith (Rom. 14:1). We should be looking for every reason to receive and fellowship our brethren, rather than reasons not to.

The essence of living this kind of life is the cross of Christ. Paul brings this out in Rom. 14:21-15:3: “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor *any thing* whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak...We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me”. The quotation is from a Psalm which refers to the crucifixion of Jesus. Yet Paul applies this to us, in our bearing with the weaknesses of our brethren and seeking not to offend them. For this is the living out of the crucifixion life in ours. This is putting meaning into words, reality into the regular action of

taking bread and wine in identity with that sacrifice. Sensitively bearing with our brethren, not doing anything that weakens or offends them, but rather building them up by our patience and tolerance of their scruples and limited perceptions. This is the cross, for us. The more we realize the height of the calling, the more even like our Lord we balk at what we are really being asked to do. It is *so hard* not to offend others and to commit ourselves to only building them up. As hard, in barest essence, as the cross of Calvary, on a day in April, on a Friday afternoon, about 1970 years ago.

### 19-3 Paul And Philemon

Paul's masterful letter to Philemon brings out the consequences of all this. He parallels loving the Lord Jesus with loving "all saints" (Philemon 5). To receive Onesimus was to receive Paul (Philemon 12); and "if thou count me therefore a partner [Gk. *Koinonos*- 'one in fellowship'], receive him as myself" (Philemon 17). Paul is saying that if we receive any brother, then, we receive him. He clearly has in mind the Lord's teaching, that if we receive Him, then we are to receive His brethren. So if we receive any brother, we not only receive the Lord Jesus, but we receive all other brethren in Christ; for each brother represents the entire body of Christ. This shows the utter fallacy of division within the one body. It is an utter nonsense to accept one brother, but not the other brethren, e.g., of his ecclesia. According to the logic of Philemon 17, if we don't accept a true brother, then we are not treating our other brethren as being in fellowship. For Paul says that if Philemon considered *him* to be in fellowship, then Philemon ought to accept Onesimus. Likewise, he reasons that he saw in Onesimus the face of Philemon; for Onesimus ministered unto Paul "in thy [Philemon's] stead" (Philemon 13). The implications of this are far reaching. For by refusing fellowship with our brethren, we are effectively declaring ourselves outside of the body of Christ. And hence Paul's sober warnings in 1 Cor. 11, to discern / recognize the Lord's body; for if we refuse to break bread with our brethren, then, he says, we are eating and drinking damnation to ourselves, because we refuse to accept our part in the Lord's body.

My observation is that personal experience of bad behaviour by brethren is the number one reason why individuals quit the community. However, those brethren who acted badly nearly always are held by others to be upright and good living brethren. And so division develops. Some see their bad behaviour and say 'Well, that shows for sure he's a bad guy'. To which another group respond: 'But whatever you say, I know him well, and from personal experience, I know he's a good guy'. And the argument goes on: 'Ha? You call *him*, who did such bad things to me, a good guy? What Gospel do you believe? Certainly not the one I do...'. This is no caricature. This scenario plays itself out, in essence, time and again. What can be done about this? For one, we should recognize that we all go through the struggle of Paul in Romans 7. We have the new man in Christ within us, who does the good works; yet our old man of the flesh is not as dead as he ought to be, and surfaces at times, in actions and attitudes. If we're honest, we see this in our own lives, if only we would stand back and see ourselves from outside of ourselves. So it should be no surprise that other brethren act in the same almost schizophrenic manner. Indeed, it is often claimed that brethren who do both good and bad things to other brethren are not mentally OK. This is merely an observation on human nature; we all have this schizophrenic ability, as Paul did, to do both good and evil. But it doesn't mean we're any more of a head case than the man or woman next to us. Paul gives an excellent pattern to us in how he dealt with Philemon, whom, it would appear, had not treated neither Paul nor Onesimus in a Christ-like way. Paul genuinely rejoices in the good deeds of Philemon in other contexts: "We have great joy...in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother". But he goes on to ask Philemon to do this

to him: “Brother, let me have joy of thee...refresh my bowels” (Philemon 7,20). The two verses are clearly linked to each other- the words “joy”, “brother”, “refresh”, “bowels” etc recur. Paul appears to be saying: ‘I fully recognize, brother, that you’ve done many good things, given other brethren joy, refreshed their hearts. But, you’ve not done that to your slave, brother Onesimus, neither to me. But I acknowledge the good, Christ-like things in you that I see, in other contexts (v. 6). But please, expand that love to include me; please, treat me in the same good way you’ve treated other brethren; treat me too as a brother in Christ’. Now this sets a wonderful example to us. To acknowledge even in our bitterest enemy in the ecclesia, some good things. Because they are in Christ. To realize that how they are treating us is not actually how they treat all brethren. And to plead with them as does Paul, “for love’s sake”, to treat us in the graceful way they treat their other brethren.

### ***Summing Up***

We can avoid being caused to stumble by living a life that is focused upon the person of Jesus. We must know our own utter desperation. The grace we have received must be allowed to transform our lives radically, so that we forgive. We need to so relate to our brethren that we let ourselves gain sustenance from them, so that we know we can never leave the body of Jesus come what may. And on the other hand, we must recognize that we are the face of Jesus to our brethren. We represent Him to them, and His deepest passion is for their salvation. This must be ours too. We will articulate this through a respect of others persons, and a deep seated hopefulness for their salvation. It will take effort, the plucking out of eyes and severing of limbs. I believe we can collectively improve in these matters, and I dare to think we are slowly doing so. This is how the true church can grow. With less offence, both given and taken, our community will grow bigger numerically, for fewer will leave. And there will be fewer disillusioned sideliners. But most importantly, we will *all* work together in a greater harmony, and thus the body will build itself up in love, compacted by that which every part supplies, and thus hasten the day of the Lord’s return. Amen.

## **19-4 Vendettas And Hatred In The Church**

### ***How It Happens***

I’ve met so many, many believers who have been hurt beyond description by what they perceive to be vendettas against them by other brethren. Listening to them, it does indeed appear to be the case. But it’s also highly doubtful that brethren who in many walks of their lives are good Christians, would purposefully sit down and plan out a series of attacks upon another brother or sister, with the conscious aim of bringing about his or her downfall in their community. And yet, looking at things from the viewpoint of those who are hurt, one can understand their perception.

I suggest that what happens is actually a psychological phenomena. Spiritual and psychological principles are often seen more clearly expressed in the natural world; and the phenomena of the ‘feeding frenzy’ seems to me to best explain it. “In the animal world, no activity is more classically frenzied than the feeding of sharks, piranhas or blue-fish when they encounter a wounded prey. These attack-fish with extraordinarily acute senses first search out weak, ill or injured targets. On locating them, each hunter moves in quickly to gain a share of the kill, feeding not just off the victim but also off its fellow hunters’ agitation. The excitement and drama of the violent encounter builds to a crescendo, sometimes

overwhelming the creatures' usual inhibitions. The frenzy can spread, with the delirious attackers wildly striking any object that moves in the water, even each other”<sup>(1)</sup>.

Every phrase in this description has been simply so true in the unhappy experience of our community. The fact that doctrine and behaviour clearly matter, has led some to be hypersensitive to the possible faults of others, both in understanding and action. They've overlooked Rom. 14:1: “Him that is weak in the faith, receive...”! Coupled with an undoubted sense that there is ‘guilt by association’, these brethren have “acute senses”. They naturally home in on the weaknesses of others. If anyone is felt to be thinking outside the box, then the human weaknesses common to us all are sought out. And such brethren feed off each others’ “agitation”- lengthy phone calls, endless emailing, meetings, hand-wringing meetings of concern... lead them as a group to cast off the “usual inhibitions” which they have as Christians against unkind and unjust behaviour. This is why brethren who otherwise may lead truly good lives can end up part of a frenzy of attack upon others which is so uncharacteristic of them. The amount of time they spend about this kind of thing is usually a tiny fraction of the effort they actually make with the individual who is supposed to be so wrong. And the frenzy spreads, to the point of a delirious mania. Anything that moves is attacked; anyone who is thinking or acting for themselves outside of the herd mentality. And then, having hurt themselves during their mad frenzy, both emotionally and spiritually, they turn on each other. An analogy from the sports world would be the phenomena of ‘piling on’ in rugby football. A man is down, and there appears a senseless phenomena of all jumping on the pile of bodies. Both sides are hurt, energy is wasted, direction is lost, the ball is buried, the game can’t go on. And this, I suggest, is why a community which has the potential to radically change the world, to be a powerful, cutting-edge influence upon society, is so often found ineffective, lost and floundering.

What happens at times in our community is repeated many times in the world of politics and in other religious communities. And that's simply because it's the same basic psychological phenomena working itself out.

### **Why?**

But pushing deeper. Why do people chose to believe slanderous attacks, or join in with them because others are indulging themselves?

### ***The Collapse Of Reason***

The decline in basic moral justice and judgment in our world has without doubt influenced us. The Western world in particular has almost stopped thinking, and is thus unable to arrive at truth. Conclusions are presented and accepted; sifting through written material and weighing up truth for oneself is a struggle rarely seen today. Communication has moved away from words to pictures and images- thanks to TV and the internet. And our reasoning, therefore, has become more subjective, rather than rational and logical. ‘Truth’ has been reduced to propaganda and nicely presented opinion; rigorous examination of evidence, the struggle of internal and external debate, is something 21<sup>st</sup> century people are too lazy for. Further, e-mail, text messaging, along with the TV and internet culture, has *trivialized communication*. Let me say it again, because I think it's crucial: *communication has been trivialized*.

The result of this is that we not only have difficulty in truly communicating, but we have a problem with any form of judgment or coming to truth if it means concentrating upon written material, or our own judgment of truly first hand evidence <sup>(2)</sup>. We tend to shrug and think ‘There’s no smoke without fire’ when we receive allegations against others, and not seek to either ignore the matter, or get to the first hand truth of it. All this has led to the supreme truth of the maxim: “The media is the message”. It’s no longer so important *what* you say, the position you adopt, the truth you communicate, the basic person you are. It’s all about *how* you articulate it. The person who makes a slick, attractive presentation will carry the day, rather than the one with truth and reality on his side, who simply says it how it is. It’s always been the case, but in this ‘media is the message’ world, it’s truer now than ever before. And when the slick and the suave present slander and personal attacks in an acceptable way, very few see it for what it is.

And all this links in with another sad feature of our modern world- a lack of personal loyalty. Friendships and relationships of a lifetime are torn up, because individuals chose to follow the lead of what they perceive to be as ‘truth’ about another individual- without judging the issue by their personal knowledge of the person, and with little attention to actual truth. So powerfully has the media become the message, that it is allowed even to destroy personal relationships- if the ‘message’ is to dissociate from your friend or family member. And so as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, " In the end it is not the words of our enemies we will remember, but the silence of our friends."

### ***Misplaced Ideals***

Against this background, there arises the basic problem that there are amongst us some paranoid about ‘heresy’. They perceive in any innovative thinking an element of *change*; and this becomes perceived as a threat to their doctrines and traditions which they perceive as unmovable. And of course, the basic truths of the Gospel *are* unmovable; and there *is* such a thing as heresy. But this doesn’t justify attacking those who do and speak of things which we simply don’t understand or haven’t experienced. Ironically, the Greek word for ‘heresy’ is the very word used to describe those divisions / ‘sects’ which should not be amongst us (see its usage in Acts 15:5; 24:5). To divide the Lord’s body is itself a heresy; and yet it is so often done in order to protect His body, supposedly, from heresy. Yet the difference between the heresy and the heretic is often fudged. The person gets attacked rather than their beliefs. So often we’ve seen this happened. A brother may, e.g., have views of the interpretation of prophecy which are found obnoxious by some. Yet the criticism of him will tend to get personal; his character is besmirched, because it’s felt that this is justified because he [supposedly] has ‘heretical’ views.

But as we know, there *is* such a thing as heresy / false teaching. But we must be absolutely certain that any given brother or sister is in fact holding and spreading those wrong views, or living a profligate life. It’s quite wrong to take statements or actions out of their context; and of course it’s always easier to attack those who have written and thought and laboured the most. This is how it happens that a community ends up persecuting or even expelling their most active workers and thinkers. They provide more material through which the critics can nose in order to find ammunition for their cause. And this has led to a great paradox: a fine living and hard working brother or sister who expresses a slightly controversial interpretation of Scripture, or who makes a momentary personal slip, is likely to suffer character assassination and expulsion. If someone e.g. writes a book that is perceived as controversial, soon the attacks move on from criticism of what was written, to the personality of the author.

Over time, the actual issues become less important, and the person of the author becomes the main point of attack. The unconscious reasoning is that we must ‘kill the messenger’ in order to stop the spread of the message. But this is certainly not how the Father and Son deal with error amongst us. The result of this is that each ecclesia likely has its share of those who , e.g., rarely read Scripture, pray little [on their own admission], abuse drugs, are regularly immoral, fill their lives with the things of the world, share their lives with unbelievers... and [quite rightly] the ecclesia patiently bears with them, and every effort is made to keep them coming along to meetings, however occasionally.

There *must be* a personal approach to the person we’re so worried about. Yet this is so rarely done. Surely this would indicate that there is not much desire for the personal salvation or correction of the individual; rather is there a concern with doing what is perceived to be right or ‘sound’ amongst our peers, or an upholding of a community position. Care and value of the individual is simply lacking if we fail to approach them first, privately, over any matter. And if there is a genuine retraction of wrong teaching or action, let’s realize how much humility that requires. Let’s also recognize that we all have gaps in our understanding, and we all certainly have a whole history behind us of misjudgements, weakness of character, and outright sins. We should only enter the battle of criticizing another with a trembling awareness of our own intellectual, spiritual and moral frailty, ‘considering ourselves, lest we also fall’ (Gal. 6:1). And nearly all Bible heroes are characterized by some major moral or spiritual failure; and certainly aspects of their understanding of God’s revelation which were significantly incomplete. David, Noah, Jacob, Abraham, Jonah, Peter, the disciples, Elijah... came randomly into my mind as I write this. Not that this in any way minimizes our own failures. Nor those of others. But it’s a point worth bearing in mind, as we seek to reflect the *restorative spirit* of the Lord to others.

In the experience of the wider Christian community, it is very often Charismatic or Pentecostal types who come under personal attack and character assassination. Some quite justifiably; but far from all. I sense here another great irony. The tension between emotion and rationality has, in my experience, been at the root of much division. The supposedly ‘rational’ types are repulsed by the supposedly ‘emotional’ or subjective approach of others; and they are easily charged with heresy. But here’s the rub: in line with what I tried to explain earlier, the heresy hunters, defenders of the faith, etc, are the ones guilty of not being *truly* rational as God wishes. Very often the victims on the ‘emotional’ side are caricatured. Because, e.g., someone plays a guitar at a meeting...he’s therefore and thereby ‘sloppy’, ‘unsound’, ‘loose’, ‘red under the bed’, ‘undermining us’ etc etc. And the ecclesia where he plays is caricatured as ‘apostate’, ‘emotionally out of control’, ‘rejected the Bible’ etc. Or unrepresentative statements or individuals are focused upon in order to blacken an individual or an ecclesia. It’s frightfully easy for both ‘sides’ to caricature the other. But here’s where what we said about *true* rationality, right judgment, comes into play. Such caricaturing shows a lack of concern for the *individual*, and certainly no attempt at *understanding*, which is surely so crucial to the love and grace we have known in the Lord Jesus.

### ***The Damage done***

Looking back through the history of the preaching of the true Gospel, there have been periods of great growth and dynamism; yet nearly all of them came to an end as a result of church politics, and personal attacks upon the main sources of dynamism. Paul is the obvious example; maligned and rejected by his converts, all Asia turned away from him, and the amazing mission he spearheaded came to an end, with the church dividing and going off into

institutionalization and apostasy. Or take the amazing growth of the Brethren in Christ movement in the years 1870-1885, as chronicled by Andrew Wilson. The numbers of baptisms dropped off sharply after 1885 as a result of the split between Robert Roberts and the main preachers, who were initially accused of false doctrine, and then personally vilified. And it could be that history is working itself out again. There was an unprecedented expansion of the same group world-wide in the 1990s. But recent frictions mean that this great explosion, which could have possibly even heralded the Lord's return, by getting the true Gospel into "all the world", will now likewise fizzle out due to politics. But we don't have to allow this to happen. History is there for our learning. It would appear that the Christian community has now within it a group of brethren who are acting more like vigilantes, searching around for guilt on the part of those they have focused in upon, asking around for even childhood recollections of their victims, acting like the witch hunters of previous centuries, carrying out "justice" at the tip of their pen or on their computer keyboards rather than with a noose. They need to be *accountable* to the community they belong to. Their lack of accountability only enables them to go on in their misguided work. And it is us as individual members of the Lord's body who should hold them accountable. And we do this by judging just judgment, and communicating properly and meaningfully as God intended.

Our motive must surely be for the unity of the Lord's body, that we don't lose yet more fine brethren and sisters, and so that the wonderful growth of the Gospel can continue, ushering in the Lord's return to a body that is united as His bride should be.

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### **Notes**

(1) Larry Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics* (New York: MacMillan, 1991) p. 6.

(2) Seeing the Bible is a written medium, this has some frightening consequences. The Lord likens truly hearing His words to digging a foundation on hard rock. The Bible isn't an 'easy read'; and it's a long book. Yet we are living in a world where information has to be presented in easily digestible form, as a quick, attractive read- or else nobody will bother with it. When I hear brethren say 'Well, I don't read long books', I wonder what they make of the Bible.

## **20. The Urgency of Our Task**

### **20-1 The Urgency Of The Preacher**

The crying out of wisdom in Proverbs is alluded to by the Lord as the pattern for our appealing to men and women. A feast is prepared by wisdom, and she sends out people to invite others to come in to it (Prov. 9:1-3)- clearly the basis for the Lord's parable about the King's feast. Those who reject these invitations sin against their own souls (Prov. 8:36)- just as those who reject our witness reject the appeal of God against themselves (Lk. 7:30). Wisdom appeals to people "where the paths meet" (Prov. 8:2 RV), just as the Lord taught that our witness to people places them at a 'crossroad', whereby they have to decide for or against their God. In this context my point is that the appeal of "wisdom" in Proverbs is in a spirit of *urgency*- an urgency inspired by the ultimate seriousness of the message, and the fact that there are only two paths in Proverbs which men can chose. It's either eternal life or eternal death, the way of wisdom or folly, obedience to the call of the woman wisdom or to the call of the harlot. There's no third way- and this should be the spirit of our witness. Insofar as we

appreciate the ultimate eternity of the issues we're preaching about, so we will find a power of urgency that somehow appeals to people and compels them.

In a preaching context, Paul tells us to "redeem the time", or "be buying up the opportunity" (Col. 4:5 RVmg.); we are to urgently snap up every opportunity to preach. As we read the preaching of Jesus, one cannot but be impressed by the gravity of His message. He never spoke of His message, of His person and His Kingdom, in a take-it-or-leave-it way, as thought it didn't matter how His hearers responded. And we ought to preach as He preached. He realized that how His hearers responded would determine the structure of their whole lives and what their eternal destiny would be. He urged His preachers to exchange no greetings on the road as they pressed on to take His Gospel to others (Lk. 10:4). This would have been seen as most unusual and even offensive in first century Palestine. The people would have had their attention arrested by this- these preachers of the man from Nazareth had an urgency about them, a sense of utmost priority in the work they were about. They were to be known as men in an urgent hurry. "Leave the dead to bury their dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom" (Lk. 9:60) would have been more shocking to first century ears than it is even to ours. For to bury his father was the most elemental duty of a Jewish son- "in Jewish custom it came before other fundamental religious responsibilities like reciting the Shema" <sup>(1)</sup>. And the urgency about the preacher was to elicit a like urgency in the response of their hearers.

The Lord taught us that we should have a sense of urgency in our response to others. The Lord showed by His example that it is better to meet the hunger of human need than to keep the letter of Sabbath rules (Mk. 2:25,26). *His* urgency, *God's* urgency, *our* consequent urgency...all means that when even Divine principles appear to come into conflict, we are to be influenced above all by the urgency of others' need. " Which of you shall have a son fallen into a well, and will not straightway draw him up?" (Lk. 14:5 RV). Wells weren't that wide. Only a small child would fall down one. We can imagine the tragic situation in the home. " Benny's fallen down the well!" . And everyone would go running. They wouldn't wait until the Saturday evening. Nor would they worry the slightest about infringing the letter of the law. And so, the Lord explained, that little boy was like the sick men and women, sick both physically and spiritually, whom He saw around Him. There was an *urgency* which He felt about them. And so there should be with us too. We can realize that this world is evil and vain; and yet we can still fail to perceive the tragedy of it all, and the urgency of our task to save at least some. The Father of the prodigal told the servants: " Bring forth *quickly* the best robe" (Lk. 15:22 RV). The indebted man was told to sit down *quickly* and have his debt reduced (Lk. 16:6). There is an urgency in the mediation of mercy towards others. Because this world cannot hear without a preacher, we must "preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:1 RSV). I take this to mean that whether or not we feel like it, whether or not an opportunity seems to have arisen to witness, there should be a compelling urgency which leads us to make the openings and pique interest in our message. The salvation of others is in our hands. Any laziness in this work is effectively an act of selfishness and a statement that we are willing to see the eternal loss of others- because we couldn't be bothered. In this spirit Prov. 18:9 RV warns: "He that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a destroyer".

The accounts of the Lord's resurrection and the imparting of that good news to others are studded with the idea of speedy response. "Go quickly and tell his disciples...and they departed quickly...and did run to bring his disciples word" (Mt. 28:7,8). The accounts show how Mary "quickly" told the disciples, the women did likewise, the two on the way to

Emmaus ran back to town and urgently told the others that the Lord had risen...and then the record climaxes in bidding us take that very same good news of the resurrection to the whole world. But the implication from the context is that it is to be done with the same spirit of urgency. We are merely continuing in the spirit of those who first spread that good news.

### ***The Nature Of The Gospel***

The Greek word *evangelion* translated 'Gospel' means, strictly, 'good news that is being passed on'; for example, the good news of a victory was passed on by runners to the capital city (cp. the Hebrew association of carrying tidings, and good news: 2 Sam. 18:20). Once it had been spread around and everyone knew it, it ceased to be *evangelion*; it was no longer news that needed to be passed on. But in that time when there was a *joyful urgency* to pass it on, it was *evangelion*. Notice, heralding is not the same as lecturing. Our community for far too long equated preaching, good newsing, with lecturing. Lecturing seeks no result; whereas the herald of God has an urgency and breathlessness about his message. There must be a passion and enthusiasm in us for the message of Christ and His Kingdom. More to be feared than over emotionalism is the dry, detached utterance of facts as a droning lecture, which has neither heart nor soul in it. Man's peril, Christ's salvation...these things cannot mean so little to us that we feel no warmth or passion rise within us as we speak about them. Remember how the early preachers were so enthusiastic in their witness that they were thought to be drunk. We are insistently pressing our good news upon others- evangelizing. And the Spirit has chosen this precise word to describe that understanding and hope which has been committed to our trust. If we have the Truth, the Gospel, it is *of itself* something that by its very nature *must* be passed on. For this is in fact what the *evangelion* is- good news in the process of being passed on.

You will recall the record of how the desperate, starving lepers found great treasure and went and hid it (2 Kings 7:8). The Lord used this as the basis for His parable about the man who finds the Gospel, as the treasure in a field, and hides it. But surely He intended us to think of what those men did afterwards. "They said one to another, We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings ['the Gospel'], and we hold our peace". They even felt that woe would be unto them if they did not share the good news of what they had found. The same joyful urgency must be ours.

" God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself...and hath committed unto us the word (Gospel) of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech (men) by us...we then, as workers together with Him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted...behold, now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 5:19-6:2). We are the means by which God is appealing to mankind; and we must do this while there is the opportunity for salvation. According to 2 Cor.5, in prospect, God reconciled the whole world to Himself on the cross, the devil was destroyed, *all* sin was overcome then, in prospect. In this sense Christ is the propitiation for our sins as much as He is for those of the whole world (1 Jn. 2:2). On the cross, He bore away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29). So now we must spread this good news to the whole world, for *all* men's sins were conquered on the cross. God is eager that none should perish, but all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:8); and seeing that we preach "the Gospel of God" (1 Thess. 2:2), the God who is "the saviour of all men", we likewise must offer this Gospel to as many as possible. Again, the motivation for world-wide preaching did not change at the end of the first century. To limit our preaching is to limit God; and limit Him we can, seeing that His purpose works in harmony

with human freewill decisions. The urgency which shines through Paul's thinking here is just as true today, if not more so. "The day of salvation" was not just in the first century; it is now as well.

God Himself has an urgency for human salvation; the Lord drew a parallel between the man who rushed out to save his animal on the Sabbath, and His waiving of the Sabbath rules in order to save others. Indeed, the way He did His miracles on the Sabbath rather than waiting shows His sense of urgency; not a day could be wasted for the sake of human scruples. And further, the Lord said that to refrain from saving a man when it was in your power to do so was effectively "to do evil...to destroy" (Lk. 6:9). This is how the Lord looks at our laziness and passivity- as active wrongdoing.

### **" Go out quickly "**

The parable of the great supper chronicles the preaching of the Gospel over time. There were three stages of appeal: "To them that were bidden" (the Jews in Israel), to those in the streets and lanes of the city (the Jewish Diaspora), and finally, in a spirit of urgency, the preachers are commanded: "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled" (Lk. 14:16-23; the same spirit of urgency in witness is to be found in the Lord's command to His preachers to cut the courtesy of prolonged greetings). Once the required number are in God's spiritual house, the feast will begin- and that feast represents eating bread in the Kingdom, at the second coming (Lk. 14:15). The language of 'going out' should be connected to the command to 'go and teach all nations'. The parable concerns the master of the house (God) commanding His servant (Christ); yet the connection with the preaching commission indicates that the commission given to Christ He fulfills through us, as demonstrated earlier in this study. The ever increasing sense of urgency in the appeal to 'come in' ought to be reflected in our preaching in these last days.

The tragedy of the fact that the Jews by and large rejected the invitation of God meant that the servants are asked to "Go out quickly into the streets and lanes...and bring in [any who will respond]" (Lk. 14:21). The 'quickness' of the preachers is matched by the 'quickness' of the response of those who heard them in the first century. Now what this means is that if we as preachers have an urgency about our approach and our presentation of the message, then people will respond quickly. If we present the urgent good news as a set of academic propositions to be studied at length in the comfort of an untroubled conscience, then those who respond [if they do at all] will do so with the same laid back, cool, calculating attitude. Peter preached on Pentecost with a fire and passion which came from realizing the urgency of human need and Christ's salvation. And this is why, it seems to me, the people responded so quickly. They were baptized in a matter of hours after hearing the Gospel preached from his lips.

The way the Lord didn't just ignore the Jewish leaders, as we might ignore trouble makers at a public meeting or correspondence course students who ask endless questions...this is really quite something. He grieved for the hardness of their hearts (Mk. 3:5), and finally broke down and wept over Jerusalem, in an agony of soul that they would not respond. The apparently foolish catch questions of Mk. 3:21-29 are answered in some depth by the Lord, and He concludes with pointing out that they are putting themselves "*in danger* of eternal damnation" (although, mark, not yet condemned). One senses the urgency with which He put it to them.

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## **Notes**

(1) James Dunn, *Jesus' Call To Discipleship* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1999 ed.).

### **20-2 The Apostles' Preaching**

One can only be impressed by the way that within only three days of arriving in Rome after an awesome journey, Paul began preaching by inviting the local Jews to come to him. He would have had so much else to attend to surely, quite apart from getting over the trauma of the journey. The apostles sought to convict men of their desperation, the urgency of their position before God, the compelling nature of the cross, that they were serious sinners; that a man cannot behold the cross and be unresponsive, but rather must appropriate that work and gift to himself through baptism. The urgent appeal for repentance was quite a feature of their witness (2:38; 5:31; 7:51; 11:18; 17:30; 18:18; 20:21; 26:20; Heb. 6:1). The gap between first hearing the Gospel and being baptized would appear to have been far shorter in the 1<sup>st</sup> century than in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Because of the urgency of appeal in the approach of the preachers, the listeners responded quicker- for they sensed the compelling urgency of what they were hearing. The Gospel demands a response, and the preacher of it can really do nothing else but consciously or unconsciously urge that response upon the hearer. In the Acts account, people heard the message and within a matter of hours were baptized. The simple point is, that there was the utmost speed of response to the very same message which we have heard and preach.

Baptism needs to be perceived as a crisis point, the concentration of a whole life in a life-determining decision. It isn't an end in itself, but neither is it something drifted into. May I suggest there needs to be a greater stress on repentance in our preaching, 20 centuries later. This is why baptism was up front in their witness, for it is for the forgiveness of sins; thus in Acts 22:16 the early preachers appealed for repentance and baptism in the same breath. And this was the implication of the Lord's parabolic command to His preachers in Mt. 22:9: "Go ye therefore [cp. "go ye therefore and teach all nations"] unto the partings of the highways" (RV) and invite people to the wedding feast of the Kingdom. The point from which He foresaw us making our appeal was a fork in the road. We are to appeal to men and women with the message that there is no third road; that it truly is a case of believe or perish. There is no example of apologetics in their preaching, but rather an utter confidence that they were holding out to men the words that gave eternal life. Their words, lives and body language reflected their deep sense of the peril of those outside of Christ. By preaching, they were freed from the blood of men (20:26); evidently alluding to how the watchman must die if he didn't warn the people of their impending fate (Ez. 3:18). In line with this, "*necessity* is laid upon me...woe is unto me if I preach not the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). Paul felt an ineffable sorrow and personal responsibility for the unbelieving Jews, to the point that after the pattern of Moses he would fain have given his salvation for theirs (Rom. 9:1). This was quite something. And it would have been noticeable in the style of his witness, and such a level of love would surely have found response. There are times it sends shivers down my spine to realize that men like Paul and Moses were willing to give up their eternal life for others. What a height of love they rose to. And what an unending challenge they are to us.

### ***"Forthwith...immediately"***

Paul and the apostles were urgent in their preaching. When Paul received the go ahead to preach in Macedonia, he “immediately endeavoured” to go there, even not waiting for Titus to join him, such was his urgency (Acts 16:10; 2 Cor. 2:12,13). And the response of people to these urgent preachers was therefore quick too. Men who began doubting and cynical were pricked in their heart, they realized their need, and were baptized within hours (Acts 2:12,37). The men who marvelled and doubted whether Peter was anything more than a magic man were within a few hours believing and being baptized (Acts 3:12; 4:4). There is a speed and power and compulsion that pounds away in the narrative. Luke has a favourite Greek word, often translated “forthwith...immediately” (Acts 3:7; 5:10; 9:18; 12:23; 13:11; 16:26,33). This is quite some emphasis; and Luke uses the very same word a lot in his Gospel, as if to show that the speed and power and achievement of the Lord’s ministry is continued in that of His ministers now (Lk. 1:64; 4:39; 5:25; 8:44,47,55; 13:13; 18:43; 19:11; 22:60). The word is scarcely used outside Luke’s writing. And he uses many other words to stress the speed and urgency and fast moving nature of the Lord’s work. They are worth highlighting in your Bible; for our ministry is a continuation of that of our early brethren (Acts 9:18-20,34; 10:33; 11:11; 12:10; 16:10; 17:10,14; 21:30,32; 22:29; 23:30). The preaching of a God hurt by sin, passionately consumed in the death of His Son, feeling every sin, rejoicing over every repentance and baptism...this was something radically different in the 1<sup>st</sup> century world, just as it is in ours. And such a God imparted a sense of urgency to those who preached Him and His feelings and ways and being, a need for urgent response, a need to relate to Him, which was simply unknown in other religions. The urgency of man’s position must be more up front in our witness. Christianity went wrong in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD because the church abstracted God and His being into nothingness, to the point that the urgent import of the true doctrines was lost in practice. May this not be the case amongst us .

Mainstream Christian groups, who do not possess the Truth which we do, have estimated that “More than 2,700 million people, which is more than two-thirds of all humanity, have yet to be evangelised. We are ashamed that so many have been neglected; it is a standing rebuke to us and to the whole Church. There is now, however, in many parts of the world an unprecedented receptivity to the Lord Jesus Christ” [taken from *The Lausanne Covenant*]. These words are surely a challenge to us. For far less than two thirds of all humanity have heard the Truth. The urgency of *our* task, possessing God’s saving Truth as we do, is far greater. Or it ought to be.

### ***Jesus Is Coming***

Urgent response in view of coming judgment is a repeated theme in the teaching of Jesus. His servants are to wait in hourly anticipation of His return (Mk. 13:34-36; Lk. 12:36-38); the day of reckoning is even now at hand, all our guilt will be uncovered, and we should act now before it is too late (Lk. 16:1-8). We are as a guilty man about to be hauled to court, whose only way out is to make peace with his offended brother (Mt. 5:25,26). Unless we repent, a great tower is about to fall upon us (Lk. 13:1-5). Jesus saw Divine judgment as something imminent, something which is essentially happening now, and therefore day by day we need to live accordingly. He insisted that any supposition that life will simply carry on as it is...was a fatal delusion. He piercingly dismantles our natural human assumption that life can be broadly maintained as it is or simply adapted a little. There is an urgent need to *change* and to keep on being *transformed* in the new life in Him. So the urgency of response is because the Lord is coming back soon, but also because He is right now our constant and

insistent judge. Our generation particularly ought to have a sense of urgency. For I will go on record as saying that I do truly believe the Lord may very well come in our time. He is near, even at the doors. Written in our lives, as a neon sign in the black of our human lives, should be the simple reality: *Jesus Is Coming*.

The unjust steward in the parable of Luke 16 ran round forgiving others their debts, so that in his time of crisis and judgment he would have a way out of his own debt problems. And in the context of forgiving our brethren, the Lord holds him up as an example. But He laments that sadly, the children of this world are often wiser than the children of the Kingdom, i.e. the believers (Lk. 16:8). I take this as meaning that the Lord is sorry that His people don't see the same obvious need to forgive each other, in view of their own inadequacies and the coming of judgment. The children of this world see the coming of their judgments and the urgency of the need to prepare, far more strongly than many of us do; we who face the ultimate crisis of sinful, responsible man meeting with an Almighty God.

### ***Ready To Respond***

The Passover night is alluded to in the New Testament as being typical of the spirit which we ought to have in daily life as we await the Lord's return. They were to eat it with their clothes girded together ready to up and go, huddled together in their family / ecclesial units, focused upon the slain Passover lamb in their midst which was to be their salvation. "Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind...and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ...forasmuch as ye know that ye were [redeemed] with...the precious blood of Christ, as of a [Passover] lamb without blemish" (1 Pet. 1:13,18,21). "Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning, and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord, when he will return...that they may open unto him immediately" (Lk. 12:35,36). In order to be ready to quit this life at any moment, with no looking back after the pattern of Lot's wife, we need to live in a daily spirit of urgent awareness of our position, living as we do in Egyptian darkness.

How we respond to Jesus now is how we will respond at His return. Those who open to Him immediately will be saved (Lk. 12:36). The wise virgins go immediately and are thereby accepted, whereas the foolish delay their response. The implication is surely that those who are ready to drop all and go when He knocks, will be saved. Our reaction in that split second of knowing 'He's back!' will determine our eternal destiny; it will effectively be our self-judgment. And yet in this life too, the figure of the Lord knocking at our door is used to describe our response to Jesus in this life (Rev. 3:20). If there is no immediacy of response now, there will not be then.

We must agree with our adversary quickly, for we are on our way to judgment (Mt. 5:25). The call of the Gospel is effectively a call to go to judgment. If we truly perceive this, and our coming need for the utmost grace, we will settle our differences with our brethren—"quickly". The whole Kingdom of God is likened to the parable of the virgins about the judgment (Mt. 25:1). We are *speeding* towards judgment, therefore we should watch with urgency what manner of people we are (2 Pet. 3:11,12). "The things that shall come upon them, sealed up among my treasures, make haste" (Dt. 32:34,35 Heb.). We are on our way to judgment day, and that day is rushing towards us (cp. Lk. 14:31); the hearing of the Gospel is in itself a call to go forth and meet the Lord (Mt. 22:8). The believer is called to his Lord to receive his pounds, and yet is also again called to Him in judgment at His return (Lk. 19:13,15). The repetition of the idea of being called to our Lord surely suggests that our

calling to Him in the first place is in fact a calling to judgment. We are being gathered to judgment *now* (Mt. 13:47; 22:10; Jn. 11:52) although we will be gathered then to meet the Lord (s.w. Mt. 3:12; 13:30). The point is, we must act now as men and women will do when they are on their way to judgment, and the meeting with their ultimate destiny. Then we will not be bickering amongst ourselves or worrying about our worldly advantage; then, only one thing will matter. And so now, only one thing matters. The Christian life is likened to a man on his way to his judge along with his adversary (Lk. 12:58); and evidently, he ought to settle his differences with his brother before he arrives, for this judge will be extremely hard upon those who cannot be reconciled to their brethren. This would suggest that the Lord foresaw that getting along with our brethren would be a major part in the development process of His people; and as they draw closer to the day of meeting with Him, the more urgent is the need to settle their disputes, as He will be unsympathetic towards them. Indeed, the point of conversion is the beginning of the gathering (Lk. 11:23; Jn. 4:36)

### **20-3 Urgent Response To The Gospel**

And yet it shouldn't just be the nearness of the Lord's return that makes us urgent. Our decisions to give over each part of our lives, radically, to Jesus should be made not just because life is short and the Lord is at the door; but also because it might otherwise be too late to undo the damage a self-engrossed life has already caused, to the self and to others. Rebekah responded immediately to the call to go marry Isaac, in a story which is clearly to be read as an acted parable of the search for a bride for Jesus. Her 'quick' response is one of her characteristics (Gen. 24:18,20,26,46,64). Abraham likewise "rose up early" after his night time vision, requiring him to offer his son to God (Gen. 22:1,3). Joshua "therefore" started to attack the confederacy of local kings, in the middle of the night, immediately after God had assured him of victory (Josh. 10:9). David could write: "I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments" (Ps. 119:60). We cannot be passive on receiving the opportunity to serve God. We will urgently seek to do something with what we have been enabled to do for the Lord: "The servant who got five bags *went quickly* to invest the money and earned five more bags" (Mt. 25:16 NCV). The law of the peace offerings was designed so as to encourage the person who decided to make such a freewill offering to execute immediately-they were to eat it the same day they offered it, and the sacrifice would be totally unacceptable if it was killed but left for some days (Lev. 19:5-7). If we have an impulse to respond to the Lord, we should respond to it immediately. This isn't mere impetuosity. It's a spirit of always having an immediacy of response, which empowers us to overcome the procrastination which holds us back so much.

The Lord spoke of each man who finds the Gospel as a merchant who comes across a pearl of surpassing beauty, and sells all he has to buy it. And again, He compares our 'unexpected' stumbling upon the Truth to a man who finds a field containing treasure, and immediately buys the field. The implication is definitely that the men involved urgently and quickly realized their assets in order to buy what they had come across. There is an implied speed of response, a concentration upon the task in hand to the relative exclusion of anything else. The Gospel is not to be responded to merely at the time of our conversion and baptism. Paul came to Rome to preach the Gospel to those there who had already been baptized. It is something which continually demands our response, with the same zeal of first love and conversion. The way the Lord called people in the midst of their daily lives, and they immediately "left all and followed Him" is surely recorded to set a pattern for all future response to Him (Mt. 4:22; Mk. 1:18). Those fishermen who left their nets had heard the message some time earlier, but the record is framed so as to stress the immediacy and totality of response to Him, in the

midst of daily life. In a day when the complexity of modern living can become an excuse to justify almost anything as an expression of discipleship, we need to remember the starker simplicities of Jesus' first call: "Follow me". And the immediate response which was made to it. In this sense, Jesus through His word that makes Him flesh to us, i.e. an imaginable person...still walks up to fishermen, into shops, accountants' offices, school classrooms: and bids us urgently and immediately leave behind our worldly advantage, and follow Him in the way of true discipleship.

This 'quickness' of response doesn't necessarily mean that there ought to be a hasty response in the sense of a superficial one. The seed on stony ground sprang up quickly [although this could well have been a good thing- the problem was that the joyful response didn't continue]; the man who built quickly on sand is compared unfavourably with the one who built slowly. The implications that we should respond 'quickly' to the Gospel surely mean that we should not have any element of indifference in our response to the call of God, and yet the foundations of a true spiritual life cannot be laid hastily. The Father drove out the tribes from Canaan slowly, not immediately- or at least, He potentially enabled this to happen (Jud. 2:23). But Israel were to destroy those tribes "quickly" (Dt. 9:3). Here perhaps we see what is meant- progress is slow but steady in the spiritual life, but there must be a quickness in response to the call of God for action in practice. Compare this with how on one hand, God does not become quickly angry (Ps. 103:8), and yet on the other hand He *does* get angry quickly in the sense that He immediately feels and responds to sin (Ps. 2:12); His anger 'flares up in His face'.

### ***Response To The Word***

There is an idiom in Scripture which concerns running. To 'run' is sometimes used to describe a man's response to God's word (Ps. 119:32,60; 147:15; Amos 8:11,12; Hab. 2:2; Jn. 8:37 RV; 2 Thess. 3:1 Gk.)- it must be a running, active, speedy response. Dan. 12:4 seems to imply that in the last days, God's word will be clearly understood by the brotherhood and therefore many will "run to and fro" in response. The more clearly we understand and perceive God's word, the faster we will 'run' in response. We cannot separate our Bible study from our actions. This is why we should not only do our Bible readings daily, but study and pray and strive to understand...so that we will be the more motivated in practice. It is all too easy to be apparently zealous for good causes, as are many unbelievers, because of the needs of the moment, because we are in a situation where we would feel awkward not to enthusiastically respond...but the only true and lasting motivation for good works is an understanding, a purely personal understanding, of God's will for us. When the shepherds were told that Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, they "quickly" went there- for they believed what they had understood (Lk. 2:16). Paul "immediately" went to preach in Macedonia after seeing the vision suggesting he do this (Acts 16:10), just as he "immediately" began his initial preaching commission after receiving it (Gal. 1:16).

We need to ask ourselves whether or how often we allow His words and the imperative of all that we see and know in Him actually concretely change us. Do we do something or stop doing something in response to Him? When we learnt the Gospel, we were baptized. We got wet, we went under water. Because we understood that His death and resurrection demanded this of us. We translated passages like Mk. 16:16 into actual concrete practice. But our response to the word of God must continue. Yet we are held back by our past, and by our whole humanity. People do not immediately / quickly respond to the new wine of the new covenant because, the Lord piercingly observed, they think the old was better (Lk. 5:39). He

perceived, with His amazing penetration of the human psyche, that there is a conservatism deep within us all that militates against the immediate response to Him and the new wine of His blood / sacrifice which He so seeks. Yet once we have made this immediate response in a few things, it becomes easier to get into an upward spiral of response to Him. We become truly a new creation in Him, breaking constantly with factor after factor in our past, which has previously defined us as persons. Quite simply, we become new persons, with all the rejection of the ‘old’ ways which this requires.

Sadly we are too often empirical learners. We learn by experience that fire is hot, so we better not touch it. We learn by our failures, that this or that sin isn’t really worth it. But one of the things I most respect about the Lord is that He never learnt empirically in this sense; He understood the Father’s word, and acted accordingly. And so it should be with us. If we truly believe the Bible is inspired by God’s Spirit, just one word from Him is enough. What He teaches we ought to immediately accept, to the extent that day by day as we hear His word in our daily reading, those principles become the immediate and defining features in the very core of our personalities.

### ***Immediate Response***

Note that the Lord sends out His disciples *to reap-* not to sow. He *knows* there are people out there waiting to be reaped- He doesn’t merely commission us to go out and throw a bit of seed around in a vague hope that something may come of it. Far too many a preaching campaign and bill distribution has been characterized by this approach. But we’re going out *to reap*, not to sow. This alone should create an urgency within us, to spread the word. Our sense of urgency will be related to our faith that in fact our preaching will bring results. The urgency of the call to preach is taught by the way that the Lord called men to go preaching at the most inconvenient times for them. The Lord even insisted that a man not fulfil his most basic Jewish duty- to bury his father (Lk. 9:61)- but rather go and preach the Gospel *immediately*. The poignancy of all this becomes the deeper when we realize that in first century Palestine, burial took place on the day of death. The son had just that day lost his father, and was willing to miss the traditional six days of mourning to go preach for the Lord. But no, the Lord wanted him to go *there and then, immediately*. No delay for anything was possible in the light of the knife-edge urgency of sharing Christ with others. And it was whilst Simon and Andrew were in the very act of casting their net into the sea, snap shotted in a freeze-frame of still life, silhouetted against the sea and hills of Galilee, that the Lord calls them to go preaching (Mk. 1:17). The Lord surely intended them to [at least later] figure out His allusion to Jer. 16:14-16, which prophesied that fishermen would be sent out to catch Israel and bring them home to the Father. And He called them to do that, right in the very midst of everyday life. His preachers were like harvesters working in the very last hour to bring in the harvest- in fact, the harvest was spoiling because it’s not being fully gathered. The fault for that lies with the weak efforts of the preacher-workers (Mt. 9:37). They were to go on their preaching mission without pausing to greet others, such was their haste (Lk. 10:4 cp. 2 Kings 4:29). The Greek word translated ‘greet’ also carries the idea of joining together with others. People rarely travelled alone unless they were in great haste, but rather moved in caravans. But for the Lord’s messengers, there was to be no loss of time. Every minute was to be precious. In a world full of time wasting distractions, information we don’t need to know... this is all so necessary. No wonder that when those men finally came to themselves, realized their calling, and hurled themselves in joy at this world after the Lord’s ascension... they preached repentance, immediate conversion and quick baptism, right up front.

## Passionate Life

In the first century, when people heard the Gospel, they were generally baptized immediately. This meant that the prison keeper was baptized in the middle of the night, amidst an earthquake... in essence, people heard the message, and responded immediately. We likewise heard of the Bible's teaching about baptism, and we did something concrete and actual- we got wet. We went under the water. But we must ask ourselves whether we are continuing to be responsive to the word of God which we become increasingly familiar with as we read daily. Our very familiarity with it can militate against a real response. When last did you read / understand something from Scripture, and then get up and *do something real, concrete and actual about it?* Remember how Josiah discovered the book of the Law- and he then went on to do something about it in practice. Reflect through what he did:

Josiah's actions	2 Kings	Deuteronomy
Passover kept in Jerusalem	23:21-23	16:1-8
Removed:		
Asherahs	23:4,6,14	12:3; 16:21
Star worship	23:4,11	17:3
The 'high places' and cults	23:8-20	Chapter 12
Child sacrifice	23:10	12:31; 18:10
The cultic stones / 'mazzeboth'	23:14	12:3; 16:22
Conjuring up the dead	23:24	18:11

Do you notice from where in Deuteronomy he got those ideas? From chapters 12 and 16. My suggestion is that he maxed out on that part of the 'book of the law' which was read to him, and went and did it. The Lord in the wilderness was likewise motivated by Deuteronomy chapters 6 and 8. From all the Scriptures He could have quoted to refute temptation, each of the three examples were from one or other of those two chapters. So here we have two examples, Josiah and the Lord Himself, of men who allowed Scripture to live in their lives, and who were immediately motivated by it to tangible action. Theirs was not a religion of fine Sunday morning words, intellectually admired and aesthetically pleasing. The word should likewise be made flesh in us as it was in the Lord. What is required is passionate, real, actual, tangible, concrete action and re-action to what we read and understand.

Paul told the Corinthians that he didn't want them to be "ignorant" of the powerful implications of the fact that they had been baptized into the Son of God, and were on their way to His Kingdom, being in an exactly analogous situation to Israel as they walked through the wilderness. He uses a word which is the Greek word 'agnostic'. He didn't want them to be agnostic, to be indifferent, to shrug their shoulders, at the bitingly insistent relevance of the type to them. And that type of Israel in the wilderness is most applicable to us, "upon whom the ends of the ages are come" (:11) than to any other generation. Indifference seems to have been a problem in Corinth as it is for us. By contrast, God is provoke to jealousy by our indifference to Him (1 Cor. 10:22), seeing every self-reliant act as an implicit statement that we are "stronger than he". And Paul himself could share with the Corinthians that he 'burnt' every time a brother stumbled from the way, feeling weak with the weak (2 Cor. 11:29). He uses the same word he uses in 1 Cor. 7:9 about burning in unfulfilled sexual lust. Time and again Paul uses this 'agnostic' word . He would not have us "ignorant" or agnostic about the implications of the basic doctrines we believe (1 Thess. 4:13; Rom. 1:13; 2:4; 7:1; 11:25; 1 Cor. 12:1;

2 Cor. 1:8; 1 Thess. 4:13), nor ‘agnostic’ to the fact we have been baptized and risen with Christ (Rom. 6:3). These are all things that we are almost too familiar with; and yet he urges us, down through the centuries, to never be indifferent and agnostic to these things.

### **Living On A Knife-Edge**

This urgency of our approach to preaching is in harmony with the generally urgent call to spiritual life which there is everywhere in the Lord’s teaching. He gives the impression that we are living life on a knife edge. He saw men as rushing to their destruction. We are the accused man on the steps of the court, whose case is hopeless. Now is the very last moment for him to settle up with his brother (Mt. 5:25 cp. Lk. 12:58). We’re like the unjust steward, with a knife at our throat because all our deceptions have been busted. *Everything* is at risk for the guy. Life in prison, goodbye to wife and kids, poverty... stretch out before him. He *must* get right with his brethren by forgiving them their debts. We can’t come before God with our offering, i.e. our request for forgiveness, if our brother has any complaint against us regarding unforgiveness (Mt. 5:23). Forgiving each other is as important as that. As we judge, so we will be judged. Our attitude to the least of the Lord’s brethren is our attitude to Him. There are likely no readers who don’t need this exhortation- to ensure that they have genuinely forgiven all their brethren, and that so far as lies within them, they are at peace with all men. At any moment the bridegroom may return...so have your lamp burning well, i.e. be spiritually aware and filled with the Spirit. Put on your wedding garment, the righteousness of Jesus, before it’s too late (Mt. 22:11-13). He’s just about to come. The judge stands before our door, as James puts it.

As clouds drift lazily across the sky, the seasons of life come around, the mediocre repetitiveness of life wears away at us... we can totally miss this sense of urgency which there is to be in the true Christian life. The sheer, utter, trivial boredom of our lives is shattered for ever once we realize this. Beneath the razzamattaz and glamour and bubbly personality mask we try to wear, there is a deep tiredness in this world. A tiredness with ourselves, with our society, the streets we walk, the job we do, the mindset and worldview we’re in. It all seems so much in the same groove, whether rich or poor, sick or healthy. But the life Jesus taught and lived was in itself good news. Living life on a knife edge of urgency, using every minute, going some place definite... with the commission to go and reap a harvest of people for Him. Believe me, the people are out there. Show a little faith. Roll down the window, let the wind blow back you hair, and commit yourself to the road of purpose and commitment to the Gospel which the Lord beckons you to. I know we’re all scared, wishing we were younger, more outgoing, didn’t have such complex lives...but you were born to be God’s witness in this world. He has a plan for you, people for you to reap in to the Kingdom. And if we don’t give our lives over to His service, we’ll be sucked down into the mire of an unfulfilled, uncommitted life. And even worse. Remember the parable about the converted man, whose house is empty and clean. If he doesn’t let the Lord live there, ‘Lord of every motion there’, the demons of his past will return eve more strongly and take him over (Mt. 12:44).

The Lord further taught the intensity of the life He required by taking Old Testament passages which refer to the crisis of the last days, and applying them to the daily life of His people. Take Is. 26:20, which speaks of how in the final tribulation, God’s people will shut the doors around them and pray. The Lord applies this to the daily, regular prayer of His people- we are to pray in secret, in our room, with doors closed (Mt. 6:6)- clearly an allusion to the Isaiah passage. The preachers of His Gospel are His messengers / ‘angels’ reaping in

the harvest and proclaiming God's victory. And yet these are the very things which the Angels are described as doing in the last day (Mk. 13:27; Rev. 14:6-14). Yet we are doing it right now. In the preaching of the Gospel, we are sharing with the Angels in their work. We're in tandem with them. And when the Lord taught that it was right to break the Sabbath because they were in the business of saving life (Mk. 3:4), His words were purposefully alluding to how the Maccabees had pronounced that it was acceptable for Jewish soldiers to break the Sabbath in time of war, in order to save lives through their fighting (1 Macc. 2:32). He intended His people to live as active soldiers on duty, at war in order to save the lives of God's people. Indeed, so frequently, the whole language of the future judgment is applied to us right here and now. We are living out our judgment now; we are standing as it were before the final judgment seat, and receiving our judgment for how we act, speak and feel and are.

Not only are we living out *our* judgment by how we preach; by presenting the Gospel to people we are effectively bringing the judgment to them. Paul commented how those who rejected his preaching judged / condemned themselves to be unworthy (Acts 13:46). The preacher stands in the 'highways' (Mt. 22:9)- 'the place of two roads', the Greek means, i.e. the place where two roads divide. This is what our taking of the Gospel to people means. They are given their choice. We bring the crisis of the judgment seat right in front of them, and they make their choice. Thus in a village's response to the Gospel, they divided themselves ahead of time into 'worthy' and 'unworthy' (Mt. 9:12-14). The Lord called His followers to be "fishers of men" (Mt. 4:19). The Qumran documents spoke of 'the fishers of men' as being those who would condemn Israel in the last day<sup>(1)</sup>; and yet the Lord clearly had the idea that they were to 'catch' people out of the 'sea' of the nations and bring them to salvation. So the preachers as 'fishers of men' actually have a double role- as Paul put it, to some our preaching is the savour of death, to others, the savour of life (2 Cor. 2:16). Not only does this encourage us as the preachers to *plead* with men to choose life rather than death; but it is a sober reminder that we too face the impact of the very Gospel which we ourselves preach, and must likewise live lives of ongoing response. We preach, therefore, aimed at a decision- not merely 'witnessing', nor simply imparting helpful information. Our preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom means that that very Kingdom 'comes near' to people (Mt. 9:9), in the same way as the judgment immediately precedes the final establishment of that Kingdom, so we bring the immediate prospect of the Kingdom right before men and women.

## Notes

(1) See W.H. Wuellner, *The Meaning Of 'Fishers of men'* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

## 21. The Primary Importance Of Preaching

We live in a world where "quiet desperation", or aimless, pointless distraction, is the order of the day. We who have "known the truth" have the empowerment to live a life of purpose quite unknown to the experience of the unbelievers around us.

### *The Purpose Of Life*

The first thing to get clear is that our lives are not a chance. By rejecting chance-evolution and accepting the Biblical teaching of creation-with-a-purpose, we sign ourselves up to living a purpose driven life. It has been rightly observed that whilst there may be illegitimate parents, there are never illegitimate children; for our existence is not unplanned by God. Your race, the colour of your skin, your hair, the genetic and social background which you had, all

this was planned and is usable by God. David marvelled that God had overseen his formation, bit by bit, right from the womb (Ps. 139:15). God “will fulfill his purpose for me” (Ps. 138:8). “You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Each day was recorded in your book” (Ps. 139:16). Now if this is the level of intention and planning which God put into us, we at least can draw the conclusion safely and certainly: life is not aimless. God has a purpose for us and we therefore ought to be living a purposeful life, not just drifting from experience to experience as in a half-conscious dream. God is focused upon us- “Long before he laid down earth’s foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love” (Eph. 1:4). If we are the focus of His love, God ought to be the focus of our lives. This is a simple truth upon which to build and structure human life in practice. This means that we will be more likely to be instantly obedient to the Father’s principles; we will overcome the natural desire to delay doing God’s work today, rendering obedience right now, because we reason that we can do it later. The purpose driven life wants to respond now rather than later.

The witness of the Gospel is within ourselves (1 Jn. 5:10) in the sense that it is our Christ-like life which is the essential witness to Him. Hence Peter says that a woman can win her husband to Christ “without the word”, i.e. without formal, conscious preaching. Paul parallels his preaching with God ‘revealing’ Jesus through him (Gal. 1:9). Likewise Jn. 12:38 parallels our preaching or “report” of the Gospel with the Lord Jesus, the “arm of the Lord”, being ‘revealed’ through us. The body of Christ thus witnesses to itself by simply *being* Christ to this world. This is the essence of our calling and of our lives- to manifest / reveal Christ. Indeed, our eternal future will be about God’s glory being revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). And yet we are even now partakers in that glory which shall be revealed through us in the future (1 Pet. 5:1). In this we see the connection between our present spirit of witness, and the eternal life. We ‘have’ eternal life in the sense that we live out now the essence of the life we will eternally live. Our eternal future will be all about revealing Christ, who is the glory of God; and this therefore is to be the essence of our lives today. Which is all why ‘preaching’ isn’t an optional extra to the Christian life, something some are into but not others; the essence of revealing / manifesting Christ is to be the essence of our whole existence. And further, the fact we will do this to perfection in God’s future Kingdom is seen by Paul as the ultimate encouragement for us, on account of which we can count all the sufferings of this life as nothing (Rom. 8:18).

### ***The Focus Of Slavery***

We are frequently spoken of as being slaves of God. At baptism, we changed masters (Rom. 6). Yet the implications of being a bond-slave are tremendous. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price. And we cannot serve two masters. There’s a powerful, powerful logic here. We are either slaves of ourselves, or slaves of God. Ultimate freedom to do ‘what we want’ is actually not possible. So we may as well take the path of slavery to the Father and Son. Unless we firmly accept this, life will become motion without meaning, activity without direction, events without reason. And this exactly explains the trivial, petty, pointless life “under the sun” which is the experience of rich and poor alike in this sad world. Stand and watch a stream of people passing along a busy street. The eager young woman, the tired, worried business man, the young father, the old, sick man, the middle aged woman with the blank eyes...the greatest tragedy to me is not so much death, that one day relatively soon these faces will all be face down or face up in the dust of death, but rather....the tragedy is surely that they are living life without purpose. But for us, we recognize that God has a plan for us- and that plan is positive, to do us good and not harm in our latter end (Jer. 29:11).

Nothing is insignificant in our lives. Even the smallest incidents have significance for our character development. No meeting with anyone is a chance; we have the power of eternal life in our clumsy hands, through knowing the Gospel of life. Whoever we meet we are surely intended to meet, and extend the hope of life to them. Having a sense of purpose simplifies life. There are less choices; we don't over-extend ourselves trying to do too much, with all the stress and conflict which this results in. It is meaningless work rather than overwork that wears us down and robs us of our joy. To be zealously affected in a good thing is indeed a good thing, Paul says. Life is no longer lived unthinkingly, carelessly; for we are focused upon our aims (Eph. 5:17). Think of light. Diffused light, like diffused life, has little power or impact. But when the rays of light are focused through a magnifying glass, they can cause a flame of fire; and when focused as a laser beam, they can cut through steel. The implications of being God's slave are radical when it comes to materialism. We cannot serve both God and money / mammon; where our treasure is, there will our heart be also. All self-serving is replaced by a total serving of the Father.

The image of slavery suggests a total devotion of life to our Lord's cause. Just as every part of the animal had to be offered, so we as "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1) cannot just offer certain aspects of our lives to the Lord. The life in Christ affects every part of human existence. Thus Psalm 37 parallels those who have faith, who do good (:3), who hope (:9), who are meek (:11), pure (:18), generous (:22), just (:28), wise, speakers of truth (:29), waiting for the Lord (:34), peacemakers (:37). It's not that some of us have faith and another, e.g., is generous. We may be better at some aspects of the Christ-life than others, but our model is Him, as a total person.

### ***The Kingdom Perspective***

Paul was a fine example: "I am focusing all my energies on this one thing...looking forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13). Or again in Phil. 3:15: "Let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us". The Kingdom ahead not only motivates us, but also provides perspective. From a child I have sought to imagine eternity as an infinitely long line, with this life just a few millimetres at the start. Quite simply, we should live today knowing that our eternal future is in that eternity. It will not revolve around many of the things which currently fill our minds. We should be minimalists in relation to the things of this life. If we can have this perspective of eternity before us, it changes our attitude to things. We won't spend eternity making money, buying nice things, following fashions, watching telly...we will spend it being the servants whom God intended us to be. Every act of our present lives ought to strike some chord that will vibrate in eternity. Our focus needs to be on relationships and character rather than present fun, achievements etc.

### ***The Love Of Christ***

But not only do we have the Kingdom ahead of us as a motivating factor. We have the love of Christ behind us; the fact He lived and died and resurrected for us as He did means that our lives are purpose driven. We can no longer live lives of passive, drifting indifference. The blood of Christ redeemed us from the vain way of life we received by tradition from our fathers / the world around us (1 Pet. 1:18); "I once thought all these things were very important, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done" (Phil. 3:7). Paul again reveals his heart to us in Phil. 3:10: "My determined purpose is that I may know Him- that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with him, perceiving and recognizing and understanding the wonders of his person more strongly and

more clearly". His life sought to be focused upon the Man Christ Jesus. We have each been entrusted by Him with talents- our energy, intelligence, opportunities, relationships, resources...have all been given to us *to see how we are going to use them*. And a day of answerability is surely coming. God "delights in every detail of their lives" (Ps. 37:23); and the more we perceive that interest, the more we will live the purpose driven life. Yet the tendency is to just assume these gifts from God as what we have almost by right, and that He is willing for us to live the life He has given us without deeply analyzing our choices and decisions; that our talents are things we can use as we wish because they are what life dished up to us. But they have been granted by an eager Father, anxiously watching how we will use them in *His* service, not our own. Life is a test, a trust, rather than a few decades pursuing our own happiness. We have been made unique, with unique thumbprints, eyes, voices, and each heart beats to a different pattern. And of course all this is reflected in our unique emotional makeups. All these things are given us to fulfill our unique role in the body of Christ- a part only we can play. We have a huge personal responsibility to use our lives for the God who gave them to us. What is made in His image- i.e. our bodies- must be given back to Him.

### ***Worship***

The Psalms make it clear enough that another defining aim in life is to "worship him continually...from sunrise to sunset". "More than anything else, however, we want to please him" (2 Cor. 5:9). Likewise Paul and David speak of constantly praying to God. Yet how is this possible in our busy daily lives? Perhaps one way is to make it your way of thinking to recite one phrase prayers or verses in the daily round of life: "For me to live is Christ...You will never leave nor forsake me...You are my God, will seek you". It's too bad that memorizing Scripture is going out of fashion. It shouldn't be. Set your watch to chime each hour. Bring yourself back to the Father and Son each half hour. These are the nuts and bolts things of daily spiritual life which may determine our eternal destiny. Whatever we do, doing all to the glory / praise of God, working for human masters as if we are serving the Lord Christ. But a word of caution must be sounded here. "If thou canst become free, use it rather" (1 Cor. 7:21 RV), Paul wrote to slaves. We are inevitably tied down with the things of this life; but if we can be made free, to serve God directly, as usefully as possible, then surely we should seek to do this. Take early retirement. You can chose to remain at work, and of course, you can glorify God. But you can devote your life and free time to the work of the Gospel, and bring dozens to the knowledge of Christ who wouldn't otherwise have had it. I'd say, and I interpret Paul to say likewise: "If you may be made free, then use it rather". We should aim to "surrender yourself to the Lord, and wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:7).

### ***Life Together***

We need each other. John so often drives home the basic point: that our attitude to our brethren is our attitude to our God. By walking in fellowship with each other we walk with God. James tells us to confess our sins one to another and pray for each other...and thus to have true fellowship requires that we are authentic, admitting who we really are, facing our fear of exposure, rejection and being hurt again, *with all the risks these things involve*. One of God's purposes for us is that we should actively live within the community of believers. To 'hold the truth' in some kind of splendid isolation is not what we were called to. Personal Bible reading and prayer are not actually enough to bring us to the fellowship with God which He intends; He works through people. The body of Christ grows by that which every member supplies, and edifies *itself* in love. Active love of the brotherhood and allowing

ourselves to receive from them is definitely part of the purpose-driven life. But let's not confuse uniformity and unity; nor compatibility with community. We're a diverse family, bound together by our common Father and Lord. Remember how the interlocking wheels of Ezekiel's cherubim spun in different directions but moved overall in the same path, like a gyroscope. This is how we should be, as we manifest our part of the huge Angelic system above us. Our focus must not be on the quirks of others but rather upon how we can help them. Whatever we suffer is so that we might comfort others who go through the same things (2 Cor. 1:4). Fellowship with each other is therefore an obvious necessity. We should "look upon" the best interests of others (Phil. 2:4)- the Greek word *skopos* is the one used in "telescope" or "microscope". Our focus must be upon what is their best interest spiritually. Not upon anything else. Condemning, belittling, comparing, labelling, insulting, condescending, being sarcastic...have absolutely no place in a life driven by this purpose.

### ***Each Has A Calling***

Each has his or her calling, and therefore we should each have a sense of authority because we realize this. We have a job to do, a mission to accomplish, and we have authority from the the Lord Himself. For the Son of man gives to *each* of His servants both " authority" and his or her specific work to do (Mk. 13:34). In another figure, we have each been given gifts, talents, to use until the Lord comes. And make no mistake, we will be judged as to how far we have used those talents. You have a unique place in the body of Christ. You aren't just an attender at Bible Schools or breaking of bread meetings. You have something unique that you can contribute, that actually the rest of the body needs in order for it to fully grow. Yet we are all held back by our sense of inadequacy. But actually all God's servants had this problem. Jacob was insecure, Leah unattractive, Samson a womanizer, Moses stuttered and had forgotten Egyptian, Rahab was immoral, David messed up, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah was a manic depressive, John the Baptist was eccentric, Peter was hot-tempered, Martha was materialistic...and you and me sitting here tonight in Minsk, Manhattan, Mumbai, Manchester, Maputo are just as held back by our pasts and our dysfunction.

We read in 1 Jn. 2:20,27 that we have each been anointed. The idea of anointing was to signal the initiation of someone. I'd therefore be inclined to see 1 Jn. 2:20,27 as alluding to baptism; when we become in Christ, in the anointed, then as 2 Cor. 1:21 says, we too are anointed in a sense. We're given a specific mission and purpose. " The anointing that you received" would therefore refer to our commissioning at baptism. It seems to imply a one time act of being anointed / commissioned / inaugurated for service. Baptism isn't therefore merely an initiation into a community; it's a specific commissioning for active service, in ways which are unique to us. We do well to bring this point out to those we prepare for baptism. The words for 'anointing' are unique to 1 John but they occur in the LXX to describe the anointing / initiation of the priests, and of the tabernacle / dwelling place of God (e.g. Ex. 29:7; 35:14,28). John sees us as the dwelling place / tabernacle of the Father.

There is some historical evidence that candidates for baptism in the early church were anointed with oil. References- uninspired of course, just for historical interest- are Tertullian, *De Baptismo*, 7.1,2; and various references in the 'Didascalia', the Acts of Judas Thomas, and the Pseudo-Clementine epistles. It could be that in the house ecclesias to whom John was writing, there was already this practice in place, and the initial readers would've understood this clearly. Paul, writing to a different audience, uses a different figure when he speaks of being " sealed with that holy spirit of promise" . We are after all baptized into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So the anointing which we've received would in my view refer back to our

baptism. It was the initiation of us into service, just as the priests and tabernacle parts were anointed. The question we much each sort out is, what are our specific talents, our gifts, the potential uses for which the Father and Son intend us, the paths of service they potentially mapped out for us and initiated us for at our immersions?

### ***The Disciples' Example***

I want to be bold enough to suggest that one of the most important and definite callings we each have received is to take the Gospel to others. For many years I felt that some were called to be preachers, whilst others were to focus upon other aspects of the Lord's service. Whilst it is so that we each have different gifts and are different parts of the Lord's body, it also stands that the very possession of the good news means that we're all preachers- as outlined in earlier chapters. The very first disciples were called and told that they were to be made "fishers of men" (Mk. 1:17). Those men were surely intended as our prototypes. They were called with the explicit purpose of being prepared for preaching (Mt. 4:18-22; Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-11). The Lord Jesus "*putteth forth* his own sheep by name" (Jn. 10:4); the same word is used by Him in Lk. 10:2 concerning how He *sends forth* workers to reap converts in preaching. Each of those He calls has a unique opportunity ["by name"] to gather others to Him. And notice that the Lord sent out novices on a preaching mission (Lk. 10:1)- reflective, surely, of how He perceived His calling of men to be a calling for them to preach on His behalf. When the lawyer asked Jesus what he must "do to inherit eternal life", the Lord could have lectured him on salvation being by grace rather than works (Lk. 10:25). But He doesn't; instead He tells the parable of the good Samaritan, running with the lawyer's misunderstanding for a while [as His gracious manner was]. The essential basis of inheriting eternal life is of course faith, but the Lord's answer to the question shows that we can safely conclude: 'Faith must be shown in our care for the salvation of this world if it is real faith'.

It's not that we have to master certain techniques in order to preach well. The idea is surely that we must ourselves be mastered by the convictions of the Gospel itself, the implications of the doctrinal truth which we believe, and mastered by the conviction that one essential purpose of the Gospel is to share it with others. Focusing merely on technique will only make us good orators or talkers; what we need is to be mastered by our convictions as to the priority of preaching, and the methodology will just come naturally. The Gospels, which were transcripts of the early preaching of the Gospel, concluded with the command to go forth and preach to the world. This is a solemn duty of each person who responds to the Gospel through baptism. This command to go into all the world is framed by the synoptic writers as the climax of their Gospel message. This is the final and ultimate command of the Lord to those who would follow Him. Acts 1:2 RV says that on the day the Lord was taken up, "He had given commandments through the Holy Spirit unto the apostles". The day the Lord was taken up, He gave one commandment to the apostles, related to their possession of the Holy Spirit: to go into all the world with the Gospel. But why does Luke speak in the plural, "commandments"? It could be that here we have one of many examples of Hebrew idiom being used by the Jewish writers of the New Testament, even though they wrote in Greek. There is in Hebrew an 'intensive plural', whereby something is put in the plural (e.g. "deaths" in Is. 53:9) to emphasize the greatness of the one thing (e.g., *the* death, of Messiah). Could it not be that here we have something similar? The one great commandment is to go into all the world with the Gospel. We are the light of this world. We, the candles, were lit so that we might give light to others. Our duty is not merely to inform others of our doctrinal position, but to gain, win or catch [as fishermen] our fellow men for Christ.

For we are the salt of the earth (Mt. 5:13). The Lord doesn't say that we ought to be the salt of the earth, or should try to be. Salt with no flavour or influence is pointless, worthless, untrue to what it is intended to be, displeasing to its user, fit only to be thrown out; and so are we, if we fail to witness to others (Lk. 14:35). Likewise, we *are* the light of the world. By the very nature of who we are as in Christ, we are to influence the world around us. We don't just hold the light in our hands; *we* are the light, our whole being, every moment we live. Preaching the light is not therefore something which we occasionally do. The Lord likens us all to labourers sent out [cp. The great commission to us all] to work in the vineyard in harvest time, gathering the plentiful harvest (Mt. 20:1). Elsewhere the Lord likens labourers to the preachers. He clearly saw a primary reason for our calling as to preach and help others to the harvest of the Kingdom. He called us in different ways to labour for and with Him in this work; not to merely passively hold various doctrinal truths in intellectual purity, or to dumbly attend church meetings of whatever sort.

It is clear that the apostles gave priority to the ministry of preaching- Acts 6 makes it clear that they resisted the temptation to involve themselves in endless administration, but rather got on with the prayerful ministry of the word to others. This was their priority. The New Testament is essentially a missionary document. The whole account we have there of the believers revolves around missionary work. The letters reflect the needs of evangelism, instruction and worship which there were in the early community. Thus John's Gospel and letters feature a defence of the Gospel against incipient Gnosticism and Judaism, which was an obstacle both to the spread of the Gospel and to spiritual development amongst the early converts.

### ***Paul's Pattern***

Paul many times bids us follow him. The context of those invitations is very definitely that of preaching. It is of course true that not everyone can spend an itinerant life pushing back the frontiers of the truth [although more could perhaps rise up to this than do]. But the priority for preaching and helping those converted which was the essence of Paul must in principle motivate our lives likewise, in whatever life situation we find ourselves in. Paul certainly saw some kind of glory in the work of witnessing to God's grace. He perceived that by preaching, we allow the word of God to run and be glorified (2 Thess. 3:1).

Paul understood there to be a command from the Lord Jesus that those who preach the Gospel should be supported financially by their converts (1 Cor. 9:14 RSV). But Paul chose to disobey what he calls a 'command' from the Lord- because he figured that the purposes of the Gospel would be served better long term if he in his case didn't obey that command. Not only does this give an insight into the nature of a man's relationship with his Lord when he knows Christ well enough; but it indicates the huge priority placed by Paul upon the spreading of the Gospel. He would even relegate a 'command' from the Lord Jesus beneath the overall aim of spreading the Gospel. This is a line of reasoning which is of course dangerous for *us* to adopt; but it indicates the priority given to preaching. Actually one sees other examples of this in Paul- he observed Torah amongst the Jews, but broke it amongst the Gentiles; he thus relativized obedience to Divine law for the sake of the spreading of the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:22). In fact all Paul's decisions in controversial matters seem to have been made based around the ultimate question: 'What would be best for spreading the Gospel?'. Perhaps the Lord was making the same point when He told His preachers to stay in their converts' homes and eat whatever was out before them (Lk. 9:1-5), i.e. without insisting on eating kosher food. For the Pharisees insisted that an observant Jew could *not* do what the

Lord said- i.e. eat ‘whatever’ was set before them. But the Lord waived that commandment-for the sake of spreading the Gospel. And we do well to get into his spirit as we face the many calls we do in church life.

In Gal. 1:15,16, Paul speaks as if his calling to preach the Gospel and his conversion coincided. He clearly understood that he had been called so as to spread the word to others. Paul uses the word *kaleo* to describe both our call to the Gospel, and the call to preach that Gospel (Gal. 1:15 cp. Rom. 8:30; 1 Cor. 1:9; 7:15; Gal. 1:6; 5:13; 2 Tim. 1:9). He doesn’t separate his call from that of ours; he speaks of how God called “us” (Rom. 9:24; 1 Thess. 4:7). We may not all be able to live the life of itinerant preaching and spreading the word geographically which Paul did. And yet clearly enough Paul sets himself up as our pattern in the context of his attitude to preaching. Our lamps were lit, in the Lord’s figure, so as to give light to others. We are mirrors, reflecting to others the glory of God as far as we ourselves behold it in the face of Jesus Christ.

Paul says that God’s grace to him “was not in vain”, in that he *laboured* more abundantly than any in preaching. Yet within the same chapter, Paul urges us his readers that our faith and *labour* is also “not in vain”; the connection seems to be that he responded to grace by *labouring* in preaching, and he speaks as if each of the Corinthians likewise will not *labour* in vain in this way (1 Cor. 15:2,10,58). He clearly sees himself as a pattern of responding to grace by preaching to others.

Paul makes a number of allusions to the great commission, in which he applies it to both himself and also to us all. The weak argument that it was ‘only for the disciples who heard it’ evaporates when it is accepted that Paul wasn’t one of the 12, and yet the commission applies to him. Consider Rom. 1:5 RV: “...through whom we have received grace and apostleship, for the obedience to the faith among all the nations, for his name’s sake”. These words are packed with allusion to the great commission. And Paul is not in the habit of using the ‘royal we’ to refer solely to himself. He clearly sees all his readers as sharing in just the same calling. The early preachers travelled around “for his name’s sake” (3 Jn. 7), even though they were not in the original band of disciples. Having alluded to the great commission, Paul goes on in that context to rejoice “that your faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world” (Rom. 1:7 RV). He saw their example of faith in practice as being the witness that fulfilled the great commission; and goes on to speak of his sense of debt to spread the word to literally all men, hence his interest in preaching at Rome (Rom. 1:14,15). And here we have our example; “as much as in me is”, we should each say, we are ready to spread the Gospel as far as lies in our power to do so. Having spoken of how the faith of the Romans is spoken of throughout the “world”, Paul goes on to comment that the preaching of the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God “from faith to faith” (Rom. 1:17). The righteousness of God is surely revealed in human examples rather than in any amount of words. Could Paul not be meaning that the faith of one believer will induce faith in others, and in this sense the Gospel is a force that if properly believed ought to be spreading faith world-wide? This means that spreading our faith is part and parcel of believing the Gospel.

The obvious objection to the preceding paragraphs is that Paul was a “chosen vessel” to preach the Gospel. And indeed he was. But the above evidence demands, surely, the verdict- that he really is, all the same, our pattern as a preacher. Significantly, Paul describes us all as ‘vessels of election’ just as he was (Acts 9:15 RVmg. = Rom. 9:22,25).

### ***The Purpose Of The Church***

The whole purpose of the true church is to be a light to the world- “the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members”, as William Temple put it. The Lord will tell some in the last day that He never knew them, He will deny them; and yet He will deny those who never confessed Him before men (Mt. 8:23; 10:32,33). These people will have prophesied in His Name [i.e. preached to the ecclesia], and done “mighty works” for Him; but the fact they didn’t confess Him before men is seen as not knowing Him; for to know Him is to perceive that we are intended to confess Him before men. This, perhaps, is our greatest danger. The presence and witness of God is no longer in a tent in the Sinai, nor in a Jerusalem temple. God reveals Himself through the group of ordinary, mixed up folks who comprise the ecclesiastis. For the watching world, we present proof that Christ is indeed alive; we provide the visible shape of what God and Jesus are really like. This is how vital is the matter of witness. It is utterly fundamental to the whole purpose behind our having been called. And especially in these last days are men and women called to the Lord so that they might go out and witness to Him; for the Gospel must go to all the world, and then the Lord will come. In the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, the owner goes five times to search for workers. It is apparent that the owner was in desperate need of workers; the only time labour would be in such demand would be during the harvest. Is not this parable implying that in the last days, men and women are called to the Lord’s service in order to go out and gather the harvest? For when the Lord elsewhere used that same figure, the harvest referred to potential converts, and the labourers were figures of the preachers. So you and me tonight, called as we were in the very last days, were converted so that we might go out and bring in the harvest for the Lord, and thus hasten His return.

That one purpose of our calling to the Gospel is to assist others is brought out by the way John the Baptist prepared a highway in the desert through baptizing repentant people (Mk. 1:3,4). This highway was to be a path *to* Christ as well as the one He would travel. And it's worth reflecting that Christ can only come once the way for Him is prepared- as if His coming depends upon a certain level of response to our preaching, especially to the Jews of the very last days.

Many times we read of how those who hold God's word are to shine it out to others. The Old Testament tends to use a Hebrew word translated "warn" in speaking of how prophets like Ezekiel were to warn-out, or shine out, God's word to others (Ez. 3:17,18 etc.). Yet the same word occurs in Dan. 12:3 about how the preachers of God's word will "shine" eternally in His Kingdom. The connection is clear- how we shine forth God's word now, is how we will eternally shine it forth. Thus in the practice of preaching today, we are working out who and how we shall eternally be. The very concept of preaching is therefore partly designed by God for our benefit, to develop us into the persons we shall eternally be, by His grace. When we read that God will 'require the blood' of those to whom we fail to preach His word (Ez. 3:18), we may here have another reference to a 'going through' of our deeds at the day of judgment. There, perhaps, we will have to give an account, an explanation, of why our neighbours and workfellows lie eternally dead- because we were too shy, too weakly convinced of the eternal realities we knew, to tell them. For the Hebrew word translated "require" implies some kind of inquisition / explanation. Here we see the vital importance of witness.

## 22. We Will Be Saved

### 22-1 Assurance Of Salvation

Dr. Rene Allendy was a selfless, fine doctor who kept a brutally honest diary to the last day of his long agony of dying (*Journal d'un medecin malade*, “Diary of a sick physician”). In the face of death, despite a humanly ‘good’ life lived, he finally possessed nothing but a hopeless cynicism. I ask you, every reader: In the face of death, what do you have? The true Christian should be able to answer so, so positively.

#### *Assurance After Assurance*

The pleasure or will of our loving Father is that we should share His Kingdom (Lk. 12:32), and that pleasure / will prospered through the cross of Jesus (Is. 53:10). God isn’t indifferent. He wants us to be there. That’s why He gave His Son to die. It’s as simple as that. The deepest longings we feel in our earthly lives, as parents, as lovers, are mere flickers of the hungering desire God feels for us. It is a desire that cost Him His very own crucified son. The Lord Himself knew our basic tendency to disbelieve the certainty of our salvation when He comforted us: “Fear not little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom”. God’s promises are sure; so sure that they are as good as if they have been fulfilled. Hence the New Testament speaks of our having eternal life right now, even though that promise has not yet been fulfilled. Acts 7:17 speaks of “the time of the promise” drawing near- putting ‘the promise’ for ‘the fulfillment of the promise’, so sure are God’s promises of fulfillment. “God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of the promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: that...we may have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us; which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (Heb. 6:17-19). If the hope is an anchor to the soul, the foundation to our innermost thought processes, it must be something more than a mere possibility. “Boldness and glorying in the hope” are the family characteristics of the house / family of Jesus (Heb. 3:6 RV). It is the sureness of the hope that brings us close to God; without such certainty, how can we have the relationship with the Father which He so earnestly intends for us (Heb. 7:19)?

When the Lord taught that “the life is more than the food” which we worry about today (Lk. 12:23 RV), and “the body [which we shall receive] is more than the raiment”, He surely means that our hope of eternal life, *the life*, the only real and ultimate life worth having, should eclipse our worries about today’s problems of survival. Not worrying about food, drink and clothing, which God will provide, is likely an allusion to His provision for Israel during their wilderness journey to the promised land. And in this context the Lord encourage us: “Seek ye the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you...fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the Kingdom” (Lk. 12:31,32). If it is God’s pleasure to give us the Kingdom, then surely He will give us all basic necessities until that time comes. Our certainty of being there thus greatly relieves us from earthly cares, compared to the person who has no such hope.

The belief that we will be there is the only real anchor in life’s uncertain storm. “When the kindness of God our saviour, and his love toward man, appeared, not by works done in

righteousness which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us...that, being justified by his grace, we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life...and concerning these things I will that thou affirm confidently, to the end that they which have believed God may be careful to maintain good works" (Tit. 3:4-8). The confident, regular reassurance of other believers was to be part of the ecclesial diet with which the Cretan brethren and sisters were constantly fed. And this assurance was to be the foundation of ecclesial growth as members individually developed the mind of Christ.

In the end, God gives us our dominant desire. Israel in the wilderness "despised the land of desire, they believed not his word" of promise, that they would enter it (Ps. 106:24 AVmg.). They didn't really desire the land, so they didn't receive it. Israel both despised the land, and they despised their God (Num. 14:11,23,31 RV). Our attitude as to whether or not we want to be in the Kingdom is essentially our attitude to God. This has far reaching implications. Ps. 107:30 likewise speaks of how the faithful are brought to the haven of their desire (RVmg.). All those who truly love the Lord's appearing- with all that implies in practical life and belief- will be accepted (2 Tim. 4:8). And yet Israel didn't have the dominant desire to be in the Kingdom, as Joshua and Caleb had. Why didn't they? It is vital that we understand the reasons for their failure – such an understanding will be a safeguard to help prevent us from making the same mistake (Rom.15:4).

They initially wanted to return to Egypt, and yet it is also true that they sought for a city to live in whilst in the wilderness (Ps. 107:4). They wanted to just stay there in the wilderness. They didn't want to return to Egypt, they didn't really desire the unknown promised land...so, they wanted to just settle there in the wilderness. And so it can be with us. We can be happy with the way to the Kingdom, it can be that the social aspect of the Christian life suites us...we are content with it, and yet it can be that for all that, we lack a real sense of direction towards the Kingdom. We are going some place. The Christian life is but a path leading towards an end, and the end destination is the Kingdom. *If we believe surely that we will be there, we will live lives which reflect this sense of concrete direction and aim.*

### ***Our Motives***

But all this raises the question: Why do I want to be in the Kingdom? What makes this the dominant desire which we will surely receive? David asked to be given "thy salvation...that I may see the good of thy chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of thy nation" (Ps. 106:4,5). Paul likewise says that to see the Thessalonians in the Kingdom would be his glory and joy in that day. Both those men had a perspective far bigger than merely themselves. If our sole desire to 'be there' is so that *I* will live for ever, *I* will have a nice level of existence...this, it seems to me, is not only essentially selfish, but our basic dysfunction and tendency to self-abuse and devaluing of ourselves just will not allow us to have the receipt of personal eternity as our dominant desire. We'll be interested in it, but it won't consistently be the thing we desire above all else. But if we see the wider picture, then we will pray for the Kingdom to come so that the things of God's Name may be glorified; because we want to see our dear brethren there in the Kingdom; because we will want to share our Lord's joy and their joy. These things are more than the primitive desire for self-preservation which we all have, and which we can articulate in terms of wanting to personally be in the Kingdom. Thus if our motives are right for wanting to be in the Kingdom, then this will become our dominant desire; and we will be granted the desires of our heart. Really we will be. God's word promises this.

The grace of God guarantees our salvation. Yet we find it so hard to believe- that I, with all my doubts and fears, will really be there. Israel were warned that they were being given the land (cp. salvation) " not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thy heart...for thou art a stiffnecked people" (Dt. 9:5,6). These words are picked up in Tit. 3:5 and applied to the new Israel: " Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing (baptism) of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit" - by His grace alone.

Our difficulty in believing ‘we will be there’ is perhaps related to our difficulty in believing that in prospect, we ‘are there’ right now, through being “in Christ”. This most basic truth, that we are “in Christ” through baptism, carries with it very challenging implications. We are well familiar with Paul’s reasoning in Romans 6, that through being immersed in water at baptism, we share in the Lord’s death and resurrection. As He rose from the dead, so we rise from the waters of baptism. But what happened to Him next? He ascended to Heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God in glory. And each of those stages is true of us right now. Let Paul explain in Eph. 2:6: “He hath raised us up together [Strong: ‘to rouse [from death] in company with’], and made us sit together [i.e. Christ and us] in heavenly places in Christ”. We are now in ‘the heavenlies’; and not only so, but we *sit together* there with Christ. And He now sits upon His throne of glory. Even now we in a sense sit with Him in His Heavenly throne, even though in another sense this is a future thing we await (Lk. 22:30; Rev. 3:21). No wonder Paul goes on to make a profound comment: “That in the ages to come [the aions of future eternity], He might show [Gk.- to indicate by words or act] the exceeding riches of his grace [which was shown through] his kindness toward us through Christ”. Throughout the ages of eternity, God will demonstrate to others [the mortal population of the Millennium, and perhaps other future creations] how pure and wonderful His grace was to us in the few brief years of this life- in that, He will demonstrate, He counted us *right now in our mortality* as having resurrected, ascended to Heaven, and reigning / sitting with Christ in glory. The wonder of what we are experiencing now, the height of our present position, is something that will be marvelled at throughout eternity as an expression of God’s grace and kindness. And we will be the living witnesses to it. And we can start that witness right now.

## 22-2 Believing In Salvation

The people had walked all round the lake to see Jesus and get some food from Him. In typical style, He responded: “Labour not for the meat which perisheth but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life” (Jn. 6:27). They ask what they can *do* that they might work / labour [same Greek word] the works of God; and they are told that the real work / labour which God requires is to believe (Jn. 6:28). To truly believe, to the extent of being sure that we will surely have the eternal life promised, is the equivalent of walking round the lake. We like those crowds want to concretely *do* something. The young man likewise had asked what good thing he must *do* in order to get eternal life (Mt. 19:16). But the real work is to *believe*. To really make that enormous mental effort to accept that what God has promised in Christ will surely come true for us. The proof that this is so is because Jesus really said these words, and “him hath God the Father sealed”, i.e. shown His confirmation and acceptance of. So again we come down to the implications of real basics. Do we believe Jesus existed and said those words? Yes. Do we believe the Biblical record is true and inspired? Yes. Well, this Jesus who made these promises and statements about eternal life was “sealed” / validated by God. Do we believe this? Yes. So, what He said is utterly true.

The Gospel is ‘good news’. If we perceive it as information about the coming Kingdom which we have a chance to enter, but we won’t know for sure till judgment day...then I would say it is worrying news, a great idea, a daunting prospect, a thrilling possibility...but not all round *good news*. Surely the good news is that it is coming and by God’s grace, we will be there. It is well nigh impossible to eagerly look forward to the Lord’s return to establish the Kingdom if we are totally unassured that we will be there. Probably the most common thing we all repeatedly request in prayer is that we will in fact be in the Kingdom. But the Lord’s model prayer doesn’t include that request- instead, the main petition is for the Kingdom *to come*. This can surely only be the truly dominant desire in a person if they are assured that their Lord comes to redeem them and not to reject them.

May I place two well known Scriptures together in your minds. “*Thine [God’s] is the Kingdom*”. And “Blessed are you poor, for *yours* is the Kingdom *of God*” (Lk. 6:20). The Lord assures us that the Father wants to give *His* Kingdom to those who are poor in spirit, to the broken, to the self-doubters, the uncertain, those uncomfortable with themselves, the unbearably and desperately lonely, the awkwardly spoken...the poor in spirit. Those who would be the very last to believe that God would give *them* what is evidently *His* Kingdom. But not only *will* the Father do this, but Jesus stresses that it *is* ours right now. The certainty of the glory that will be revealed for us means that we cope better with suffering; as Paul writes, they “are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom.8:18).

### ***Coping With Spiritual Failure***

The fact we sin and fail inevitably militates against a robust faith that “we will be there”. The Lord predicted how Peter would deny him; but went straight on to assure the shocked and worried disciples: “Let not your heart be troubled [because some of you will fail me]: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you...if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (Jn. 13:36-14:3). These wonderful words of assurance were in the very context of predicting the disciples’ failure. It’s as if the Lord is saying: ‘Don’t let the fact that you will fail me shake your faith that I will never fail *you*, and I will save you in the end’.

### ***The Breaking Of Bread***

This wasn’t all words, mere theory. Jesus showed by His fellowship with “the poor in spirit” that He meant what He said. He, as God’s Son, extended His Father’s fellowship to them in the here and now of this life. Luke seems to have been especially perceptive of the fact that Jesus often accepted invitations to eat with those whom others despised (Lk. 5:29; 7:36; 10:38; 11:37; 14:1). In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, to eat with someone was a religious act. The host blessed and broke the bread and then broke off a piece for each guest, thus binding together all present. This was why the many sects of Judaism carefully limited their table fellowship (notably the Pharisees and Essenes). Thus it was the Lord’s desire to share table fellowship with the very lowest (apparently) within the community of God that brought Him such criticism (Mt. 11:19; Mk. 2:16). His teaching also made it plain that He saw table fellowship with Him at a meal as a type of the future Messianic banquet, to be enjoyed in His Kingdom at His return, when redeemed sinners will again sit and eat with Him (Lk. 22:29,30). To accept the gift of the bread of life at the breaking of bread is to symbolize our acceptance of the life that is in Him. If we believe what we are doing at the memorial

meeting, we are showing our acceptance of the fact that we will be there, and that what we are doing in our humble breakings of bread is in fact a true foretaste of the Kingdom experience which awaits us.

I read through the New Testament, looking out for point blank assurances that we will be there. They are listed as an appendix to this study. I was amazed to find them on average about twice on every page. Now that's really quite something. So what I write is no mere positivism. In all intellectual and expositional integrity I can say that the Bible teaches, as a major theme, that we will be there. The Apostolic writers fill their epistles with an air of certainty and assurance that they and their readers will be there. Their readers are not "foolish virgins" - the writers are labouring to the utmost that Christ might be formed in those who are presently "foolish" (Gal. 4:19). There was to be no room for half belief in their hearts. A lukewarm spirit and all double mindedness (Jas.1:8) were to be banished. The urgency of the power of positive thinking was in every breath that they uttered and every word that they wrote.

Somehow human beings struggle to believe that something so very good can be personally true for them. There's something in us which wants to have to pay the full price even if we can't, or even decline the wonderful free gift. Franz Kafka, one of Eastern European Jewry's finest writers, was fascinated by this theme. In *The Watchman* he presents a fictional representation of it, which many of us can relate our real life experiences to:

"I ran past the first guard. Then I was horrified, I ran back and said to the guard: "I just ran through here while you were looking the other way". The guard looked straight ahead and said nothing. "I suppose I shouldn't have done it", I said. The guard still said nothing. "Does your silence mean I have permission to enter?" (1).

By God's grace, we have in prospect 'made it' through. If our whole lives are a struggle to finally come to believe that, well so be it. It's just the quicker we grasp it, the sooner we can begin living the life of joy and peace which true Christian faith really offers.

### ***What About The Conditions?***

And yet we know so well that a place in God's Kingdom is conditional. Many of the above passages seem not to mention those conditions. Why not? Surely because although the conditions are there, God wishes us to order our lives in such a way that we live as though we believe we will be there. We are to reckon / count ourselves as if we are dead to sin (Rom. 6), even though we are very much aware of its living power within us at times. We are to have a positive self-perception. The teaching of Jesus included frequent quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament. When we go back and read around the contexts of the passages He quoted, it becomes apparent that He very often omits to quote the negative, judgmental, or conditional aspects of the blessings which He quotes. Consider the way He quotes Is. 29:18; 35:5,6 and 61:1 in Mt. 11:4,5. These are all talking about Messianic blessings. But they are embedded amidst warnings of judgment and the conditionality of God's grace. Likewise Luke records how Jesus read from Is. 61:1,2, but He stopped at the very point where Isaiah's message turns from promise to threat. None of this takes away from the terrible reality that future failure is a real possibility, even tomorrow. We can throw it all away. We may do. We have the possibility. And some do. There is an eternity ahead which we may miss. And each one who enters the Kingdom will, humanly speaking, have come pretty close to losing it at various points in his or her mortal life. We know that some who

expect to be in the Kingdom will be shocked to find they are not (Mt.7:21-23). But they will have mistaken the will of the Father, having never known the real Christ. But the focus Jesus wishes us to have is essentially positive. Of this there can be no real doubt. I would claim that true Christianity is the only religion which inspires true self-value and positive self-perception, thanks alone to God's grace. Yet we are suspicious by nature; we think that there must be a catch to anything free, to any apparent good news. With the good news of the Kingdom, there is no catch. We will be there. The grace is pure and total.

Whilst there are of course conditions for entry into the Kingdom, it must ever be remembered that it is not right to therefore reason that if we *do* certain things, then we will be in the Kingdom. For this would be justification by works and not by faith. However, because we believe we will be in the Kingdom, we will therefore naturally respond by living according to God's precepts. Moses encouraged Israel to keep the Law exactly because God would surely give them the promised land- not *so that* they would enter the land but because He would give them the land: "Thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, and to fear him. For the LORD thy God bringeth thee into a good land..." (Dt. 8:6,7).

David's example helps us understand something of how this paradox works out in practice. He of all people appeared confident in his relationship with God and his personal hope of salvation. And yet he frequently felt at times "cast off" (Ps. 43:2; 44:9; 60:1; 74:1; 77:7; 88:14; 89:38; 108:11), using a Hebrew word elsewhere commonly used about God's final rejection of sinners. David genuinely felt a condemned man- and yet he rejoiced in God's salvation. Few of us get the balance so right.

Our assurance of salvation grows as we grow in faith and understanding of God's grace. It was so with Paul. In his earlier Christian experience, Paul spoke of running the race towards salvation (Acts 20:24; 1 Cor. 9:24-26; 1 Tim. 6:12). But by 2 Tim. 4:7 he can say that he has actually finished the race. He uses the same word there [translated "finished"] as in Phil. 3:12, where he says that he had "not yet reached perfection". No longer was he 'aiming to win the prize' (Phil. 3:14)- he was now certain that it awaited him (2 Tim. 4:8). Indeed we can take 2 Tim. 4:6-8 as a conscious commentary by Paul upon his earlier sense of still striving towards salvation:

Philippians	2 Tim. 4:6-8
I would like to depart (Phil. 1:23)	The hour of my departure is now upon me (2 Tim. 4:6)
If my life blood is to crown the sacrifice (Phil. 2:17)	My life blood is being poured out on the altar (2 Tim. 4:6)
I have not yet reached "perfection" but I press on (Phil. 3:12)	I have run the great race, I have finished [s.w. "perfect"] the course (2 Tim. 4:7)
I press toward the goal to win the prize (Phil. 3:14)	Now the prize awaits me (2 Tim. 4:8)

These parallels and Paul's commentary becomes all the more poignant if we accept the view that actually, Paul did not die soon after 2 Tim. 4 was written- rather was he released, did much work for the Lord, and died under Nero at a later date. In this case his commentary in 2

Tim. 4 is a reflection not so much of a dying man's last words and hopes, but of a mature, reasoned conviction that in fact he had arrived at a point of believing in salvation.

### ***The Return Of Jesus***

It is pretty hard to be enthusiastic about the Lord's return if we are not certain whether we will be saved. Yet the Spirit sees the return of Jesus as being our salvation, our meeting with our bridegroom for marriage.

"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord...shall give me...and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8)

"...knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Rom. 13:11,12).

"Looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of ...our Saviour Jesus, who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us" (Tit. 2:13,14).

"So Christ also, having been once offered to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time...unto salvation" (Heb. 9:28).

"Thy kingdom come" (Mt. 6:10).

"We according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth" (2 Pet. 3:13).

"Them that are sanctified in Christ...waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:7,8).

"As also ye have acknowledged us in part, that we are your rejoicing, even as ye also are ours in the day of the Lord Jesus" (2 Cor. 1:14).

"We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8).

"We through the spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith" (Gal. 5:5).

### **Notes**

(1) Franz Kafka, *Parables And Paradoxes* (New York: Shoken Books, 1961) p. 81.

### **22-3 "Eternal life" Assured Now**

For all the above reasons, I believe that we should be able to believe that we will be there, if the Lord were to come right now as we read and write these words. There is much talk in John's writings of 'having eternal life'. I don't think these passages are directly relevant to the question of whether ultimately we will be there in the future Kingdom; but rather do they speak of a present experience of sharing the quality and spirit of the eternal life of Jesus. The fact is that our names are presently in the "book of life" (Phil. 4:3).

We have eternal life insofar as the life that Jesus lived and lives, He will eternally live. If we live that life, we are living the essence of the life which we will eternally live. The lawyer asked the Lord what good thing he must do “to inherit eternal life”. The Lord replied that he must properly love his God and his neighbour: “this do, and thou shalt live”. By living a life based on this, he would be living the life which he would eternally live (Lk. 10:25,28). And thus the Lord responds to the query about inheriting eternal life by changing the emphasis of the question- He replies by speaking of the life we should be living now. “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (Jn. 10:28) sounds as if the eternal type of life being given is an ongoing process. Consider the repeated parallelisms in the Lord’s teaching:

Labour / work, as Israel worked to gather manna, as the crowds walked around the lake to get to Jesus	For the food that gives eternal life
Believe in me	Receive eternal life
Eat me daily, eat / absorb my body and blood, the essence of My sacrifice; have this as your real food and drink in life	Receive eternal life
Come to me, having heard and learnt of the Father	Never hunger, never perish, receive eternal life
Behold the son, believe on him	Receive eternal life
“I am”, God manifested in the person of Jesus	The bread that gives eternal life
The manna of Christ	Gives eternal life
Jesus came down from Heaven [i.e. manifested the Father]	Gives life unto the world
By Jesus doing God’s will	I get eternal life for you (“the world” of believers)
By giving His blood to drink and flesh to eat	Gives eternal life
The Spirit and words of Jesus	Quickens / gives eternal life

The Spirit of Jesus, His disposition, His mindset, His way of thinking and being, is paralleled with His words and His person. They both ‘quicken’ or give eternal life, right now. “It is the Spirit that quickeneth [present tense]...the words that I speak unto you, they are [right now] spirit, and they are life...thou hast [right now] the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6:63,68). Yet at the last day, God will quicken the dead and physically give them eternal life (Rom. 4:17; 1

Cor. 15:22,36). But this will be because in this life we had the ‘Spirit’ of the eternal life in us: “He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by [on account of] his spirit that dwelleth in you” (Rom. 8:11). Again we have the same words, ‘quicken’ and ‘his spirit’. And Paul says that our resurrection will have some similarities with that of our Lord- who was “put to death in the flesh but quickened by [on account of] the spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18). It was according to the spirit of holiness, of a holy life, that Jesus was raised and given eternal life (Rom. 1:4). What all this means in practice is that if we live a ‘quickened’ spiritual life now, a life modeled around what Jesus would have done or said in any given situation, then we have the guarantee that we will be ‘quickened’ in the Kingdom. Thus Rom. 8:2 speaks of “the law of the spirit of life in Christ”. Having “the spirit” in our hearts is therefore the seal, the guarantee, of our future salvation (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). By “the spirit” I do not mean an overpowering force which makes us righteous against our will. I take it as a description of a life that has the spirit / mind / disposition of Christ at its core. And remember that Jesus Himself is described as “the Lord the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18 RV). “The Spirit” is a title of Jesus (Rom. 8:16,26,27; Rev. 2:7,11 etc.). To walk each day in the Spirit is to live in Him, to act as He would act. It is this “Spirit” which will be the basis of our new life. Living life in that Spirit is living the life we will eternally lead. If we don’t like the righteous, clean life in Christ, if we find it limiting and boring, then we are signing ourselves out of the eternal life. There will be no point in our receiving it. The eternal life is there to be lived. It’s there for the taking in the sense that it is there to be lived. If we live it, we have it. And our bodies will be changed at the Lord’s coming so that we can eternally live it.

### ***True Christianity***

For some years after my baptism, I had the impression that the Christian life was a matter of reading the Bible daily, understanding it ever more deeply, especially in matters relating to prophecy, preaching our understanding of doctrine to others, often in an argumentative way, helping out with the more obvious needs of my brethren around me, attending gatherings, giving my opinion in the various questions and controversies and projects that came along in the life of the community, avoiding the more obvious public sins... But I remember very clearly the moment when I perhaps rose up a level in my conversion to Christ. I was on a campaign in a small town by the sea, in northern Ireland. I sat down at lunchtime on a wall with my sandwiches and propped my Bible open, looked out to sea and reflected a little. It suddenly struck me that the *whole and entire purpose* of our lives is to imitate Jesus, to have His Spirit / disposition within us. *This is Christianity.* To live and be like *Him*. All those years of Bible reading, study, argument and (more or less) good works had somehow missed that utterly essential point.

When our lives are in focus on this perception there is a subtle, yet powerful change in our thinking. We are to be in a personality cult behind this Man, this more than Man. How He was and How He is, ought to continually and radically influence our daily lives. Perhaps for you this was always obvious, but for me, in reality, it had not been. Immediately I grasped the need to read the Gospels more carefully, more often, indeed, daily. For there we have the record of the Lord’s life. I saw in a split second that the entire point of the Old Testament records was to teach us something of the spirit and essence of the Man they pointed forward to. That word was all made flesh in Him, as it is to be in us. Of course I knew something about the types of the Law, the promises about Messiah etc. But the personal relevance had been lost on me...that there, in all those things and indeed in so much more, there is the revelation of yet otheraspects of this Man whom having not seen we love. And because I want to be like Him, I must know Him; and there is in the very knowledge of Him an

imperative to be like Him. So we want to know Him. And this is why we need to pray before our Bible readings, that our blind eyes will be opened to see something of Him there, in whatever passage we are reading.

### ***Our Brethren Will Be There***

If we believe that all in Christ, all who are ‘Christian’, will be in the Kingdom...then, we will act joyfully and positively toward our community, abounding in hope. We have to assume that our brethren are likewise going to be there; for we cannot condemn them. Therefore we must assume they too will be saved along with us. Consider how Paul repeatedly has this attitude when dealing with his apostate Corinthians:

“For all things are yours; Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; And ye are Christ’s” (1 Cor. 3:21-23)

“Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels?” (1 Cor. 6:2,3)

“...such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11)

“For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17)

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12)

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive...And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly...Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality...But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory” (1 Cor. 15:22,49,51-53,57)

“And our hope of you is stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so shall ye be also of the consolation...But as God is true, our word toward you was not yea and nay. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, even by me and Silvanus and Timotheus, was not yea and nay, but in him was yea. For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen” (2 Cor. 1:7,14,18-20)

“But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

“For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens...For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life...Therefore we are always confident...” (2 Cor. 5:1,4,6,8)

And Paul was just the same about his Galatians, many of whom he says seemed to be departing from the Christian faith. He feared he may have “laboured in vain” for some of them (Gal. 4:11), but he writes of his expectations in a totally positive way: “Christ hath redeemed us...that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ: that we might receive the promise of the Spirit [i.e. salvation]” (Gal. 3:13,14)

“For ye are *all* the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus; for as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ...then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:27-29)- yet Paul could write this despite knowing his readers’ lack of faith in Christ (Gal. 1:6; 3:1,3-5; 4:9,11,19,21; 5:4,7).

“And because ye are sons...thou art no more a servant, but a son: and if a son, then an heir of God though Christ” (Gal. 4:6,7)

“So then brethren we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free” (Gal. 4:31).

If we believe that we ourselves will be there, we will spark off an upward spiral of positive thinking in the community of believers with whom we are associated. Think carefully on the Lord’s words to the Pharisees: “For ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in” (Mt. 23:13). If we don’t believe we will be there, we end up discouraging others.

### ***“Hereby we know...”***

But to return to our question. Can we know that we have the spirit of Jesus, and that we are living the eternal life, to the point we are confident that “we will be there”? John addresses this question head on. “Hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him... if our heart condemn us not, *then* have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight” (1 Jn. 3:19-22). The answer of our conscience is therefore highly significant. Now living in societies as we do, based around shame and guilt, we can condemn ourselves more harshly than God does. Baptism is “the answer (RVmg. ‘appeal’) of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet. 3:18). Note how the phrase “toward God” occurs in both passages. We need to reflect more deeply upon what baptism really meant. Just as Romans 6, the classic baptism chapter, is asking the Romans to think back and remember what their baptisms really did for them before God. There we were counted as being ‘in Christ’. God now looks upon us as if we are in Christ, covered with His righteousness. In the court of Divine justice, the fact we have been baptized and had our conscience cleansed is our appeal for justification. And it will be heard. We condemn ourselves for our failures, yes. But on the other hand, do we believe that we really are baptized into Christ, with all that means in terms of how God now sees us? Do we believe rather than merely know...the most basic elements and realities of our Christian faith? I believe we do underneath, but we need to think deeply about all this.

When we worry about whether or not ‘we will be there’, we inevitably reflect how God’s justice demands that we not be there. And yet God’s justice is a reflection of His character of love; it’s not human justice. Note how 1 Jn. 2:29 and 1 Jn. 4:7 parallel love and justice; and this parallel is to be found in the Old Testament, not least in the concept of *hesed*, God’s covenant love. His justice involves His love. And His love is the love of grace and salvation. But as Paul argues to the Romans, it is *God* who justifies, and so there is nobody who can

condemn. The Christ Jesus who died for us is not going to condemn us if we are in Him (Rom. 8:33,34 Gk. and RVmg.).

The fact we were called to baptism therefore inspires us to believe that we really will be there in the Kingdom. This is prefigured by the way in which Moses pleaded with those who doubted in the wilderness that the fact they had been brought through the Red Sea was a guarantee that God would likewise bring them into their inheritance in Canaan (Dt. 1:29-33). Yet they failed to believe this; they forgot the wonder of their Red Sea deliverance, just as we can forget the wondrous implications of our baptism, and thus lose faith in our ultimate salvation.

We walk in a world where lives have become living deaths. The deep hopelessness of the non-Christian or post-Christian world is tightening its chilly grip on world culture. And yet for us, the hope of the Truth should result in the experience of exuberant, unstoppable, intoxicating, energizing hope, and the joy which this brings. And such an experience is without doubt worth preaching. Indeed, it will bubble out of us in some sort of witness to this hopeless world. It's not just a life beyond the grave which we offer, but life *before* the grave too!

### ***Keeping Commands***

“And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 Jn. 2:3). What pleases God? We read the Bible daily and learn there what pleases Him. Do we do at least some things that please God? Surely we know that we do. But I don’t think he meant ‘If you *do* enough works, then you can be assured of salvation’. Works and keeping commandments can’t earn us a place in the Kingdom; we will be there by sheer grace alone. Such a view would be contrary to the very basic spirit of the Gospel of grace. I think John had some specific commandments in mind: “And this is his commandment, That we should believe on [Gk ‘into’] the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment” (1 Jn. 3:23). We believe into the Name of Jesus when we are baptized into His Name. We “love one another” by keeping the *agape*, the love feast, the breaking of bread, with one another. If we refuse to break bread with any of our brethren, then we cannot have a good conscience. I am not saying that simply being baptized and breaking bread can save anyone. But if our self-examination reveals that we believe in what those two basic commands of the Christian life really imply, then we can have a good conscience, knowing we have kept His commandments, and are thus assured of ‘being there’. The Kingdom has been promised to us. We ask for it to come, that we might be there. And we must act as if our prayers have been answered, even though physically they haven’t been. And so all joy and peace will come through believing. We will feel the truth of 1 Pet. 1:9, that we are “receiving the end of [our] faith, even the salvation of your souls...”; and of Col. 1:13, that we *have been* delivered from the power of darkness, and been in prospect “translated into the kingdom”.

And so the reader will observe that we are not concluding anything other than what we have always stood for- baptism, continuing in the breaking of bread, daily Bible reading and striving for the imitation of Christ. But the tantalizing thing is, that by doing these things with serious belief, we are assured that “we have eternal life”. We can therefore believe and act as if ‘we will be there’. And yet so many of us fail to do this during a fairly high percentage of our Christian lives, despite doing all of those things. Yet, we *will* be there. Those basic practices of the Christian life assure us of it. This is the good news. That if the Lord comes

today, we can say with assurance, that by His grace we will be there. We can even now "glory in hope of the glory" (Rom. 5:2 Gk., RVmg.); and this 'glorying' requires an absolute confidence. And because of that spirit of glorying, we are bidden glory in the tribulations we encounter in this world (Rom. 5:2,3 RV). This is indeed "good news"; anything less than full persuasion of eternal life would not be such ultimately good news. God's salvation is indeed "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Lk. 2:32 RV); the light of human life is the fact that we will be saved, and this light is what we are to reveal to the world by preaching the Gospel to them.

#### **22-4 Preaching The Good News**

We labour and strive in the preaching of the Gospel "because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all men"(1 Tim. 4:10 RV). The certainty of our hope is the basis of our witness. "The witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life...he that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself" (1 Jn. 5:10,11 RV). We will witness from a sense welling up within us, that we have in prospect been given eternal life. If we have ourselves believed that the good news of the Gospel really is good news, we will inevitably share that message. Good news can't be kept to oneself. News of engagement, marriage, child birth...is spread somehow and yet urgently by those affected by the events. Even the most retiring of people can find a way to communicate the good news of their first child or grandchild. Sometimes I find my e-mail clogged up with big attachments of baby photos-from people I scarcely know! But their sense of good news compelled them to make contact with me. And so it will be with us in the round of encounters and conversations which make up our daily lives. We will get the word out, somehow. We will break barriers and boundaries in order to engage people in conversation about the one thing that really and essentially matters to us. And, believe me, passively, beneath the show of casual indifference, people *are* interested. And Bill Hybels claims from surveys that "about 25% of the adults in the US would go to church if a friend would just invite them"<sup>(1)</sup>.

And so I appeal to us all, to make a special effort to get out there with the message. Leave leaflets around wherever you go [we will be pleased to arrange for you to receive supplies]. Turn conversations around. We are the salt of the earth- and one of the uses of salt is to create thirst and appetite. We must create interest, open up opportunities in our conversations. Take the standard Monday morning workplace greeting: "Hi! How's it going?". "Oh, fine, thanks". Get right in there with something like: "Yeah but tell me, how is it *really* going...?". Around Christmas and Easter, ask people: "Do you really buy all this stuff about the baby in the manger, Jesus being God's Son? For me, I really struggle with what they say about Him being God Himself and all that...I was reading this guy who shows that Jesus wasn't even born on December 25<sup>th</sup>...".

#### ***Practical Suggestions***

Here are a few suggestions for talking to people:

- Talk to them one to one, without the pressure of others' presence.
- Provoke their interest- just as Jesus did with the woman at the well. He spoke in a way that piqued her curiosity and then went on from there to make a direct appeal.

- Seize split second opportunities that arise when spiritual themes are alluded to. Take a deep breath and with a quick prayer, with love in your heart for the person, make your point, share your faith and understanding.

- In what you say, separate yourself from all the Mickey Mouse ‘Christian’ preaching that has gotten religious / Christian people such a bad name. Admit that a lot of people out there are giving two cent answers to million dollar questions (and of course, don’t give those sort of trite answers either). Treat people as your fellow struggling humans, as persons, whom God passionately cares for... not as objects.

- Tell them something about yourself and what the Truth means for you practically. Everyone likes hearing other peoples’ stories...remember how popular those dumb soap operas are.

- Remember that you have the keys of eternal life for those with whom you live and work. You have been placed amongst them for the very purpose of giving them the chance of eternity.

And so, my dear friends. We will be there. The fact that the Father and Son right now accept us should strengthen against the pain of rejection both from the world we preach to, and from our brethren. Thus in Ps. 38:11-15 David laments at how rejected he is by all, and yet takes strength from God’s acceptance of him. Our conviction that we are accepted of Him should enable us to overcome the waves of rejection that inevitably accompany the preaching of the Gospel, and which discourage so many would-be preachers. We simply must believe that we will be there. David so often looks forward to the day of judgment with eagerness. David's enthusiasm for the coming of judgment reflected his understanding that it will be a day of the display of Divine mercy. Is. 16:5 speaks of it as "a throne shall be established in mercy, and one [the Lord Jesus] shall sit thereon judging in truth". It will be the ultimate moment of truth, and yet it will be established in mercy. One of the most disturbing conversations of my life was with a sister who had worked for many years in a Christian old folks home. She had become specialized in being with elderly brethren and sisters as they faced the moment of their death. She admitted that the majority of them expressed huge fear and even a strong conviction that they would not be in the Kingdom. They could not meet their death with integrity; they made comments like “Well I’ve never been much of a student...”. Yet these were by all accounts brethren and sisters of good standing in the long course of their ecclesial lives. And yet in the final analysis of death, they confessed that they did not believe they would be in the Kingdom. Others, of course, could calmly face death with confidence of the resurrection and the life eternal; but they, apparently, were in the minority. This ought to *profoundly disturb us as a community*. For the very essence of the good news is that *we will be there*.

The fact that Yahweh really did redeem His people from Egypt is connected and associated with the command to have no other Gods apart from Him (Dt. 5:6,7). The more we believe that we really have been redeemed, the more evident it becomes that this Saviour God demands our whole and total devotion. Let us take heed to the exhortation of Heb. 2:1,3: If we “neglect so great salvation”, we will have ‘drifted away’ (RV) from the solid assurances which are in the Gospel we first heard. Clearly, it is a temptation to drift away from those assurances, even if we ‘hold’ to the doctrinal propositions of the Gospel in theory. The wonderful reality of it all for us can so easily drift away. But; we will be there! We will be like the weak old labourers in the parable who walk away from judgment day clutching their ‘penny’ [of salvation], thinking " I really shouldn't have this. I didn't work for a day, and

this...this coin...this is a day's pay" . But we will be there. You and me. For all our doubts and fears, our chronic lack of self worth, for all the inward, unspoken struggles to believe and understand, that nobody knows nor even notices. We will be there. This is grace, and this will be grace. Truly there is all joy and peace through believing these things, "that ye may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13).

*"If upon divine testimony in the word, a man believes that Jesus of Nazareth was the suffering and risen Christ and Son of God, he then and only then, believes the apostolic Gospel...the only way to become a Christian is by being buried in water into the similitude of his death for the remission of sins. Unless a man is pardoned thus, there is no remission for him in this or the world to come. He is entitled to his wages- death. But if he no longer works sin, that very instant he becomes entitled to everlasting life through Jesus. But he may forfeit that title, and therefore lose his life".*

Bro. John Thomas

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#### **Notes**

(1) Bill Hybels, *Becoming A Contagious Christian*, p. 129.

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#### **Appendix: The Certainty Of Salvation**

Just consider the huge amount of assurance in the New Testament that we will be there. This is the repeated assumption of the inspired writers. These assurances are there on almost every page of the New Testament.

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:1,2).

"For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement" (Rom. 5:6-11).

"For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:19,20).

"For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection...Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he

liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God" (Rom. 6:5,8-13).

"But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you... For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us...But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it...What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:11,15-18,25,31-35).

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Rom. 10:9).

"...knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand" (Rom. 13:11,12).

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13)

"In hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised..." (Tit. 1:2)

"The grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to the intent that, denying ungodliness..." (Tit. 2:11)

"The promise of life which is in Christ...who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace...hath brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel" (2 Tim. 1:1,9,10)

"If we be dead with him, we shall also live with him" (2 Tim. 2:11)

"In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised" (Tit. 1:1)

"The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared" (Tit. 2:11)

"Hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end" (Heb. 3:6)

"We are made partakers with Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end" (Heb. 3:14)

“We which have believed do enter into that rest” (Heb. 4:3)

“Beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation” (Heb. 6:9)

“We desire that each one of you may shew...the full assurance of hope unto the end” (Heb. 6:11)

“He is able to save to the utmost those who come unto God through him” (Heb. 7:25). The achievement of the cross is such that the Lord’s blood can “purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God...that they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:14,15). “By one offering hath he perfected for ever them that are sanctified...having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus...” (Heb. 10:10,14,19)

“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope, that it waver not; for he is faithful that promised” (Heb. 10:23). Any wavering of hope is surely a lack of faith in God’s supreme faithfulness.

“Knowing that ye have a better possession and an abiding one. Cast not away therefore your boldness, which hath great recompense of reward...we are not of them that shrink back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (Heb. 10:34,35,39)

“Heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him” (James 2:5)

“The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time...though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet. 1:3-5,8,9)

“Hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13)

“Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9,10)

“Hereunto were ye called, that ye should inherit a blessing” (1 Pet. 3:9)

“And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away...But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you” (1 Pet. 5:4,10)

The Lord “is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9)

“This is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life” (1 Jn. 2:25)

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:1,2)

“And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world” (1 Jn. 4:16,17)

“He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life...And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life” (1 Jn. 5:10-12,20)

## 23. The Loneliness Phenomenon

In the 1950s, about one in every ten households had only one person in them. These were primarily widows. But today, due to the three D's of social statistics (death, divorce, and deferred marriage), about one in every four households is a single person household. And if current trends continue, sociologists predict that ratio will soon increase to one in every three households. Many may not even be conscious of their loneliness and isolation which a changing society has thrust upon them. In his book *The Hazards of Being Male*, Herb Goldberg asked adult men if they had any close friends. Most of them seemed surprised by the question and usually responded, " No, why? Should I? ". People today seem to value above all else mobility, privacy, and convenience. But these three values make developing a sense of community almost impossible. In *A Nation of Strangers*, Vance Packard argued that the mobility of American society [in various ways] contributed to social isolation and loneliness. People these days rarely do the same job for long; accommodation often changes frequently. It's the same in almost every country and society, rich or poor. Loneliness is a number one complaint within our community; isolated believers earnestly wish for more fellowship; others complain of feeling ‘lonely in the crowd’ at Bible Schools or established ecclesiastical bodies; and others speak of the loneliness they feel within their marriage or ecclesial or family relationships. Loneliness is more a state of mind than it is a social situation. Thus people who find themselves trapped in a relationship may be more lonely than a person living alone.

As we lay awake at night looking up at the lamp fitting, or stare out from the balcony at the city lights, there must have been within each reader a deep sense of this clawing, intrusive loneliness. That search for ourselves, that inner despair, that fear of standing so totally and essentially alone in this world... And I have reason to believe that these kinds of struggles are more common amongst Christians than amongst many others. For we have been separated from this world unto the things of the future Kingdom; there is a deep and natural sense of our ‘separation’, yet frankly we often don’t know how to handle it. We can end up like Jeremiah in Jer. 15:17, almost resenting that separation: “I never sat in the company of

revelers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me..." . Our essential loneliness, and recognizing it, is what leads us to faith in and relationship with our true Father. The Lord Jesus will not leave us alone as orphans- He will come to us (Jn. 14:18). He does this through "The Comforter", the Spirit of Christ. What this means is hard and controversial to exactly define. But let it be said that if we seek to live life in the Spirit of Christ, ever asking what He would do, how He would speak and deport Himself...we will feel His presence as if He never left this world. And sensing His personal friendship will be absolutely and totally *enough*.

Salvation, as Robert Roberts so frequently said, is an individual matter. It is not a collective affair. Compare two passages within the Lord's teaching, which each use the same Greek words: "I am come to give...division. From henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three [i.e. sometimes they would be 2:3 and other times 3:2- there would be a series of disagreements over various issues]... a house divided against a house falleth" (Lk. 12:52,52 cp. Lk. 11:17). What are we to make of this? Every divided house or Kingdom will "fall", i.e. be condemned at judgment day (s.w. Mt. 7:27; Rom. 14:4; 1 Cor. 10:12; Heb. 4:11; James 5:12). And yet Jesus inevitably divides 'houses'. Surely the Lord is teaching that every Kingdom and family will fall, because it will be divided, and therefore the only hope of salvation is purely individual. This was radical thinking in first century Palestine, where the destiny of the extended family was held to be uniform; i.e., you would end up in the last day wherever your extended family did. But the Lord is cutting through all this, and teaching that salvation is a personal matter. No single extended family will, as a unit, avoid being divided by the result of the judgment. The Lord's teaching surely has some relevance to some Christian cultures which can likewise give the impression that large, well established Christian families will almost automatically all be saved.

### ***The Need For Personality***

The Lord's teaching places a huge value on the importance of the individual- He is the unusual shepherd who will leave the 99 in the wilderness and go searching for the one lost sheep. Yet His parable of searching for one sheep is clearly based upon a similar one in Ezekiel 34, where we read that God [in His Son] will 'seek out his *flock*' (Ez. 34:12). Perhaps Jesus meant us to understand that for Him, one lost sheep is as good as the whole flock; so important is the individual to Him. He made no effort to start an organization; rather did He focus upon the conversion and radical transformation of a group of individuals. We were each uniquely created in order to manifest some specific aspect of the Father's glory. I therefore want to demonstrate Biblically that loneliness, as we may perceive it, is not something to necessarily lament. For this simply has to be, if genuine personality in us as individuals is to be developed as God desires. I have long pondered why it is exactly that the Catholic and Orthodox churches are so popular. The answer, it's seeming to me, lies in the way that the individual is submerged beneath a collective consciousness. It's the same explanation for the temporary success of every political movement, from Fascism to Communism. We can escape from ourselves, from the burden [and yet the God-intended joy] of being *you*, by signing up to a uniform position- and delegating out the huge weight of your personal responsibility to an organization. Perhaps there is an element of this in our natural dislike of loneliness, our desire to be within a circle of thought and other believers rather than being alone. Yet within such a system as those just described, and which so many humans have signed up for, you have to do what you are told; and what you personally think, feel or believe becomes unimportant. And for any who stray too far into being themselves, there has

to be elimination from the system; and so there *had to be* Belsen on the extreme right, and the Gulag on the extreme left. And in religious terms, there is excommunication from the Catholics, fatwahs [death warrants for heretics] from Islam. And in many a Protestant group there is likewise dissociation or excommunication for those who dare to be themselves. In the very end, though, we are personally responsible before God. Here is the biting relevance of the Biblical doctrine of responsibility. We cannot pass our responsibility on to others. You and me personally will be in God's Kingdom, with our arms around each other in the rubble of Jerusalem. We will personally be there. We will see Abraham there (Lk. 13:28); as Job says, with our own eyes we will behold our Lord, and not through anyone else's eyes (Job 19:27). Our eyes shall behold the King in the beauty which we personally perceive in Him (Is. 33:17).

And so it has to be that in this life we forge that same personal bond with the Lord whom we shall one day [soon] meet in person. We have a totally personal responsibility to Him now which we will give account for then; and the Lord likens it to a talent, something precious, given to us each one to do what we can with. I feel I need to sound a word of warning about how things can tend within our own community. Brothers and sisters are baptized in isolation, and live very closely with their Lord. More converts are made, and, quite rightly, ecclesial life develops. As in any society, submission to each other is required in the spirit of Christ. Yet if we're not careful, our natural tendency to hide behind organizations, committees, group positions...can erode our being the unique son or daughter of God, glorifying Him in a totally unique way, which we were created to be. We will end up in a position where, as we once were out in the darkness of this world, what we personally think, feel or believe is unimportant. We must be so careful that the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of our preaching work- the building up of new converts into living ecclesiastis- does not result in the converts stumbling disillusioned back into the world. According to the parable of the sower, they will do this because they have no "root in themselves". I take this to mean that they have no deep, individual, enduring spiritual personality. Unity is not the same as uniformity; and community is not the same as conformity. The unity between God and Jesus is the model for our unity as believers, and also the unity between man and wife. But that unity involved the will of the Son being different from that of the Father, even if He submitted His will to the Father's. What the Father and Son desire so eagerly is genuine human personality, re-formed after their image. They want us as persons. God has a specific plan for each of us, and we should exist as ecclesiastis and organizations to inspire the individual growth and expression of each individual member according to the pattern of Christ Jesus. In Paul's figure, the body makes increase of itself, developed by what *every* member supplies <sup>(1)</sup>. In Christ there is an untold freedom for the human person. For freedom Christ set us free; where His spirit is, there the heart is free (2 Cor. 3:17).

### ***The Lord's Loneliness***

It can be no coincidence that the Lord Jesus is described as being "left alone" only twice in the New Testament, and they are both within a few verses of each other: "They which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was *left alone*, and the woman standing in the midst" (Jn. 8:9)... "Then said Jesus unto them, When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not *left me alone*; for I do always those things that please him" (Jn. 8:28,29). He was not alone because the Father confirmed Him in the judgments He made (Jn. 8:16).

What is the meaning of this connection? As the peerless Son of God stood before the repentant sinner, with all others convicted by their consciences to one by one slink away from His presence, He was left alone with His perfect Father as well as the repentant woman. Jesus saw in that scene a prefiguring of His death on the cross. There, lifted up from the earth, He was left alone with the Father, a repentant sinner [the thief], and again, one by one, the condemning onlookers smote their breasts in conviction of their sin and walked away. The cross was “the judgment of this world” (Jn. 12:31). There men and women are convicted of their sin and either walk away, or take the place of the humbled woman or desperately repentant thief. This alone should impart an urgency and intensity to our memorial services, when through bread and wine we come as it were before Him there once again, facing up to the piercing reality of our situation as sinners kneeling before the crucified Son of God. One aspect of the loneliness of the cross was that simply the Lord’s righteousness set Himself apart from humanity- and He so intensely felt it: “Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me” (Jn. 16:32). Yet it was the loneliness which drew Him to the Father. For the isolated believer, the loneliness of being in some sense more righteous living that e.g. your alcoholic husband, your atheist daughter, the materialistic women at work...is a burden hard to live with. Yet in this, we are sharing something of the cross of our Lord. And if we suffer with Him, we shall also share in the life eternal which He was given. Being “left alone” with the Father and your humbled, repentant brethren is a sharing in the cross of the Son of God. This is the gripping logic, the promise of ultimate hope, which is bound up with the sense of spiritual loneliness which is in some ways inevitably part of the believing life.

Loneliness is a part of sharing in the crucifixion life. The Lord hinted at the loneliness of the cross in saying that the seed falls into the ground and ‘dies’ “alone”- but then brings forth much fruit as a result of that alone-ness (Jn. 12:24). The High Priest entered alone into the Most Holy place with the blood of atonement (Heb. 9:7). Any stepping out of the comfort zone is an inevitably lonely experience, just as the crucifixion life of Jesus was the ultimately lonely experience. For nobody else knows exactly how you feel in e.g. turning down that job, giving away those savings, quitting that worldly friendship, quietly selling something.... .

On the other hand, we’re not called to be martyrs in the sense of glorying in our sufferings, e.g. loneliness. One of the first heresies that assailed the early ecclesia was the idea that the real opposite of the spirit, or spirituality, was the body. The body came to be seen as evil; it had to be covered up and even physically abused to compensate for its sin. But the real antithesis to spirituality is the Biblical devil, the sinful thinking of the mind of the flesh. We are intended by our creator to be happy with who we are. There’s nothing wrong with a girl dressing to look pretty, with young men combing their hair in the mirror and kidding themselves they look so cool. It’s part of life, part of our God given humanity. It’s how it all is in this wonderful world of human types and personalities in which we move. And so. To get to the bottom line, it’s no sin to be glad you’re alive, and to seek to live a fulfilled and happy life in Christ. There is such a thing as feeling lonely when we needn’t. Elijah is an example of this; he felt that he was “left alone” faithful in Israel- even though there were another 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal (Rom. 11:3). The Hebrew in 1 Kings is hard to translate. It could mean that God reserved 7,000 of Elijah’s brothers and sisters who potentially would not bow the knee to Baal. Yet Elijah didn’t want to see the potential of his brethren. He set himself in a league above them, like the Psalmist, saying in his haste that all men are liars (Ps. 116:11).

### ***Mutuality***

In the final analysis, we will meet Jesus alone. There will by God's grace be a moment when we will even see the face of Almighty God- alone. This was the light at the end of Job's tunnel- he would see his redeemer for himself "and not another". There are many examples of where God and man are portrayed as being in some kind of mutual relationship. Consider Jn. 4:23: "The Father seeketh such to worship Him". The Hebrew / Greek idea of 'seeking' God implied to worship Him [Strong's lexicon gives this interpretation of the Greek word used here]. Understanding that, albeit through the mask of translation, we see that the Father is seeking seekers. We seek Him, He seeks us; and thus we meet.

The more we let this reality sink in, the more apparent it is that if we are truly in touch with ourselves, we cannot be half hearted in our relationship with the Lord. We will want to give our whole self to Him. Let His words sink in to you personally: "He who is not with me is against me...he that is not against us is for us" (Mt. 12:30; Mk. 9:40). We may think we are not against the Lord's cause, even if we're not as committed to it as we might be; many an unbaptized young person has told me this. But to be 'not against' Jesus means we must be *with Him*. Nobody can be passively 'not against' Jesus. If we're not whole heartedly with Him, we're against Him. That's how His demanding logic goes. A relationship with Him demands the whole person; *you*, your very heart and essence. You can't hide behind your family, your ecclesia...it's just you and Him in the end.

### ***Self-Examination***

To fear loneliness, being left alone with ourselves, can be a result of simply not facing up to our own personality and our own very personal relationship with the Father which we ought to have. We would rather turn the radio up loud, so we don't have to think... than reflect upon how we stand utterly alone before the Father and Son. Self-examination brings us face to face with our essential loneliness in a healthy way: "For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another" (Gal. 6:2-4). It is possible to have rejoicing in ourselves alone when we know we have a clear conscience before the Father. But this can only come through being genuinely in touch with oneself; the person who is subsumed within an organization, who is totally co-dependent rather than an individual freely standing before the Father...such a person can never reach this level of self-knowledge. The N.I.V. says: "Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else". We are treading a terrible tightrope here, between the deadly sin of pride on the one side, and the sin of devaluing our own God-formed personality on the other. Only a person in touch with him or herself can have the rejoicing or pride in one's clear conscience [cleansed, of course, by grace in Christ] of which Paul speaks here. Paul seems to have in mind the words of Job when he speaks of how he will in the very end behold God with his own eyes, "and not another" (Job 19:27).

### ***The Strength Of Fellowship***

We forsake all human relationships to follow the Lord Jesus (Mt. 19:27-29). And He promises to compensate for this even in this life. But it depends to what extent we are willing to accept and perceive it. Through meaningful fellowship with our brethren we will find those relationships which we have given up compensated for, even if we aren't physically close to our brethren. In reference to Israel's deliverance from Egypt we read: "God setteth the

solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains" (Ps. 68:6). To be set in a new family is paralleled with being brought out from slavery. Part of the process of our redemption is that we are set in a new ecclesial family. This must be a reference to how Israel were brought out on Passover night, where the families and lonely ones had to join together into households big enough to kill a lamb for. The implication of Ps. 68 could be that it was in these family groups that they travelled through the wilderness. The N.C.V. reads: "God is in his holy Temple. He is a father to orphans, and he defends the widows. God gives the lonely a home. He leads prisoners out with joy...". The very house / family of God becomes the house / family of the lonely. Hence the ecclesia *is* the house of God (1 Cor. 3:16). We find true family in the new family of God. By baptism we are "added together" with those others who are likewise saved in Christ (Acts 2:47 RVmg.). We will live together eternally with the other members of this new body and community which we enter. The links between us within that new family are even stronger than those with our natural family; and hence any division amongst the family of God is the greatest tragedy. What this means in practice is that we must fellowship each other. Even if we are isolated from other believers, one can always write letters, make phone calls, invite others to visit them, attempt to meet others... And if you have no idea where your nearest fellow believer is, by all means contact us.

So loneliness isn't at all a bad thing. Paul tells the Thessalonians how desperately he wanted to physically be with them, but God stopped him "time and again"; and so he concluded in the end that it was better for him to be left at Athens alone (1 Thess. 2:17-3:1). He "could no longer forbear" that loneliness in Athens, just as many readers likewise struggle with their loneliness. But looking back, he realized that that aloneness in Athens had actually been for his spiritual good, even though he so longed to be with his brethren. And here those who so bemoan [understandably] their spiritual isolation as they live out their Christian lives in ones or twos can take comfort. It was whilst left alone in Athens that Paul's conscience was stirred within him and he began an incredibly successful preaching campaign (Acts 17:16-22). The image of that wonderful man standing alone on Mars Hill taking Christ to the masses there for the very first time is inspirational; but he only stood up there and did it because he had been left in Athens alone by a loving Father. His loneliness led to his spirit / conscience being stirred within him by the need of the humanity around him. His loneliness made him see how unique was his relationship with God Almighty and His Son. And for this reason so many isolated Christians, grasping the awesome reality that perhaps they alone have any Hope of salvation as they live amidst their atheistic or Buddhist or Moslem societies...are inspired by their consciences to take the Hope of Israel so powerfully out into their societies.

### ***The Loneliness Of Prayer***

If the Lord's words dwell in us, we will ask what *we* will, and it will be done. Yet only if we ask according to *God's* will can we receive our requests (Jn. 15:7 cp. 1 Jn. 5:14). The implication is that if the word dwells in us, our will becomes that of the Father, and therefore our requests, our innermost desires, are according to His will, and are therefore granted. The word of the Gospel becomes "united by faith with them that hear it" (Heb. 4:2 RVmg.). Through the medium of our response to God's word, our will becomes united with His. Therefore the word was what directed and motivated David's regular daily prayers (Ps. 119:164); they weren't standard repetitions of the same praises or requests, but a reflection of his Biblical meditation. He asks God to hear *his* voice in prayer, using the very same words with which he reflects upon how he heard *God's* voice as it is in His written word. In successful prayer, therefore, our will merges with that of the Father. His will becomes our will; and *vice versa*. By this I mean that *our* will can become *His* will in that He will hear us

and even change His declared will [Moses several times achieved this during the course of his prayer life]; prayer really does change things. Our will becomes God's just as His becomes ours. There is an awesome mutuality between a man and his God as he kneels at night alone, praying and asking for the very things which are now God's will.

If I were to ask you what are other words which might describe the will of God as revealed in His word, you'd likely come up with the word "spirit". And this is Biblical. Romans begins with Paul talking about praying through God's will to come and visit them; and the letter concludes with Paul writing about his prayer for this through the Spirit (Rom. 1:10; 15:30-32). We can be filled with God's will "in all wisdom and understanding of the Spirit" (Col. 1:9; 4:12). What we think of in our self-talk as we walk down the street, this is our "spirit", and it is this which must be conformed to the Spirit of the Father and Son. We read several times of praying at all times in the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:15; 2 Cor. 12:9; Eph. 6:18), for the need to struggle in prayer "through the love of the spirit" (Rom. 15:30). In prayer, we address God as Abba, Father- precisely because "God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). I take these passages to refer to the way successful prayer involves the spirit / will of a believer becoming united with the Spirit / will of the Father and Son. Gal. 4:6 says that it is the Spirit of Jesus who prays to God "Abba, Father"; but Rom. 8:15 says that it is us of course who pray to God "Abba, Father". We are not slaves but God's very own dear children. The spirit / will / mind of the Lord Jesus is therefore seen as the mind of the believer. And thus Paul could write that it was no longer he who lived, but Christ who lived in him (Gal. 2:20). The whole of the new creation groans or sighs in our spirit; and Jesus, the Lord the Spirit groans in prayer for us too. God's Spirit is to dwell in us, right in the core of our hearts (Rom. 8:11; Gal. 4:6).

All this was foreshadowed in Ezekiel's vision of the cherubim, where the spirit of the living creatures in the Heavens was the same spirit in the wheels, God's people who operationalize God's will here on earth (Ez. 1:20). That vision was then immediately demonstrated in practice when the Spirit of God entered into Ezekiel and he was sent to preach; just as the Spirit of the living creatures had been in the wheels, and they were sent to and fro in the earth (Ez. 2:2). And thus Ezekiel sees the hand of a man coming to *him*, just as he had seen it associated with the cherubim in the vision (Ez. 1:8 = Ez. 2:9). And surely Ezekiel is addressed as "son of man" in this context because the living creatures have the "likeness of a man" (Ez. 1:5); Ezekiel, God's man on earth, alone and separate from his brethren, was merged with the huge Heavenly system above him, because God's Spirit was in him, and he was willing to do God's will. Just as the cherub "stretched forth his hand" to direct another Angel, so God's hand was stretched forth [s.w.] upon Ezekiel and he likewise was sent to do God's will (Ez. 2:9; 8:3; 10:7). Knowing that we are part of this huge Heavenly system of working, identified with the Angels and the very cherubim of glory above, can eclipse to a large extent our human feelings of loneliness.

This is where personal Bible reading and reflection are so important; for there the individual finds the essence of God's will and strives to make it his or her very own. This is how we can come to understand Rom. 8:16, which says that in prayer, God's Spirit bears witness with our spirit that is within us. Thus even although "we do not know how to pray for as we ought, the Spirit himself intercedes for us" (Rom. 8:26). The Spirit of the Father and Son speaks in us when we pray (Rom. 8:15), if our will / spirit is theirs. To put this in more technical but I think very telling terms: "The subject-object scheme of 'talking to somebody' is transcended; He who speaks through us is he who is spoken to" <sup>(2)</sup>. It's perhaps the thought behind Mt. 10:20: "It is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you". This is

why Paul can thank God that he finds himself praying constantly for Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3)- because he recognizes that not only can we influence God by our prayers, but He influences us in what we pray for. Joachim Jeremias mentions that " according to idiomatic Jewish usage the word *amen* is used to affirm, endorse or appropriate the words of another person [whereas] in the words of Jesus it is used to introduce and endorse Jesus' own words...to end one's own prayer with *amen* was considered a sign of ignorance" <sup>(3)</sup>. Thus Jesus was introducing a radically new type of speaking. But He did so because He wanted us to realize that if our spirit is united with God's, then our words to God are in a sense God talking to Himself; hence we say 'Amen' to our own words, when 'amen' was usually a confirmation of God's words. Jn. 16:26 fits in here, where in the context of speaking of the unity of the believers with the Father and with Himself, the Lord says that He will not need to pray for the believer, but God Himself will hear the believer. I take this to mean that Jesus foresaw that the time would come when our prayer would be His prayer. It's not so much that He prays for us, but rather prays with us and even through us.

These ideas are brought together by a consideration of the prayers offered for Zion's restoration at the time of the captivity in Babylon. Prior to this, Isaiah had prophesied that God would not rest until Zion be restored. Watchmen would be set upon Zion's walls who would give Him no rest until the walls be rebuilt (Is. 62:1,6,7). At this time, Zion was felt by God to be the "apple of his eye" (Zech. 2:8). This prophesy started to be fulfilled straight after the Babylonian invasion when Jeremiah urged the desolated people to pray: "O wall of the daughter of Zion, let tears run down like a river day and night: give thyself no rest; let not the apple of thine eye cease" (Lam. 2:18). The prayerful remnant gave *themselves* no rest; and thus was fulfilled the prophecy that *God* would have no rest. Sincere prayer according to God's will meant that there was a strange mutuality between the Father and those who prayed to Him. Both He and they considered Zion to be the apple of their eye; and thus the prayers were ultimately answered and Zion was restored.

Our spirit and His are united. All this speaks of an incredible personal bonding in prayer between the Creator and each, specific one of His creatures. These passages have nothing to do with miraculous gifts of the Spirit, or of men having their own will overpowered by irresistible bolts from Heaven. Only through our will, our essential person and spirit, becoming united with God's can it be possible to live a life of prayer, whereby we are praying without ceasing, constantly, every moment (Rom. 1:9; 12:12; 1 Thess. 1:2; 5:17; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2:13; Phil. 1:3; Col. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:3). Our life, our person, our spirit, our being, is read as a prayer to God.

All this is why 'being yourself' is so vital; your very own essence, your unique mind / spirit / desires / will, have to become united with those of the Father. This is not at all a suppression of self or elimination or resignation of human personality. It's the very opposite. I am saying that only if we are in touch with ourselves, if our faith in Jesus Christ is our very own, not the living out of anyone else's expectations, not mere membership of a group, not simply enmeshed in others' views about God and 'the truth', for whom 'the truth' is not just a bought position, a package received...only then do we have a spirit / personality / desire / will that can be uniquely bonded with that of the Father and Son. And there is no lack of evidence that God uses the experience of human loneliness to bring this about. But it's a loneliness, as I and many others can tell you, that leads you closer to the Father and Son, to that experience of kneeling alone praying when you know and feel that indescribable personal bond with the God who is above. Rising from such prayer there is the confident sense in even the most humanly abandoned soul that now, nothing else matters- with God on our side and 'with us'

in such a profound way. The Son of God kneeling in Gethsemane against the Passover moon is the most sublime picture of human and Divine will becoming one, with all the struggle that our humanity puts up against it. No wonder He has been depicted there with a halo around His head- not that personally I like that kind of art. The Father works in many ways to seek to bring us to this. It may be through the loss of loved ones, physical isolation, unfair and inexplicable rejection by our brethren, depression, events that shake our belief system to the core, being surrounded by a non-Christian society, living with a partner or family who simply cannot understand you... Believe me, because I truly have seen it in so many Christian lives, all these things have played their part. All things truly work together for our eternal good; for the Father seeks only to do us good in our latter end.

And this is why, in the very end, we are faced with the crucial need and value of our loneliness. It's why it has to be. For it is who we essentially and uniquely *are* that God is concerned with; not with our deeds of righteousness, not with our placing within a society or family; but the real, naked, you or me. Prayer, therefore, in one sense has to be a lonely experience. This is all surely why the Lord Himself is frequently pictured by the Gospel writers as making an effort to be alone in prayer to the Father (Mk. 1:35; 3:13; 9:2; Mt. 14:13,23; 17:1; Lk. 6:12; 9:28; 22:39,41). This is all some emphasis. Be it rising in the early hours to go out and find a lonely place to pray, or withdrawing a stone's throw from the disciples in Gethsemane to pray...He sought to be alone. Jn. 6:15 emphasizes this repeated feature of the Lord's life: "He departed again into a mountain himself alone". The fact He often ["again"] retreated alone like this is emphasized by three words which are effectively saying the same thing- departed, himself, alone. Much as we should participate in communal prayers or in the prayers of our partner or our children, there simply has to be the time for serious personal prayer in our lives. And I have to drive the point home: *Are you doing this?* Putting it in other terms- are you alone *enough*?

In essence, then, these are lonesome days for each of us as we wait for the Lord's return. They simply have to be, as the Father seeks to forge true personality within us. Loneliness is part of being human; to be unduly fearful of loneliness is actually a running away from our own person. To seek to remove 'loneliness' from our human experience can come close to removing our essential independence as persons; to abdicate our responsibility as uniquely created individuals, who each have a specific contribution to make to the Father's glory. This said, there is a tremendous power in true Christian fellowship. We are members of the one body, and regardless of geographical isolation, there is an often untapped source of belonging and identity here. Yet in the ultimate analysis, we still stand alone before the Father and Son. Ultimately, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son. This standing alone before them is not something to resent; it is something to value and develop, for it forms the basis for our present and future relationship with them which is what the eternity of the Kingdom is all about.

## **Walking With God**

God has structured human life so that we each experience loneliness, at least in life "under the sun". No matter how deep your relationship with your parents, in the usual course of events the time comes when they must die, and you must live on- knowing that nobody can empathize exactly with your memories of childhood, the smell of your early home, the colour of the kitchen door... And no matter how intimate your relationship with your partner, he or she wasn't in your life until you met them and cleaved unto them in marriage. No matter how close your relationship with your children, they also only personally knew part of your life. If

you were to find a wonderful friend, a companion on life's road, and spent hours of conversation with them over endless late night coffees, you'd still be frustrated that you could never exactly share with them all the memories, the scenes, the situations, that resulted in the personality you are. Many of those things you've forgotten, or misremember; the passage of time changes perceptions of reality in any case. And were you to spend weeks explaining your recollections to somebody, they still could never hug you and say with legitimacy: "Yes, I know exactly". Nobody has personally travelled with you over all the roads you've taken to what can appear to be, humanly, the unusable last equilibrium of who "you" as a person really are at this moment. This is how human experience is. We are left crying out for someone who was there, to whom we can say "You were there [then]... you were then [then]... through those years... through that moment... *you were there*".

The simple truth is, that there *is* such a Companion, “my comrade all the journey through” as a hymn expresses it. Life in Christ is about a personal relationship with Him as friend, Master, companion, Brother; and likewise with the Father. This is a reality of colossal import. Learning Bible teaching, baptism, preaching, good moral family life, working in the ecclesia... all this can be performed for decades without knowing Him as this daily, hourly, minute by minute witness, comforter and friend. Wisdom surely consists of turning that knowledge into a felt reality.

**I** will be..."

An oft overlooked component of the promises to Abraham which are the core of the Gospel is that “I will be your God”. Land and eternal life in the future, blessings... these are indeed wonderful. But the King of the Cosmos is *my* God. Oh how rich the promise. So often we read that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I take this to mean that He was there for them, through every moment, He was their God, He alone is without beginning and has immortality in Himself. This continuity in God over history is therefore an encouragement to us that He likewise is the continuous One in our lives too. Israel in captivity felt God had forgotten them; and so they are comforted that they are individuals “which have been borne by me from the belly, which have been carried from the womb: and even to old age I am he, and even to grey hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; yea, I will carry, and will deliver” (Is. 46:3,4). Note how God, who is presented as male, likens Himself to a woman here. As He carried us in the womb, so He will carry us when we are old and grey haired. True to human parenting experience, the baby is always the father’s little baby, even in grey hairs. And this wonderful comfort is so simply because “I am he”. This is an evident reference to God’s Name, YHWH. The mystery of the Name is partly because the declaration of it in Ex. 3:6 implies grammatically that He is, was, and shall be. This was intended to be a great comfort to Israel in Egypt, who again had felt that God was somehow distant, looking the other way, leaving them in their aloneness. The same Name, the promise of God’s abiding presence and purpose with us, provides comfort to every one of His people.

Case

Studies

So many of God's children have come to exemplify the truth of what we've written above.

Job in his depths came to know God as his “witness in heaven” (Job 16:19); in his former life, “when the eye saw me, it gave witness [s.w.] to me” (Job 29:11). But Job was brought to learn that the only ultimate witness in life is God, and it is His testimony and not man’s which is meaningful.

David frequently expresses his aloneness, and the comfort He therefore finds in God. But this had to grow over time. His earlier Psalms reflect his fear of loneliness: “Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth... when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not” (Ps. 71:9,18). Is. 46:4 seems almost to be in answer to David’s fear: “even to old age I am he, and even to grey hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; yea, I will carry, and will deliver”. He evidently loved his parents and expected their passing when he wrote: “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up” (Ps. 27:10). But David wasn’t begging God to not forsake him; he was now confident that God wouldn’t. Ps. 56:8 demonstrates the intensity David arrived at: “You number all my wanderings; put *my* tears into *your* bottle; are they not in your book?”. Tear bottles were kept by mourners at funerals; they put their tears in a bottle which they then kept in memory of the deceased. But David says that *his* tears are in *God’s* bottle. The idea was that *your* tears went into *your* bottle. But David was so intimate with God that he perceived that *his* tears were in fact *God’s*; and vice versa.

<b>God</b>	<b>With</b>	<b>Us</b>
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And so the awesome truth dawns: that man is not alone. For God is with us. Pushing relentlessly deeper- How, in what sense, is God with us? The answer is: ‘Emmanuel’. God is with us through the Lord Jesus. But again- what does that mean? Putting meaning into words, we could say that God is “with us” in that the Lord Jesus so suffered, so shared in our humanity, that there is no human being who can legitimately say “Nobody knows how I feel”. Maybe there isn’t anybody on this earth. But there is One who is now in Heaven, who does know. This is one window onto the old question of ‘Why the cross? Why did He have to suffer *so* much, and *so* publically?’. For our redemption could’ve been achieved any way God chose; His Son didn’t *have* to die. To say that He had to die to fulfil the Old Testament types only pushes the questions a stage further back- but *why*, anyway? Why not to give a profound speech and then drink hemlock surrounded by His friends and followers, the classic parting? Why the awful intensity and utter abandon of the cross?

Whilst the answer is multi-factorial, it’d be true to say that *one* of the reasons was so that none of us could *ever* legitimately think: “Nobody understands what I am going through”. I have met radical feminists who tell me they need a female Jesus, one like them; and radical black theologians for whom Jesus *had to be* black; and to an extent, I can see what they mean. They want Jesus to be like them. Just as I want Him to be like me. A study of Jesus in art teaches us the same. Italian painters have Him with Italian features; the Spanish masters present Him in Iberian-style villas; the Scandinavians as a blue-eyed blonde; the Africans as a negro. And yet the wonder of it all is that Christ is indeed “for every man”; the unique structure of His life and personal experiences was such that He can legitimately know the feelings of the black man, the white woman, the disabled, the deaf, the Arab, the Chinese... Nothing can separate our life experience from His understanding and ability to identify. Is. 53:7 speaks of the Lord in His time of dying: “as a sheep before *her* shearers is silent”. Yet the Passover Lamb, so evidently typical of the Lord as He approached death, was to be *male*. Why such an obvious contradiction? Was it not because the prophet foresaw that in the extraordinary breadth of experience the Lord was passing through, He was made able to empathize with both men *and* women?

<b>Meanings</b>	<b>For</b>	<b>Us</b>
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In the final analysis, we will meet Jesus alone. There will by God’s grace be a moment when we will even see the face of Almighty God- alone. This was the light at the end of Job’s

tunnel- he would see his redeemer for himself “and not another”. Paul possibly expresses the same idea of an unenterable relationship in 1 Cor. 2:15: “He that is spiritual discerneth all things (about God), yet he himself is discerned of no man”. Our real spiritual being is a “hidden man” (1 Pet. 3:4). The Spirit describes our final redemption as our “soul” and “spirit” being “saved”; our innermost being, our essential spiritual personality, who we *really* are in spiritual terms, will as it were be immortalized (1 Pet. 1:9; 1 Cor. 5:5).

Anyone faced with the trauma of forgiveness, of seeking reconciliation with another, will know that an agreed version of events between opposed parties will never be arrived at. Yet we hanker for this, we long for justice in the eyes of men and women, that they might accept our history, our reality, as the true one. Because of this, so often forgiveness and reconciliation remain unachieved. For nobody can exactly empathize with us. Nor with the opposing party. Vague sympathy there may be, but there can’t be true empathy, total fellow feeling with another because we have been exactly where they were and are. For we are not God; we’ve not been there with that other person. And nobody else has been with us in that way either. But for those who know the Father and Son as their personal witnesses, who believe that justice is with God and not men, this crying need for an agreed version of events presses less heavily. God knows. Jehovah-Jireh- He has seen, and will therefore provide. Even if there’s no justice, the wonder of a personal relationship with our Heavenly Father will keep us going. Those who lose their “faith” because of fallouts in the ecclesiastical, personal offence... haven’t known the wonder of this personal companionship of the Father and Son. It’s so wonderful that really whatever happens on earth, be it betrayal, injustice, sickness, even death itself... nothing shall separate us from the love and relationship of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. And the response to this can only be praise: “For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from before my birth; you are he who took me from my mother’s womb. My praise is continually of you” (Ps. 71:5,6).

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### Notes

(1) “Fraternal gatherings...become sources of evil if allowed to acquire a legislative character in the least degree. Ecclesial independence should be guarded with great jealousy...to form ‘unions’ or ‘societies’ of ecclesiastical bodies, in which delegates should frame laws for the individual ecclesiastical bodies, would be to lay the foundation of a collective despotism which would interfere with the free growth and the true objects of ecclesiastical life. Such collective machineries create fictitious importances, which tend to suffocate the truth. All ecclesiastical history illustrates this”. Robert Roberts, *The Ecclesiastical Guide* (1989 ed., p. 32).

(2) Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3 (The University of Chicago Press, 1963) p. 192.

(3) Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers Of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964).

*Note:* I openly express my deep and perhaps it will be eternal indebtedness to my beloved brother John Stibbs for his input into my thinking in this study. His insight into the human condition and the person of the Lord Jesus I have found remarkably helpful.

## 24. How To Fund Missionary Work

Funding mission work is one of the most contentious issues amongst us. The reason is perhaps that we all personally struggle to accept basic Bible teaching about generosity, materialism and money. Think of what the Hebrew word “Cain” means- for he is alluded to by the Lord as the epitome of the “devil”, the “murderer from the beginning”, the archetypical sinner (Jn. 8:44- perhaps because Adam and Eve’s sin was forgiven, whereas Cain was the first impenitent sinner). “Cain is defined on the basis of a double Hebrew etymology, as ‘possession’ (from *qana* = acquire) and ‘envy’ (from *qana* = be envious)” <sup>(1)</sup>.

Personal possession is almost- almost- inextricably linked with envy, and led to the lies and murder for which Cain was noted by the Lord. To have a strong sense of our personal ‘possessions’ will lead us into the same sins. Indeed, it’s the epitome of ‘the devil’. The concept of ‘private property’ is indeed a myth. For we die, and leave it all behind. The Mosaic law sought to teach this- because “The land is mine”, what appeared to be a ‘sale’ of property wasn’t really a sale at all- quite simply because the land was God’s (Lev. 25:13,23). And likewise our ‘generosity’, as David observed, isn’t really that at all- for we only give God back what He has given us. In fact, when you think about it, the only ‘thing’ that Biblically a person can say is ‘theirs’ is their partner or family- even though these are also given of God. And so it’s sadly understandable that a materialistic, wealthy society always becomes one that has a low estimate of the family unit and the exclusive sanctity of marriage. It seems to me that the nameless relative in Ruth 4 was like so many people today. He was interested in getting a bit more land to add to his stack; but he didn’t really care for the redemption of his brother, and pulled out of the whole thing once he learnt he would have to marry another wife and have more children. He said he couldn’t do this because he would spoil [AV] or endanger [NIV] his inheritance. We know that at this time, strip farming was being practiced- whereby a field was split up into parts, each of which belonged to a different person (Ruth 2:3). By having more children, the man would have to split up his land into yet more parts so that each son had his strips. Ultimately this could lead to the man’s total inheritance becoming almost worthless if it was just split into tiny strips because he had too many children. I like how the NIV has the man speaking of ‘endangering’ his inheritance. He was like so many people- he had say a 20 year horizon, genuinely concerned about what was best for his children in the short term, rather than thinking about his responsibility to his brother. He saw ‘danger’ in doing that. It could be argued that the 50 year Jubilee law meant that the land boundaries returned to how they originally were after 50 years... so perhaps [although it’s hard to work out how the Jubilee law worked in practice] he was worrying about something which only had meaning for the next few decades [if that]. He wasn’t a bad man; just one who was fearful and wouldn’t look beyond the next 20 years or so. And I suggest the genealogy at the end of Ruth 4 comments upon this- that man is anonymous, his name never went down in history, whereas Boaz who loved his brother and didn’t focus solely on his own immediate family went on to be the ancestor of both David and the Lord Jesus Himself.

Having said that it is so hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom- as hard as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle- the Lord comments that ‘what is impossible with man, is possible with God’ (Mk. 10:27). In first century Palestinian Judaism, this saying was a kind of figure of speech for describing a miracle. If any rich person gets into the Kingdom- it will be a miracle. That’s what the Lord is saying. And He says it to us today. Generosity alone, of course, won’t bring us into the Kingdom. It’s not as if we can buy our way in. But there are major implications that our attitude to wealth is in fact a crucial indicator of whether or not we will be there. God richly gives things to *all of us*, Paul says; and by our being “liberal and generous [we] thus lay up for [ourselves] a good foundation for the future, so that [we] may take hold of the life which is life indeed” (1 Tim. 6:17). “The life which is life indeed” is not the lower middle class striving-for-security life of slowly saving and occasionally splashing out on something, building, building up, watching the interest slowly grow, worrying about inflation and the possible need for a new boiler or roof... Much as those things are all part of our human experience in this age, they’re not “the life which is life indeed”. That life begins now, in a counter-instinctive going against the grain of being generous. Making friends of the unrighteous mammon results in the man who had otherwise been somewhat weak in his stewardship being accepted in the end by the Master: “I say unto you, Make to yourselves

friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye shall fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations" (Lk. 16:9). "Riches profit not in the day of wrath: but righteousness delivereth from death" (Prov. 11:4). Riches kept in hand will not help us through the day of judgment. But righteousness, which in the Hebraic parallel in this verse refers to the correct use of riches, will deliver us from eternal death. And perhaps Prov. 13:8 also speaks of how our attitude to wealth is a crucial factor in our eternal destiny: "The ransom of a man's life are his riches". Just prior to that we read in Prov. 13:7: "There is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches". This verse is actually part quoted in 2 Cor. 8:9 and Phil. 2:7, about how on the cross, the Lord Jesus made himself poor, of no reputation, and now has been so highly exalted. Our living out of the Lord's cross is shown in our making of ourselves poor. That is surely the unmistakable teaching of this allusion.

The high challenge of the Lord is also to be seen in how He asks us to *exceed* the "righteousness" of the Pharisees (Mt. 5:20). By "righteousness" he refers to their charity, for which they were well known. In addition to tithing ten percent of absolutely everything, they gave a fifth of their income to charity such as widows, orphans, newly-wedded couples etc. In addition they made anonymous gifts in a "quiet room" of the Temple. How does our giving compare to that? And the Lord challenges us that unless we *exceed* that, "ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven". Radical, challenging words- that are hard to re-interpret or get around.

### **Israel In The Wilderness**

Israel's wilderness journey is a clear enough type of our own path after baptism. They were fed with manna one day at a time- this is so stressed (Ex. 16:4,19,20). There was to be no hoarding of manna- anything extra was to be shared with others (Ex. 16:8; 2 Cor. 8:15). But we live in a world where the financial challenges of retirement, housing, small family size [if any family at all]... mean that there appears no other option but to 'hoard manna' for the future. To some extent this may be a reflection of the way that life in these very last days is indeed quite different to anything previously known in history; but all the same, we face a very real challenge. Are we going to hoard manna, for our retirement, for our unknown futures? Or will we rise up to the challenge to trust in God's day by day provision, and share what's left over? "Give us this day our bread-for-today" really needs to be prayed by us daily. Let's give full weight to the Lord's command to pray for only "our daily bread", the daily rations granted to a soldier on active duty. It's almost impossible to translate this term adequately in English. In the former USSR and Communist East Germany (DDR), there was the idea that nobody in a Socialist state should go hungry. And so if you were hungry in a restaurant after eating, you had the right to ask for some food, beyond what you paid for. In the former East Germany, the term *Sättigungsbeilage* was used for this in restaurants- the portion of necessity. It's this food we should ask God for- the food to keep us alive, the food which a Socialist restaurant would give you for free. We shouldn't be thinking in terms of anything more than this. It's an eloquent essay in what our attitude to wealth, materialism and long term self-provision ought to be.

Numbers 32 describes how Reuben and Gad didn't want to venture West of Jordan, but wished to just wave goodbye to their brethren and settle on the land which looked good for their cattle on the East banks of Jordan. They asked permission to make booths for their cattle and towns for their children. God eventually agreed and made a compromise with them- but He repeats their words back to them in a different order. They were to make towns for their children, and booths for their cattle (Num. 32:16 cp. 24). Their order was cattle and kids;

God's desire was kids then cattle. And time and again one sees the same nexus of thought playing itself out- people put their cattle, their materialism, before their children. And God wants it the other way around. Working mothers, late working fathers, kids in day care from babyhood- all so the family can live here and not there, have this car rather than that one, holiday here rather than stay at home, have the latest toys and gadgets... all, of course, in the name of 'for the sake of the kids'; when it's actually cattle before kids. Interestingly, the names of the towns which Reuben and Gad built, the territory they so desired, only occur in later Scripture in the context of their being part of Gentile territories (Is. 15:4; 16:8-9; Jer. 48:2, 45; 1 Chron. 19:7). So they never ultimately kept hold of that for which they sacrificed the promised inheritance of Canaan. God in His total love and grace was willing to go along with their weakness- He compromised, as it were, by saying they could have that coveted territory if they helped their brethren totally inherit their possessions West of Jordan. Ultimately this never happened, as not all the Canaanite territory was possessed; yet still God allowed Reuben and Gad to have their part of the deal which they never fully kept. And there's great grace in the way that Dt. 3:19 records God saying to them at this time: "I know that you have much cattle". God knew their weakness. He knew they'd never even seen the wonders of the promised land, which was far more fertile than the land East of Jordan. But He went along with them, so much did He thirst for relationship with them. And so it is with our cattle-before-kids materialism. God may not cast us off because of it in itself. His grace and love is too strong for that. But by permitting us the compromise, we find ourselves in a far harder situation and a path which long term won't lead to permanent inheritance of the promised land, just as it didn't for Reuben and Gad.

## A Wealthy World

Wealth is increasing in this world. Even a number who were previously without doubt 'poor' do in fact have enough over these days to buy a few of those extra luxury things which the Western world is so obsessed with. And many in the West end up receiving legacies from relatives, when they've already got themselves nicely established in life. They're strapped [in God's eyes] with extra cash. So are we to just hope on the Father doing a miracle to save us? Do we realize the grave importance of what the Lord is warning us of here? It seems to me that the Father has given us a way of escape. The enormous explosion of the Gospel in these last days has brought forth a huge harvest of converts amongst the genuinely and desperately poor of this world. The blind and lame, as it were, have been desperately herded into the feast, after so many others have rejected the call. And thanks to the communication revolution, our world-wide family can relatively easily respond to those needs. Is this not a wonderful, Divine way of escape for the 'richer' segment of the brotherhood? An escape, no less, from condemnation...? "The liberal deviseth liberal things; and by liberal things shall he stand" (Is. 32:8) makes the same connection- the generous will "stand" in the last day because of their generous spirit. Indeed, being in covenant with God may even depend upon our recognition of the fact that all human wealth is from God: "Thou shalt remember... it is [God] that giveth thee power to get wealth, *that* he may establish his covenant" (Dt. 8:18). The great paradox is that by giving to others with love, this 'profits me' (1 Cor. 13:3)- we lose, we give, in order to gain spiritually. But that gain can only be known by experience. These words of mine in themselves can't make you feel what it's like. We each have to go do it. Realizing that what we appear to own in life is not actually ours but God's brings with it a great sense of freedom. No longer is there the endless anxiety about what is 'ours', and the need to keep it for ourselves. Indeed, the Hebrew word translated "free" is also that translated "liberal" or "generous". Hence in 2 Chron. 29:31 we find that "as many as were of a free heart [offered] burnt offerings". Actually that Hebrew word is usually translated "prince", the

idea being that princes were wealthy enough to be ‘free’ and therefore generous if they wished. But *any* of us can have this noble / free heart, we can act like wealthy people whatever our poverty, in that we are free from the ties of materialism which bind so tightly.

The Holy Spirit appeared to the apostles as “cloven / parted tongues” (Acts 2:3), giving to each man what each needed (Eph. 4:8-13). In response to this, we read that the apostles sold their possessions and “parted them [s.w. ‘cloven’] to all men, as every man had need” (Acts 2:45). Likewise Paul speaks of how God gave the Spirit gifts to every member of Christ’s body, so that there was no part which “lacked” (1 Cor. 12:24). And he uses the same idea when telling the Corinthians to give their excess funds to provide grace / gifts for their brethren who “lacked” (2 Cor. 8:15). The simple picture, which even in different circumstances abides for us today, is that God’s thoughtful and specific generosity to us, His giving us of unique gifts as we ‘have need’, should lead us to materially assisting those likewise who ‘have need’.

But we’re not, of course, to give from fear of condemnation. The spontaneity of giving is of course exemplified by the ‘love communism’ of the very early church. They just counted all that they had as common. What they did was not organized, not compelled by a strict set of rules about giving [as e.g. in the contemporary Essene community, or as in the tithing churches of today]. It was a voluntary, sincere abandon of love and generosity and resignation of self. The early Christians “joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property” by the state (Heb. 10:34). There was a *joy* felt amongst them because of their loss. This is a totally counter-instinctive feeling- to be *joyful* because you lost or gave away ‘possessions’. The Philippians likewise gave out of a deep *joy* at giving away; the abundance of their joy resulted in their liberality (2 Cor. 8:2). And let’s not think that the early church were necessarily all dirt poor. The Christians of Heb. 10:34 had property which was plundered- and still they gave support to the poor saints in Palestine (Heb. 6:20). A case could be made that Luke’s account in his Gospel and in the Acts actually emphasizes how wealthy and middle class people came to the Lord- e.g. Joanna wife of Chuza, Cornelius the Centurion; Dionysius; Sergius Paulus, governor of Cyprus. Perhaps a reason for this was that he dedicated his works to the “noble” [Gk. ‘well born’, ‘wealthy’] Theophilus (Acts 1:3). Luke, it seems to me, was writing to Theophilus because he wanted to convert him. And so he gives other examples of wealthy people who had also converted. He was urging the middle class to allow the radical call of Christ to reach to them.

Especially in our generation, we hold wealth- any wealth- in the full knowledge that our Lord could return at any moment. James 5:3 brings out the paradox- of hoarding up wealth for the last days! The Greek for ‘hoarding up’ means ‘to reserve’. And this is just what our flesh tells us to do- reserve ‘our’ wealth for a rainy day, for long term security. It’s as if James foresaw that in our last days, this would be a particular temptation. In the context of writing about the approaching end of the age, Paul commented that because “the form of this world is passing away”, therefore those who buy anything should “be as though they had no goods, and those who deal with this world as though they had no dealings with it” (1 Cor. 7:29). Of course, this was taught millennia ago by the Mosaic law of Jubilee- that whatever land you bought wasn’t really yours, because the land is God’s. And again, we are not to be “anxious”, because “the Lord is at hand” (Phil. 4:5). And there’s nothing like managing our “wealth”, however small it may be, to make us “anxious”. Paul’s not saying we shouldn’t buy, sell or ‘deal with this world’. He’s saying we should do so *as if* we’re not really doing so, as if this is all an act, a sleepwalk, something we do but our heart isn’t in it.

I have at various times studied why the early church went wrong. How did the high idealism of Acts fritter away into the apostasy and hollow emptiness of ‘mere Christianity’? One of

the reasons seems to me to be associated with their attitude to wealth. The band of poor men who followed the Lord around Galilee were replaced by wealthy bishops and pontiffs. Even as early as AD 144, the Roman church gave Marcion 200,000 sesterces when he left the church. This was a huge sum, enough to buy ships with <sup>(2)</sup>. Instead of meeting in homes, churches were built and lands acquired. Money and legacies were hoarded rather than spent. And even worse, the *attitude* of the church leaders became obsessed with money. The writings of their leaders came to focus upon it quite wrongly. The so-called “Acts of Peter” [written during the second century] keep stressing how converted people supposedly gave all their money to Peter or to the church, encouraging readers to do likewise. According to this uninspired book, when the wealthy woman Chryse was converted, she supposedly gave 10,000 gold denarii to Peter in gratitude. This nonsense is quite sickening; it reflects nothing more than a greedy desire by church leaders to build up large capital. Such obsession with money on an organizational level will lead us astray too. Generous we must be, but directly to the poor and those in need, rather than to any church body as an organization or institution. The writings of the early church fathers contain some interesting commentary upon the Lord’s radical teaching about money: “You cannot serve God and mammon... give to whoever asks you” (Mt. 6:24; 5:42). The radical import of these statements was watered down. Is there not amongst us a similar tendency to water down the radical demands of the Lord’s teaching here?

So, should we literally ‘sell all we have and give to the poor’, as the Lord bids us, finally breaking out of the mire of middle class mediocrity by real, radical, concrete action, in obedience to our Lord? Nobody could really criticize anyone who did. For His words- from the lips of a Man who at times had not where to lay His head- hardly sound like they were meant to be taken figuratively. In my opinion, no amount of gymnastics with the text or exegetical tricks can legitimately rob those words of their obvious meanings. For those of us who can’t fully rise up to them, I have to say [and I hope, desperately, this isn’t mere sophistry] that there is a teaching that we should have *an attitude* to wealth that says: ‘This doesn’t exist... I don’t *really* personally possess this’. In the early church, “no one *said* that any of the things which he possessed was his own” (Acts 4:32). I wonder- and maybe I’m clutching at straws and justifying us all- if the emphasis is upon the word “said”. Their *attitude* was that they didn’t personally possess anything. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, to buy and sell and deal in this world, as if we didn’t really buy anything or gain a thing, as if it’s all somehow performed by us as in a disconnected dream. And this is surely what the Lord was teaching us in Lk. 14:33: “Whoever of you does not *renounce* all that he has cannot be my disciple”. Renouncing is something we do in our hearts and deepest feelings and attitudes. Have we truly *renounced* it all? Even if there are still bank balances and pension plans and property deeds and cars and treasured possessions... made out in our name. Have we in our hearts *renounced* them? That they aren’t *really* mine. I have no personal long term security from them, because they’re *not mine*. I’m just holding in stewardship what God gave me. And not D.H. but the Lord Himself drives the point home- if we have any *other* attitude to these wretched things, these *almost*-nooses around our necks, then we are *not* His disciples. It’s one of the scariest thoughts for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity. The fearless, gripped-by-Jesus approach to life which we see in the early church is the very opposite of the passivity of our post-modern world. We are called to a passionate, emotional life; a life where we each have someone to save, someone to die for, to live for, to sacrifice our self for. And this approach to life will naturally take care of how we use ‘our’ money. It is the passion-less life which results in a mean, careful approach to the spending of ‘our’ resources for others. Not only does all this imply we ought to be generous when faced head on with the needs of others. James 1:27 defines the essence of Christianity as ‘visiting’ the fatherless and widows.

But the Greek word occurs also in Acts 6:3, translated ‘to look / search out’. We are to actually search out others’ needs, go to them, imagine what they might be in need of and supply it- rather than waiting to be confronted by those needs. It was of course exactly in this sense that God ‘visited’ us in the gift of His Son.

Job 31:24,25,28 speak in dire and chilling terms of trusting in wealth- and note that these words come from a rich believer who lost it all: “had I put my trust in gold, or called fine gold my security [cp. assurance and insurance policies, bank balances, portfolios of investments... banknotes stored under the carpet, jewellery hidden in a corner of some peasant home]... this would be a crime for condemnation; for I should have denied God above”. It’s noteworthy that Job claims that despite having been the wealthiest man in the Middle East, he never put his trust in it. But that shouldn’t lead us to think that we can so easily handle the possession of wealth. For to possess wealth leads most people to trust in it. And if we do this... this is a crime calling for our condemnation, it’s a denial of God, an effective atheism. Attitudes to wealth are that important. In 2 Cor. 8:4,5 Paul parallels *giving* to the poor believers with *giving* our own selves to the Lord. Every act of generosity to the Lord’s people is a giving to Him personally. Paul had obviously grasped the huge implications of the Lord’s teaching that whenever His people are cold, thirsty, in need... then He is in such need, and every ministration to them is a ministration to Him. 2 Cor. 8:9 teaches that our response to the Lord’s sacrifice should be giving to others *until we are poor*, reflecting the Lord’s making of Himself ‘poor’ to the extent of being left naked and dead, hanging upon a stake of wood. We must review all our generosity in this light. Is it a giving of our abundance, or is it a giving until we make ourselves poor...? The practical implications of this are *huge*.

### **Sharing God's Spirit**

Ps. 51:11,12 speaks of God's "free spirit" [or 'willing spirit' ASV], paralleling it with God's Spirit, His "presence", the "joy of thy salvation". All those terms are to me parallel. The spirit of God is His presence, His salvation, joy, freedom. The Hebrew translated "free" really means 'generous'- the generosity of God's Spirit / mind / ways is shown in His forgiveness and saving of us. If God's spirit is His character, then, it is free, joyous, generous etc. Human beings can also have a "free heart" - the same Hebrew word appears translated like this in 2 Chron. 29:31 etc.- i.e. a spirit of generosity. When we have this, we are reflecting the "free spirit" / attitude of God. Whenever we are generous, His Spirit, with all its generosity, dwells in us and becomes our spirit. It is in this sense that I see a window into understanding the gift of God's spirit into the heart / mind / attitude of the believer. If God's spirit is free / generous, then so is ours to be; if His Spirit is joyous, just, true etc, then so is ours to be. In this sense we receive of His Spirit by reflecting His free and generous mind to others.

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### **Notes**

(1) Martin Hengel, *Property And Riches In The Early Church* (London: S.C.M., 1974) p. 1.

(2) Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion* (Berlin: Heinrichs, 1921) p. 24.

## **Appendix 1: Follow You, Follow Me**

*Some thoughts on pastoral care in mission churches*

### **1-1 Pastoral care in mission churches**

Many readers of these words will have heard the Gospel through studying a book or correspondence course, or from meeting other Christians. They were baptized, and then their family and friends responded to their preaching, with the result that world-wide there are now a growing number of isolated groups of Christians. Often they are below ten in number. The tendency can be for such groups to simply rely upon Western visitors, Western magazines and books for our spiritual feeding; to assume that visiting brethren will sort out all the pastoral problems which arise. However, there is within the Bible repeated emphasis on the fact that we are *each* members of the one body, and as such have a definite *responsibility* for each other. We all have more influence on each other than we may think. Quite naturally, the Thessalonians imitated the ecclesias of Judaea and also Paul personally (1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14). And in turn, they became models to all the believers in Macedonia (1 Thess. 1:7).

Whilst in many ways I would say that between us we are doing pretty well at converting people world-wide, I do seriously worry that many who are baptized do not have enough sense of *responsibility* to those others who are baptized. We seem to realise our responsibility *to the world*, but perhaps not to *each other* as we might. And I include myself as guilty here in some ways. One of the unique things about the us is that we don't have a head office that dictates belief and practice, nor a system of paid pastorship or priesthood- quite simply, because we're all priests. As it was God's intention that Israel were to be a nation of priests to the rest of the world, so the new Israel likewise are to *all* discharge the priestly functions of teaching their brethren (Ex. 19:6 cp. 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:6; 5:9,10). Under the new covenant, we should *all* teach and admonish one another (Col. 3:16). Indeed, God told Israel [unrecorded in the historical records]: "Ye are gods [*elohim*] and all of you are sons of the Most High" (Ps. 82:6 RV). Further, Ps. 96:9 makes the paradigm breaking statement that even the Gentiles could come before Yahweh of Israel in holy, priestly array- they too could aspire to the spirit of priesthood (Ps. 96:9 RVmg.). Moses spoke of how all Israel should pray that God would establish the work of their hands (Ps. 90:17)- but this was in fact his special request for the blessing of Levi, the priestly tribe (Dt. 33:11). Ps. 135:19,20 parallels all Israel with the priestly family: "Bless the Lord, O house of Israel: bless the Lord, O house of Aaron: bless the Lord, O house of Levi: ye that fear the Lord, bless the Lord...praise ye the Lord". All Israel were to aspire to the spirit of priesthood. Indeed, the Psalms often parallel the house of Aaron (i.e. the priesthood) with the whole nation (Ps. 115:9,10,12; 118:2,3). Paul speaks of us each one partaking of "the table of the Lord" (1 Cor. 10:21), a phrase used in the LXX for the altar (Ez. 44:16; Mal. 1:7,12)- the sacrifices whereof only the priests could eat. This would have been radical thinking to a community used to priests and men delegated to take charge of others' religious affairs. Hebrew 3:13 gets at this idea when we read that *we* are to exhort one another not to turn away, situated as we are on the brink of the promised land, just as Moses exhorted Israel. It was accepted in Judaism, as well as in many other contemporary religions, that faithful saints [e.g. the patriarchs, Moses, the prophets etc, in Judaism's case] could intercede for the people. Yet in the New Testament, *all* believers are urged to intercede for each other, even to the point of seeking to gain forgiveness for others' sins (1 Thess. 5:25; Heb. 13:18; James 5:15). They were *all* to do this vital work. The radical nature of this can easily be overlooked by us, reading from this distance.

And yet there is ample evidence in the New Testament that there were elders and deacons in the ecclesia, just as within the ‘nation of priests’ there were some who had a specific priestly function. The problem is, how to articulate this in our small groups, scattered world-wide, mainly comprised of newly baptized converts? These are the kind of issues I want to have a look at in this study.

## 1-2 All Christians Are Equal

We are all parts of the same body, branches on the same vine, bricks in the same building; we are all strangers and pilgrims, lacking any rights of a citizen (1 Pet. 1:17 Gk.). We are all members of the same priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5), with equal responsibility to offer up acceptable sacrifice. Don’t miss the power of this to New Testament Jewish ears: the special responsibilities of the priests were now applied to *every* believer. Paul speaks of his preaching work as offering up the Gentiles, as if he is a priest (Rom. 15:16)- and in the same figure, Peter is encouraged to preach to Gentiles by killing and eating animals in a peace offering (Acts 11:7). The command that they who preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel is referring back to how the priests had no material inheritance but lived off the sacrifices (Num. 18:11). And for us, the honour and wonder of preaching Christ should mean that we keep a loose hold on the material things of this life. And as we are *all* priests, we are all preachers.

John records how the Lord called us friends (Jn. 15:5), and it is John who uses this title in addressing his brethren (3 Jn. 14). He reflected how the Lord saw him as his *friend*. And John realised that this was how he should see his brethren; and so must we. John saw himself as their partner rather than the one above them (Rev. 1:9); repeatedly he describes himself and all believers as fellow-slaves (Rev. 1:1; 2:20; 6:11; 7:4; 19:2,5; 22:3,6- quite some emphasis). All Christians are disciples, ‘learners’ (Acts 11:26); the twelve men who followed the Lamb of God around Galilee, with all their misunderstandings and lack of faith, were and are symbols of us all. The focus was upon Him, not each other. We are all learners of Christ, taught by He Himself (Eph. 4:20,21). And we are to make all men into disciples (Mt. 28:19 RV); to make them learners of Jesus too. Paul can say that he has not yet become complete (Phil. 3:10-14) and yet he seeks to present each of his converts “complete in Christ” (Col. 1:29). He recognized that he too hadn’t got to where he was seeking to take his converts.

Our preaching and teaching of each other should have this aim: not to simply get more members for our group, to prove others wrong to the point they capitulate and join us. No. Our aim must be to make men and women sit at the Lord’s feet and learn of Him themselves. Discipleship is to be what we are all our lives. Consider the contrast: ‘disciples’ in the schools of other rabbis expected to one day graduate and become teachers themselves, with disciples at *their* feet. But no, the Lord saw all of us, including those who have learnt of Him the longest and deepest, to always be disciples. For this reason we shouldn’t call our teaching brethren ‘rabbi’, in the sense of a teacher in his own right. Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree when the Lord called him- and this was apparently the classic place where trainee rabbis sat and studied. If this is indeed the case, then the Lord’s calling of him to be a disciple / follower was saying: ‘Don’t seek to be a rabbi. Be a disciple / follower of me, as a way of life, always’.

We are all brothers and sisters, each of us adopted into the Divine family, each of us freed slaves, rejoicing in that pure grace. Most times the NT speaks of ‘brothers’, it is in the context of tensions between people (see Mt. 5:21-24, 43-48; 7:1-5; 18:15-35). We can’t separate

ourselves from our brethren any more than we can from our natural families. Once a brother, we are always a brother. No matter what disappointments and disagreements we may have, we are baptized into not only the Lord Jesus personally, but also into a never ending relationship with each other. We cannot walk away from it. It doesn't only exist in the flurry of congratulations we received when we were baptized. Being a Christian cannot be just another town along life's road. I wonder whether we realise this as we ought. The Lord implied that those who did God's will were closer to Him than His physical mother or sister or brother (Mt. 12:48-50). It has been observed that "in a kinship-oriented society like Israel, it must have been startling for people to hear of a bond that was even deeper than that of the natural family". And so it is in many parts of the world today. Responsibility to our natural families can easily take precedence over those to our spiritual family. This should not be so. It shouldn't be that we allow attendance at family functions to stop our regular attendance at the gatherings of our spiritual brethren. And *just because* we are all brothers, actually something *more than physical brothers and sisters*, we are not to call any of us 'Master', because if we do, it will distract us from our personal looking to Jesus as Lord and Master (Mt. 23:8). This is why anything that even suggests a personality cult built around leading brethren, no matter how wonderful they are or were, really must be avoided. For it takes us away from the one and only Lord and Master.

It is why Paul never speaks of an ecclesial 'elder' but of *elders* in the plural. The same can be said of "bishops (overseers), see Phil.1:1; Acts 20:28. Our groups may have secretaries or teachers, but this individual must never be seen as *the* elder. There is only one author [Gk. 'pioneer'] of our faith: the Lord Himself, who worked in our lives to bring us to Himself. This is stressed in Acts 3:15; 5:31; Heb. 2:10; 12:2. This raises the question as to whether we should refer to some brethren as 'pioneers' of the truth in an area. Elders don't have power-the power ought to reside with the brethren and sisters. Even in the era of Holy Spirit gifts, this was the case. Thus the ecclesia is the body that has power to disfellowship, not individual elders (Mt. 18:17). In Acts 15 the representatives of the ecclesias reported to the whole church at Jerusalem, not just the elders. There seems to have been a series of meetings: initially, the group from Antioch who raised the problems being discussed met with the elders (Acts 15:4), who met together in a second meeting to consider it all, involving "the whole assembly...the whole church" (:6,12,22). Then there was perhaps a third meeting where "the whole assembly" was also present. And this is why "the apostles and elders *with the whole church*" (Acts 15:22) agreed a solution. It wasn't a top down decision imposed upon the congregation. They all participated. This parallel between elders and the assembly is even found in the Old Testament- e.g. "Let them exalt him also in the assembly of the people, And praise him in the assembly of the elders" (Ps. 107:32). The "assembly of the people" and that of the elders is paralleled.

Whatever leaders or organisers we have, we are to call nobody our 'father' in a spiritual sense (Mt. 23:8). The wonder of our relationship with *the* Father ought to mean that we never do this. Above all, we are all brethren in Christ. John refers to himself as the brother of the congregation (Rev. 1:9), and the leading apostles were addressed as 'brother' just as much as anyone else in the ecclesia (Acts 21:20; 2 Pet. 3:15). There may be leaders among brothers (Acts 15:22), but we are still essentially brethren. The intimate inter-connectedness of the family must ever remain; which explains why Paul is called 'Paul' and not a longer form of address. Likewise I'd suggest that the practice of calling each other by our first names, with the prefix 'brother' or 'sister', is healthy; and, indeed, a privilege. Reference to a brother as 'Dr.' or 'Mr.' seems to me to be quite at variance with the family nature of our relationship.

### **1-3 All Christians Are Responsible**

After the leadership of Moses, there came that of Joshua. When he died, Israel expected that another such leader would be raised up: “After the death of Joshua it came to pass, that the children of Israel asked the Lord, saying, Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first?” (Jud. 1:1). They expected a man to be named. But instead, they were told that the whole tribe of Judah must go up. The reality would have sunk home- no more charismatic leaders, now the ordinary people must take responsibility. Each of us should build up his neighbour (Rom. 15:2)- and ‘neighbour’ is usually to be understood in the NT as our neighbour within the ecclesia (Eph. 4:25; James 2:8; 4:12). Leadership is essentially a process of influence, rather than a brother standing up and lecturing others. But the Lord used images such as salt, yeast and light to describe *all* who are in Him. They speak of indirect, constant, transforming influence rather than a frontal assault on the unspirituality of others. By baptism into the body, we are called to participation in a wider community, rather than to just hold in our brains certain propositions about doctrine. For our many isolated members, this is hard to realise. But *try* to read the magazines, especially the news from others, and pray for them; write your news for *Gospel News* and other magazines, and try to write an article; get to Bible Schools if you can; even consider moving nearer to your brothers and sisters. In some way contribute to the rest of the body; for we make increase of ourselves, edifying *ourselves* in love. We are all priests, a community of them. This is why Paul writes to whole ecclesiastical bodies rather than just the elders. 1 Cor. 5:4,5,11 make it clear that discipline was the responsibility of *all*, “the many” as Paul put it in 2 Cor., not just the elders. Even in Philippians, where bishops and deacons are specifically mentioned, Paul writes to “all the saints”.

The churches around us can easily affect our perception of what we expect from an ‘elder’ or leader in *our* community- especially if we belonged to them before our conversion to the Truth. We can come to expect an elder to be an inspirational, visionary individual with an ability to ‘perform’ on a platform. If we think this is what an ecclesial leader should be, then we may think we don’t have any work to do because we aren’t like that; and it may be that we therefore adopt an all too human view of who we look to for leadership in the ecclesia. And if this is our expectation, it can lead those who are elders to concentrate on fulfilling what is expected of them; and thus ecclesiastical bodies turn inwards on themselves, rather than being outward looking towards how we can win the world. Indeed, such expectations can seriously damage those who are leaders. The Pharisees saw themselves as only teachers, not pupils. The Lord had diagnosed this problem, for He told them as a teacher would tell a pupil: “Go ye and learn what that meaneth...” (Mt. 9:13). He sent them away to do some homework. And there is a warning for speaking brethren here; the repeated experience of teaching can take away from the eternal sense of student-ship which the true believer will ever feel. Again seeking to challenge the prevailing views of leadership, the Lord invited His humble fishermen-followers to see themselves as the great prophets of old being persecuted by a wicked Israel (Mt. 5:11). The style of leadership / control known in this world isn’t to be exercised by the elders of God’s flock (Mt. 20:25,26; 1 Pet. 5:3); ecclesial organization shouldn’t reflect the structures and practices of big commercial organisations, e.g. Leadership is to be based upon spiritual attributes and the ability to change and convert the lives of others, rather than secular skills such as fund raising, computer literacy, management etc. Yet sadly many ecclesiastical bodies and Christian organisations seem to confuse the difference between management skills and spiritual leadership. The two things aren’t the same. An executive director of a company may very well not be the right brother to lead an ecclesia.

Thus the Lord's image of leadership was very different from that of the world. He saw *all* of us as exerting influence on each other. Platform speaking in any case is, it seems to me, very very limited in what it achieves. It is personal influence, talking privately to the heart of each other (all of us 'exhorting' one another daily) which is what has power. In the words of another brother, leadership is about holding things up from beneath rather than ruling from the top down. 'Top down' leadership was never very effective in Israel; repeatedly there is evidence that the reforms of Judah's good kings had little effect upon the people. They practised idolatry at the very same time as the reforms took place, and publicly returned to it as soon as the King was dead. Zephaniah's prophecy is full of exposure of Judah's sins-which were going on at the very time of Josiah's apparently sweeping reforms. The way that "all" in Asia turned away, after all Paul's work there, is proof enough that one good leader, no matter how charismatic and sincere (as Paul was) will not necessarily develop a faithful community. Salvation is, in the frequent term of bro. Roberts, "an individual matter". Again I stress: leadership is from the bottom up, not the top down. It's all to do with influence and example, rather than pressurising or barking words from a platform; with holding the whole thing up from the bottom rather than ruling from the top down. Those who are of a low social position can feel that they have nothing to contribute. But remember that the men Jesus chose were working class. Don't have too low an opinion of yourself, nor of other 'lowly' members of the ecclesia. Don't assume only the university educated can 'lead'; it's just not so. The wisdom of this world is if anything a *disqualification*. And for all of us: let's not have too low or too familiar a view of each other. *All* our brethren are royal priests, full citizens, victorious athletes, fruitful branches, valued fellow-workers, precious friends...

#### **1-4 The Strategy Of Jesus**

The Lord Jesus worked through individuals. His strategy was not so much to win the multitudes for His cause as to firmly found the faith of a few women and 12 men who would then take His message to the world. The men He chose were like us- impulsive, temperamental, easily offended, burdened with all the prejudices of their environment. Their mannerisms were probably awkward and their abilities limited. But He prayed for them, as we should for those converts the Lord grants us, "not for the world" [perhaps, not *so much for the world as for*] those few whom the Father had given Him out of the world. Everything depended upon them, for "through their word" the world was to believe (Jn. 17:6,9,20). With all the powers of the universe at His command, the Lord could have chosen a programme of mass recruitment. But He didn't. They were to follow Him, so that later they would become fishers of men on a larger scale than He chose then to work on (Mk. 1:17). They would later bear witness because they had been with Him from the beginning (Jn. 15:27). In the few years they were with Him, those men learnt of Him. During that time, they showed a reluctance to learn the spirit of lowly servitude for the sake of others, they bickered amongst themselves as to who was greatest, they showed an indignant spirit with James and John, intolerant of their evident weakness; they were unnecessarily harsh in their judgment of those who did not agree with them (Lk. 9:51-54), impatient with the women who wanted their children blessed...and yet Jesus patiently endured with them. And it was a totally different group of men who then took the Gospel to the nations. He not only taught them doctrine, but urged them to commit their lives to Him who was the doctrine in flesh. Their role model was Him more than a set of propositions. He let them watch Him praying to His Father. He wanted them to learn the power of prayer from His own example. He taught the multitudes more, it seems to me, from a desire to teach the disciples something. He rejected the rich young man and then went on to explain to the twelve the difficulty of riches. Initially they simply watched Him. And only on His third tour of Galilee did He send them out two by two

to preach themselves. In our desire to develop communities world-wide ready to meet the Lord when He returns, surely this approach should be used by us too. We need to focus upon who the Lord gives us, develop them, deepen their faith, in the belief and hope that they in their turn will take the message to far more than we ourselves can reach.

Paul's strategy appears to have been similar. He constantly sets himself up as an example to his converts; and whenever he bids them 'follow me', it is in the context of his example as a preacher (Phil. 3:15-17; 4:9; 1 Thess. 1:6; 1 Cor. 4:16; 10:31-11:1; Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 2:14; 2 Thess. 3:7-9). This perhaps accounts for the otherwise surprising lack of specific encouragement to his converts to preach which we observe in Paul's writings. He understood his role to be initiatory- he speaks of his preaching as planting (1 Cor. 3:6-9; 9:7,10,11), laying foundations (Rom. 15:20; 1 Cor. 3:10), giving birth (1 Cor. 4:15; Philemon 10) and betrothing (2 Cor. 11:2). His aim was for his converts to also preach and develop self-sustaining ecclesias. "Paul's method of shaping a community was to gather converts around himself and by his own behaviour to demonstrate what he taught", following a pattern practiced by the contemporary moral philosophers<sup>(1)</sup>. Thus Paul's personal example could hardly be distinguished from the gospel he taught (1 Thess. 2:1-12)- he was his message, just as the Lord was His word made flesh. This is why 'authority' and respect are things which are earnt naturally in a community by those who have converted the community. It is hard to impose these things from outside the conversion experience.

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### **Notes**

(1) A.J. Malherbe, *Paul And The Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) p. 52.

### **1-5 Elders And Deacons**

There evidently were leaders of some sort in the first ecclesias; and so there ought to be in our groups those who are in positions of respect and thereby leadership. But let's be clear about one thing: human beings naturally seek to have leaders, to have someone to shoulder the responsibility for their decisions, someone to tell them what to do, how to believe... hence the amazing popularity of the Catholic church. Yet there are Biblical 'leaders' in the ecclesias we read of in the New Testament; but it can't be that our leaders today are leaders for us in the sense that people naturally desire leadership in order to offload the burden of personal decision making and exercising of our own conscience. Recall how in the time of the Judges, Micah asked the young Levite, who was "unto him as one of his sons", to "be unto me a father and a priest" (Jud. 17:10,11- note the paradox), resulting in others likewise asking him to "be unto us a father and a priest" (Jud. 18:19). The point is, no matter how unqualified a person may be for the job, they may be pressed into being leaders because that's what nominally religious people so desperately need.

Yet without leadership, our groups will lack direction and vitality, and there would be a fruitless anarchy amongst us. A leader, like a father, can and should make others feel valued, and give focus for the sense of family which there should be in the group. The universal servanthood of us all and the essential focus which there must be on the headship of Christ shouldn't be allowed to alter this. Nor should 'elders' be seen by the congregations as servants whom they *expect* to organise things for them and care for them. We are *all* servants of all. Respect must be earnt by elders, never demanded. Their way of life is the basis of their

authority (Heb. 13:7); in this sense, we have the choice whom to consider as our elders, whom we will respect and follow. Jesus taught as one who had authority, unlike the scribes (Mk. 1:22). Yet the Scribes had authority in terms of their position, and yet they were not respected; and hence they couldn't teach with authority as Jesus could.

Paul in Gal. 2:5 speaks of how he refused to “give place by subjection” to some who claimed to be elders, even though they “seemed to be somewhat” and were [in the eyes of some] “in repute” (Gal. 2:6 ASV). The same Greek word translated “subjection” is found in 1 Cor. 16:16; Tit. 3:1 and 1 Pet. 5:5 about submission to elders in the ecclesia. Paul’s example shows that merely because an elder demands subjection, this doesn’t mean we should automatically give it- even if others do. We should be “subject” to those who are in our judgment *qualified* to demand our subjection (1 Cor. 16:16); and “subjection” in Paul’s writings usually refers to our subjection to the Lordship of Jesus. Our subjection must be to Him first before any human elders.

Nehemiah’s brother Hanani was given “charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man”- not just because he was the boss’s brother, which is how the nepotism of those times would have usually required (Neh. 7:2). It can be that human qualification, e.g. being a successful businessman, or the brother of a leading brother, is related to positions of eldership amongst us. Yet the Nehemiah passage shows that although sometimes there may be overlap between both spiritual and human qualification, it is the spiritual qualification which must be paramount. Because of this the ‘leaders’ of a healthy ecclesia will not need to give any justification for their authority. They will naturally be respected for who they are, just as a father in a healthy family. This is why the NT gives *all* of us guidelines on how to decide whether a brother should be respected as an elder or not. Even though some may be shepherds, they are still sheep; and they are leading others after the Lord Jesus, “the chief shepherd”, not after themselves. And they should remember that Gal. 6:6 requires “him that is taught in the word” to share back his knowledge with his teacher. This is possibly the meaning behind the enigmatic Eph. 3:10- the converts of the church declare the wisdom of God to the ‘principalities and powers in the heavenlies’, phrases elsewhere used about the eldership of the church. The shepherd is to learn from his sheep- a concept totally out of step with the concept of leadership in 1st and 21st centuries alike. The flock isn’t *theirs*; it is their Lord’s. Any who teach others are themselves disciples, learners at the feet of the Master. It is simply so that some have more ability to organise than others; the Lord spoke of how each believer is given differing amounts of talent to use in His service. But before God, we are one in Christ. Elders are likened to the lowest class of “labourer”, or to a humble ox, all the same worthy of reward (1 Tim. 5:18). There is certainly no intrinsic sense of superiority attached to being an elder in the church of Christ.

The Greek language is full of words containing the compounds *kata-* and *arch-*, implying power over others, as part of a hierarchy. The leaders of the Roman world used these terms (Mt. 20:25), as did the synagogue leadership. But never does scripture use these kind of words about those who are ‘elders’ in the true ecclesia. It’s a pointed omission. On the other hand, there are many *sun-* prefixes: fellow-worker, fellow-citizen, fellow-soldier, fellow-heir etc. The New Testament emphasis is certainly on what we have in common rather on the fact that in practice some are more capable of organising, or deserve especial respect for their evident spirituality and “for their work’s sake”. And the teaching of the Lord Himself was more concerned with how to follow Him than how to lead others. Likewise, there were many contemporary Greek words used to describe religious gatherings, e.g. *heorte*, *synodos*,

*koinos*. But instead the word *ekklesia* is used, meaning a gathering together of town citizens with equal rights to discuss a matter. This is how the word was understood at that time.

## Natural Growth And Outcomes

1 Tim. 1:4 RVmg. seems to imply that continuing in true doctrine and teaching it to others develops "a stewardship of God which is in faith". This "stewardship" isn't an office or position one is voted into or appointed to by a committee- it's something which comes naturally over time, as we allow the true doctrines of God to work in us and come to its natural term, which will be a stewardship or responsibility in God's house. Quite naturally, we are to pass on to others what we have been given, and over time, as we grow in the word, we are given more, and so we pass out more to others. That's why there is a connection between being an "elder" and being "older" in the faith, i.e. having walked in the Lord for a longer time. The disciples were given the food by Jesus, and they in their turn 'set it before' the crowd (Mk. 8:7). This is the same Greek word used in 2 Tim. 2:2- we are to "commit" ['set before'] to others what has been committed to us, just as Paul 'committed' to Timothy what had been committed to him (1 Tim. 1:18). Or again, Paul tells the Corinthians that he "delivered" to them what he had himself "received from the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:23). This passing on to others, in teaching and practical ways, can only be legitimately done by those who have themselves "received from the Lord"- and it's something which in a healthy spiritual person will happen quite naturally. It isn't the result of being put into a church office or position.

## Deacons

However, despite all we have written in this study about equality of responsibility amongst us, there *is* Biblical reference to various forms of leadership position in the ecclesia. A deacon means literally one who serves at table. We must all serve [deacon] one another (1 Pet. 4:10; Eph. 4:12). And yet there were clearly specific 'deacons' in the New Testament ecclesiastas. Clearly they were officially doing what was in fact the duty of *everyone* to do. And so it is with us. There may be brethren whom we appoint to teach us; but we should all in some sense be teaching and influencing each other in the Lord's way. Likewise there was an office of 'evangelist' (Acts 21:8; 2 Tim. 4:5), but none would doubt that we are *all* evangelists. Elders are not to be domineering but to be examples, *typoi* (1 Pet. 5:3); but we are all *typoi* to each other (1 Thess. 1:7). Paul and Timothy were vessels used by God (Acts 9:15; 2 Tim. 2:21); but so are we all (2 Cor. 4:7) This means that nobody can claim they have a right to certain types of work which others in the congregation can't do. For they are only doing officially and publicly what in spirit we are all seeking to do. We may respect them to the extent that we let them do the public work, but this doesn't mean that we are freed of our own responsibilities, nor that they can lord it over us.

## Footnote: "What to do if elders are unsuitable and not qualified for their job?"

Firstly, don't be too hard on elders. It's easy for those who've never had responsibility in the ecclesia to be critical of those who do. And none of us are perfect; our patient bearing with others' weaknesses ought to reflect how the Lord *so* patiently bears with ours. Our attitude to our brothers and sisters, including our elders, is going to be a major factor in influencing the Lord's final judgment of us. That said, as you point out, there can be times when really an elder simply isn't acting properly. Nobody is above criticism, and no elder should be unaccountable. But firstly I want to challenge the terms of your question. I wonder whether

it's right to speak of 'leaders' in the ecclesia. There were many Greek words carrying the idea of 'leader' which could have been used in the New Testament to describe ecclesial elders; but the Spirit chose not to use them. 'Elder' means simply an old person, either in years or experience. A 'deacon' is literally a servant or errand runner. Even *episkopos*, "bishop", doesn't necessarily mean a leader. It can refer to an overseer in the sense of a coordinator / foreman on a building site, just ensuring the smooth running of an operation without being a personal leader. *Epi-skopos* can just as well be translated 'a mark setter' [*skopos* is elsewhere translated "mark" in the AV]. And the mark constantly before the Christian is the Lord Jesus and His Kingdom (Phil. 3:14). The Lord Jesus warned that the blind cannot lead the blind- and explained what He meant by adding that "The disciple is not above his master: but every one when he is perfected shall be as his master" (Lk. 6:39.40). We are all learners of the one Master, and not leaders. Only if we are perfect can we be leaders of the blind- for it is Jesus personally who was prophesied as leading the blind (Is. 42:16). Hence we read in Mt. 23:10: "Nor should you be called 'Leader,' because your one and only leader is the Messiah". It is Christ alone who can " lead you to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). Likewise 2 Thess. 3:5: "May the Lord [Jesus] lead you into a greater understanding of God's love". Whenever we read of *men* leading in the ecclesia, it's always in a negative sense of leading into error:

- "The teaching of deceitful people, who lead others into error by the tricks they invent" (Eph. 4:14)
- "The time will come when some men from your own group will tell lies to lead the believers away after them" (Act 20:30)
- "The teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak how to lead the people of Israel into sin" (Rev. 2:14)
- "They lead weak people into a trap (2 Pet. 2:14)
- "Be on your guard, then, so that you will not be led away by the errors of lawless people" (2 Pet. 3:17)
- "Do not let all kinds of strange teachings lead you from the right way" (Heb 13:9).

It seems to me that respect can only ever be earned, and never demanded on the basis that a brother was voted into an 'office' or appointed there by a group of brethren from afar. We know the qualifications for elders, bishops, deacons. We can make our own mind up as to whether or not we accept a brother as being truly qualified to be an elder. We may respect him as a brother, but not as an elder. In the situation you refer to, where an elder is acting wrongly, he has disqualified himself from being an elder- and therefore you don't have to treat him as such, even if he claims to be one. My observation is that ecclesiases are so small that often brothers become 'elders' by default, rather than because they meet the required qualifications. There has also been the problem in some parts of visitors from another country appointing ill qualified brothers to be elders in a local situation which they are largely ignorant of. You don't need to put up with that situation; you as individuals must choose elders for yourselves according to your experience of the brothers concerned, reflected against the Biblical qualifications for them.

My suggestion would be to not let the situation fester. After prayer and self-examination, discuss the issue openly with the offending 'elder'. Never cease to respect him as a brother;

but raise the specific behaviour with him which you believe to disqualify him as an elder. However, this should only be done if the behaviour is unquestionably wrong and evidently proven. Hunches, gossip, suspicion, anonymous accusation etc. don't amount to evidence, and the love that seeks to believe all things, hope all things and positively see the best in others will ignore those kinds of things.

### 1-6 Bishops And Elders

The commands relating to bishops (overseers) stress that he should only be treated as such if his own family is in order (1 Tim. 3:4,5,12). This could suggest that he was the one who had converted others; for the image of our converts being our spiritual children is a frequent one (1 Cor. 4:14,17; 2 Cor. 6:13; Gal. 4:19; Tit. 1:4; Philemon 10; 1 Pet. 5:13). In the same way as a father ought to be respected by his children, so converts ought to respect those who converted them. The fact Paul had made converts and founded ecclesias was used by him as a proof that he deserved at least some respect- they were his ‘seal’, the hallmark that showed him genuine (1 Cor. 9:2). My sense is that the first century Gentile ecclesias were very similar to many Christian groups throughout Africa, Europe and Asia today; somebody was converted by a visiting preacher, and they in turn converted a group of their associates. Such groups need leadership, and the logical leader is the one who converted. This is why elders are defined in Heb. 13:7 as those who preached the Gospel to those they lead. Yet there can be a tendency for groups of converts to forget the eternal debt they owe to those who brought them to new life in Christ, just as there can be a forgetting of responsibility to our natural parents. A possible translation of Is. 8:16 is: “I will bind up the testimony, and seal the instruction by my disciples” [suggested by Dr. Martin Hengel]. The context is Isaiah speaking about his disciples in the school of the prophets he ran. The implication would be that the disciples of Divine teaching are actually the seal or credibility of the instruction / testimony which the Gospel contains. Valid converts are therefore a sign of the validity of the preacher, and are therefore a qualification for eldership. The respect afforded to such converters / leaders should, however, be qualified by their meeting of the standards Paul lays down: e.g. their own natural children should be well led by them. The integrity and manner of life of those who converted us is what inspires us to carry on. Thus Paul urges Timothy to “continue” because he knew “of what persons” he had been taught them (2 Tim. 3:14 RVmg.). The image of a father leading his children is essentially a gentle image. Note how the *episkopoi* were overseers *in* the flock, not over it (Acts 20:28 Gk. Cp. AV). It should be noted that the bishop’s qualification is that he *knows* how to rule his own house (1 Tim. 3:5). It may be that as with Samuel and other elders, their children or converts do not ‘turn out’ well. If this is because there was a lack of spiritual leadership, this disqualifies a brother. But if he *knew* how to rule, but they rebelled, then he is not thereby disqualified. Fathers cannot be held responsible for the spiritual failure of their children in all cases (Jer. 31:29,30; Ez. 18- and the example of Yahweh with Israel). Likewise, Paul was clearly a bishop and yet was single. “A bishop *must be* the husband of one wife” therefore requires us to again read in an ellipsis: ‘[If he is married he must be...] the husband of one wife’.

The following words sum it all up: “Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service. Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out. Every cult of personality that emphasises the distinguished qualities, virtues, and talents of another person, even although these be of an altogether spiritual nature, is worldly...the bishop is the simple, faithful man, sound in faith and life, who rightly discharges his duties to the church. His authority lies in the exercise of his ministry. In the man himself there is nothing to admire”<sup>(2)</sup>. Thus who we

*are* makes us a father / leader- not the fact we were or were not voted in to an office. If too much focus is placed on the fact an elder has been ‘appointed’ as such, then we run the risk of the congregation and the elder becoming totally out of touch with each other. A status quo mentality develops rather than real growth; the ecclesia becomes stuck in the mire of mediocrity and even division, because the elder isn’t inspiring it forward in the way that only a true father can do.

What we have been saying here is confirmed by a closer analysis of the Greek text in the passages concerning leadership in the church. In Rom. 12:6-8, Paul speaks of *he* who exhorts, *he* who gives, *he* who presides- but note that the participles are used. The thought is of *people doing things*, rather than offices in their own right. When Paul writes to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1), the Greek nouns have no articles [*syn episkopois kai diakonois*]. This indicates that the ‘bishops and deacons’ weren’t seen as an established ‘office of the church’. Rather is Paul concerned with the *functions* of what these brethren did. It was only in Christianity’s later apostacy that the offices came to be glorified merely as offices. Note how in 1 Thess. 5:11, Paul tells the entire church to build one another up- he doesn’t leave that work to the elders. And in the next two verses, he goes straight on to tell them to respect those who labour amongst them (1 Thess. 5:12,13). There seems to be some sort of juxtaposition going on here. The flock are to take on responsibility of building each other up, but also to respect their elders.

Whilst the idea of having a treasurer isn’t at all a bad idea, it’s perhaps significant that in the Corinthian letters, Paul makes no mention of such an office. The members were to save weekly and then hand their gathering to Paul when he comes to them (1 Cor. 16). Or in 2 Cor. 8, we read of Titus and his companions being allocated to simply collect what had been gathered up for the Jerusalem poor fund. Likewise when Paul speaks of the breaking of bread, he makes no reference to anyone leading the gathering. He places blame for misbehaviour there upon the actual members. And Paul doesn’t appeal to any ultimate overseer of the whole Corinthian church when he begs for church meetings to be conducted far better (1 Corinthians 14). I feel these omissions, even though they are an argument from silence, are significant. Another such possible argument from omission can be built from an examination of the Lord’s letters recorded in Rev. 2 and 3. The ‘Angel of the church’ to whom the letters were sent may simply refer to the ‘messenger’ of the church, who physically distributed the letters. 2 Cor. 8:23 specifically mentions such “messengers of the churches” whose task was to distribute letters from the inspired apostles. Hermas speaks of such a ‘messenger’ whose job it was to take transcripts of visions to the believers in various cities (*Vision II* 4.3). My point is that in this case, the Lord’s letters of Rev. 2 and 3 were directed not at a body of eldership, but directly to all members of the churches. I’m not saying there is no place for elders, but there is no place for any system of eldership or committee / hierarchical structure which devalues the individual believer or disables his or her initiative in serving the Lord. Note how the household of Stephanas in 1 Cor. 16:15 are said to have appointed *themselves* to ministering to the saints [*eis diakonian tois hagiois*]. They didn’t need any bishop or committee to ‘put them into the ministry’. They saw the need, and responded.

It seems to me that *giving* someone responsibility or duties beyond their real capacity to undertake can destroy their self-esteem and even them as individuals. This kind of thing happens when believers are pushed into offices of eldership by vote or political decision; if Biblical guidelines are followed, the believer who has *naturally shown* over a period of time that they are qualified as an elder or pastoral figure *naturally becomes* that figure; and therefore the problem of pushing someone into an ‘office’ that is beyond their capacity to handle simply never arises. For example, if a brother has preached in a

country or area for some time, converted people, built them up in the faith, he is their natural elder. If another brother is moved in as 'elder' who's perhaps never set foot in the country, just because he is given that 'office', there is a real possibility that the experience will be damaging to him personally- as well as unhelpful for those suddenly and inappropriately informed that he is their 'father' in the Lord.

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### Notes

(2) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Macmillan, 1954), p. 108. (3) Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1986), p. 106.

### Appendix: “Obey them that have the rule over you” (Heb. 13:17)

This passage has been much abused to teach that ‘you must unquestioningly obey church elders, do what they say, believe what they tell you, give them what they ask you’. We need to bear in mind that such elders often prefer to quote the King James translation of this and other such passages about bishops and elders. First off, for all that I’m a personal fan of the KJV, let’s remember that it had a deeply political context as a translation. 17<sup>th</sup> century England was organized around “bishops” who collected the taxes for the King- and as James several times said, “No bishops- no king”. It was in his interest to ensure that the new Bible translation he authorized gave power to those bishops. Thus James ordered the translation committee: “The Bishops’ Bible is to be followed, and as little altered as the original will permit”. There was inevitably a need for the translators to please their King and sponsor- and so there tends to be an element of mistranslation in Bible passages which speak of obedience to bishops and church elders (1).

The context is set by Heb. 13:7: “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation”. I’d like to quote some linguistic observations by Steve Cook:

“(a) It is in the past tense but has been translated to read as though it were in the present tense.

(b) The word *over* (“rule over you”) in this verse has no corresponding word in the Greek and was added by the translators (*humon* means “of you” **not** “over you”).

(c) The phrase, "them which have the rule over" is a paraphrase of one Greek word - *hegeomai* - a verb - meaning to lead, to go before as a guide. In a Christian context *hegeomai* is descriptive of the act of guiding, going on ahead, leading the way as an example, not sitting as overlords.

(d) It is referring to those who have died in the faith, not to living individuals presiding over the body of Christ...

The Greek word [in Heb. 13:17] *peitho* that was translated *obey* appears only 55 times in the New Testament. It is only translated *obey* seven times. The word *peitho* is in the passive voice and simply means *be persuaded*, as the following lexicons demonstrate.

*"Peitho:* To persuade, i.e. to induce one by words to believe. To make friends of, to win one's favour, gain one's good will, or to seek to win one, strive to please one. To tranquilize. To

persuade unto i.e. move or induce one to persuasion to do something. Be persuaded. To be persuaded, to suffer one's self to be persuaded; to be induced to believe: to have faith: in a thing. To believe." (Thayer and Smith's Greek Lexicon)

"*peitho*, to persuade, to win over, in the Passive and Middle voices, to be persuaded, to listen to.... (Acts 5:40, Passive Voice, "they agreed"); The obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion." (W. E. Vine Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words)

Acts 18:4 is a good example of how this word is used in the NT: "And he (Paul) reasoned (*dialogomai*...)'To think different things with one's self, mingle thought with thought. To ponder, revolve in mind. To converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss'. Thayer and Smith's Greek Lexicon) ...in the synagogue every sabbath, and **persuaded** (*pietho*) the Jews and the Greeks." Here Paul is reasoning with Jews and Greeks in the synagogue. He did not command them to obey him. Rather, he persuaded them.

In this verse *pietho* means "listen to the reasoning of your leaders" or "be persuaded by your leaders", but not "obey them".

The Greek word that was translated *submit* in verse 17 is *hupeiko*. It occurs only here in the NT and means *yield*. *Hupeiko* in no way infers any kind of outward force being placed on the person yielding. It is a voluntary act. In the body of Christ you cannot demand that someone "submit" to your authority. If you do, it proves that you really do not have authority. He is not fit to lead who is not capable of guiding."

The context of Hebrews 13 is of course the long list of faithful believers who have gone before, which we find in Heb. 11 and commented upon in Heb. 12. The positive lesson from all this is that the records of so many lives which we find in Scripture should *persuade* us, we should be so frequently reflective upon them that we feel those characters jumping out of the page and persuading us. It is they whom we should obey, follow, hold as role models.

## Notes

(1) For more on this see Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005).

## 1-7 Paul As The Model Elder

"*We were gentle...*"

Paul says he was gentle with his Thessalonians, as a nurse with her *own* children (1 Thess. 2:7 RV). This is a touching figure- a wet nurse giving that extra special attention to her *own* child (as 2:11 RV a father with his *own* children); and like children, they mimicked him (1 Thess. 1:6 Gk.). This was quite different to Paul's background culture, where "boldness and abusive scolding were considered essential by many of the wandering philosophers if their teaching was to have any impact"<sup>(3)</sup>. Many a Pentecostal pastor likewise scolds his flock for their lack of faith; but the leaders of our groups shouldn't be like this. There should be gentleness, an appeal for love's sake, rather than shouting and criticism. Paul dealt with his

converts “as a father with his own children”, encouraging, comforting, ‘dealing with each one [individually]’ and urging them to live a life worthy of God’s grace (1 Thess. 2:11,12 RV). Note in this context how Paul says that he cares for them as for his own babies, as both the father and mother, and yet reminds them that “We were babes among you” (1 Thess. 2:7 RVmg.). His appeal to them was on the basis of the fact that although their parent, he was also essentially like them. Only as their spiritual father could he ask the Corinthians whether they wanted him to come to them with a whip or with a loving appeal. He *could* exercise the discipline of a father, out of his affectionate concern for them; but he chose, wherever possible, a better way. He normally uses the father:child image to show his closeness to them, rather than to impose his authority upon them. And so it should be with the true spiritual father or mother in our groups today. He asks them to copy him; his method of shaping the community was to present himself as the pattern. This was especially necessary amongst largely illiterate converts <sup>(4)</sup> one could not direct them merely to independent study of the text of Scripture. Paul even likens himself to a woman breast feeding a child (1 Cor. 3:1-3; 1 Thess. 2:7). And yet such wet nursing was considered to be an occupation for the very lowest of women in the Roman world; it was common for even a respectable slave woman to pass her baby over to such a woman to breast feed <sup>(5)</sup>. But no, Paul himself, as their leader and converter, as it were breast fed them himself. This very nicely shows the link between unashamed, self-abasing humility and true leadership. And again, the Spirit chose ‘shepherd’ as an image of ecclesial leadership, when the surrounding Rabbis despised shepherds as dishonest <sup>(6)</sup>. It’s just the same as the Lord Jesus describing Himself as the humble King- a very contradiction in the terms of the contemporary culture. There is an intended juxtaposition in Zech. 9:9: “thy King cometh...lowly, and riding upon an ass”.

There is the implication in the New Testament that whoever lives the life of Christ will convert others to the Way. 1 Cor. 3 speaks of the converts a man builds on the foundation of Christ. They, like himself, must go through the fire of judgment, and if they are lost, then he himself will still be saved (if he has remained faithful). The implication is that all of us build up others, and our work is tried in the end. Paul laments that some for the time they had been baptized ought to be teachers, but themselves needed to re-learn basic doctrine (Heb. 5:12). He understood that we all inevitably teach the Gospel to others over time, if we are spiritually healthy. It may well be that we have children, and it is our duty to bring them up in the knowledge of the Gospel. In this sense, therefore, every brother or sister will become a spiritual father or mother to someone; what we have written above ought to apply to *all* of us eventually.

The spiritual leaders of the apostasy often lead their congregations into a position where they feel they must suppress any opinion or feeling which contradicts the one in authority. The leaders can’t cope with disagreement, and they impose their views rather than truly teach and father / shepherd. This all leads to the average member feeling guilty for thinking for themselves; they are made to feel that any independent thought is in fact being critical of the leader. And so they become fearful to take healthy risks, narrow minded, suspicious of others who think for themselves, because they have been taught that ‘unity’ means uniformity, agreement about everything. And this is just how cult mentalities develop. The leaders who develop this reason initially from pure motives, one assumes, that ‘the sheep can’t handle truth, they’re not mature enough’. And thus there develops a kind of conspiracy mentality between the leaders, and in time therefore, also among the flock. If the essential unity between us all was accepted and felt, if the respect given to an elder was earnt not demanded by reason of their office alone, then this won’t happen. When Jesus spoke, the people were amazed at His authority, which was not as the Scribes. They had ‘authority’ by reason of their

position; He had authority by reason of who He was, and the way He made God's word live in flesh before their eyes. Which is why the Lord Himself taught that we should not follow the words of a spiritual leader, but only the deeds which we see them actually doing (Mt. 23:3). It has been observed that in such systems the leaders often use 'proof texts' in order to almost bully the flock into producing certain works / behaviours. And the flock will tend to follow the leaders in using the same method, rather than more comprehensively dividing the word of truth. The ultimate teacher must be the Lord Himself, not the pastor or speaking brother. The Law was a *paidagogos*, a slave who lead the children to the school teacher. And the teacher, Paul says, is Christ (Gal. 3:23-25). He uses the whole body to make increase of itself in love- not just the elders.

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### Notes

(4) Keith Hopkins argues that there were about 7000 Christians by the year 100, about 30% of whom were males, with a literacy rate amongst the males of 20%. This would have meant that there were only around 420 literate Christians even by 100. Hopkins guesses that only 10% of literate people were in any sense "fluent and skilled literates"- thus there would only have been say 42 at that level in the Christian community empire-wide. See Keith Hopkins, *A World Full Of Gods: Pagans, Jews And Christians In The Roman Empire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999).

(5) K.R. Bradley, *Slaves And Masters In The Roman Empire* (New York: O.U.P., 1987), pp. 71,72.

(6) Donald E. Messer, *Contemporary Images Of Christian Ministry* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1989), pp. 171-174.

### 1-8 The Servant Leader

The paradox of servant leadership is found back in 1 Kings 12:7- if Rehoboam had been a servant of his people, then he would have ruled over them. In all ways, the Lord is our pattern. He was a servant of all, and so should we be. His servanthood dominated His consciousness. He said that He came not [so much as] to be ministered unto, but so as to minister, with the end that He gave His life for others (Mk. 10:45). In His death for Israel, He was "a minister [lowly servant] of the circumcision", i.e. the Jews (Rom. 15:8). Yet we *are* His ministers, His slave / servants. The same word is used for how the women and Angels ministered unto Him (Mk. 1:13,31; 15:41), and how He anticipated men would minister to Him (Jn. 12:26 Gk. cp. 2 Cor. 11:23; Col. 1:7; 1 Tim. 4:6). But both then and now, He came and has come in order to minister / serve us, rather than to be served by us; even though this is what we give our lives to doing. Yet He is still all taken up with ministering to us. He came more to serve than to be served. We are slaves, all of us, of the lowest sort. It's hard for us to realise the lowliness of being a Roman slave; and the sheer wonder of being made a free man, purely by grace. This is what *each and every one of us* has experienced. Servanthood / slavery should be the concept that dominates our lives; for we cannot be a servant of two masters (Mt. 6:24). We are to be wholly dedicated to the service of the Lord Jesus and those in Him. As slaves, we serve without expecting any thanks at all; we do what is our duty to do by reason of who we are (Lk. 17:10). The Lord spoke this in response to the disciples saying it was impossible for them to accept His teaching about unconditional forgiveness of each other (Lk. 17:5). Man's ingratitude is perhaps one of the hardest winds to weather, and it can so easily blow us off course in our service. But as the Lord's slaves, judged by Him alone, we didn't ought to look for recognition of our labours; neither should we demand apologies for *anything*. The Lord humbled Himself to wash the feet of His brethren, even though He was their leader (Phil. 2:4-11 is full of allusion to the foot washing incident, as if there the Lord exemplified the spirit of the cross). There may be brethren who consider it beneath them to talk to others, who think it is not for them to help wash up or move furniture or all the host of

other tasks that our gatherings require. But in these things lies the spirit of Christ. Paul didn't lord it over others, but was a fellow-worker with them (2 Cor. 1:24). It is one of the finest paradoxes: that he who is the greatest must be the servant of all. When James and John asked to have the senior positions, the Lord didn't rebuke them; he just told them that the greatest would desire to be a servant (Gk. *diakonos*) of all (Mt. 20:20-28). The utter degradation of the cross, and the Lord's willing humbling of Himself to accept it, is a pattern for all who would take up His cross. The "servant of all" would make no distinctions concerning whom or how he would serve; such servanthood was a complete and unqualified act of surrender. And this is taken by the Lord as a cameo of His mindset on Calvary.

In conscious allusion to this, Paul could speak of how he had become a slave of all men, that he might help some to Christ (1 Cor. 9:19). He was a slave of the Gospel, a slave of the kind who was lower than the least of all others, i.e. a slave of all (Eph. 3:7,8). He didn't preach himself, but rather preached that he was a servant to all his brethren, for the sake of the fact that he was in Christ, the servant of all (2 Cor. 4:5). Thus he almost advertised his servant status; he preached himself as a slave. Paul wished to be perceived by his brethren and the whole world as merely a slave of Jesus (1 Cor. 4:1). In our talking to each other, or in our writing, it does us good to analyse how many personal pronouns we use; how much we are preaching ourselves rather than Jesus Christ. Any who may appear to be leaders or organisers are serving *Him*, who debased Himself to that depth. There can be no room *at all* for any sense of superiority amongst us. We are servants *of all*, not just of those individual brothers or ecclesiastical bodies whom we happen to get on well with. The apostles in their letters usually open by reminding their readers that they are slaves of the Lord Jesus- this is how they saw themselves. Paul was called to be a slave of the Gospel (Acts 26:16; Gk. *hypereten-* a galley slave, rowing the boat chained to the oars). There were slaves who were made stewards or managers ['bishops'] of the Master's business, but essentially they themselves were still slaves. The leaders of the Corinth ecclesia were no more than a *paidagogos* (1 Cor. 4:15,16), a slave who had to take the little children to school, where they would be taught by the teacher (cp. Jesus). We have all been given some gift, and that is to be used in the servanthood / slavery of our Lord Jesus (1 Pet. 4:10). We can mindlessly say that yes, Jesus is Lord, quite forgetting that it implies we are His serving slaves. The magnitude of the 'slave' concept in the ecclesia of Christ is easily overlooked, and it was this which made it so different from others. And it is this which ought to make us different from other Christian groups; and it's why the pattern of leadership found in our previous churches or religions is probably the wrong pattern for us to follow. The ability to lead is only given in order to prepare the congregation for acts of service themselves (Eph. 4:12). "Christianity was no slick imitation of existing ecclesiastical organisations. It made no attempt to set up a hierarchy modelled on previously existing institutions. It preferred *diakonia*, lowly service, to the grandiose ideas of the Gentiles" <sup>(7)</sup>. Whoever serves [Gk. 'is a deacon of'] the Lord Jesus must follow Him, and the idea of following Him is usually connected with His walk to death on the cross (Jn. 12:26). We are all asked to follow Him, it is all part of being His disciples, and so we are all asked to be 'deacons' in this sense. Our service is of *each other*; to walk away from active involvement because of personality clashes etc. is to walk away from true, cross-carrying Christianity. But I am persuaded better things of us generally. Immature we may be, and held back by a quite rightful sense of shyness and inadequacy in service, but there is evident and developing in so many of our groups a definite sense of responsibility to each other. In unfeigned humility, let us by love serve one another, and in so doing know the spirit of the Lord who served, and thereby share together His exaltation.

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## **Notes**

(7) Leon Morris, *Ministers Of God* (London: I.V.P., 1964), p. 35.

"We ask ourselves, " Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?" . Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child enlightened of God's grace. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are born to manifest the glory of God that is with in us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others".

*Nelson Mandela, 1994*

## **Appendix: Elders And Romans 13**

The question has been asked as to how the words of Romans 13 can stand true, with their implication that Government ministers are God's representatives, punishing sinners and upholding righteousness, and therefore should be obeyed. Many young brethren are pressured by such ministers to join armies and in other ways too, to break the law of Christ. How, for example, could those words have been true in Hitler's Germany or Taliban-controlled Afghanistan?

First it must be remembered that there are other passages which do command our submission to human authorities: "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king" (1 Pet. 1:13-17). Whilst these words stand true, Peter himself also disobeyed human authority, with the comment that we must obey God rather than men. When there is a conflict in allegiance created, we must obey God and disobey anyone or any institution that commands us to disobey Him. And Paul likewise-the man who was jailed repeatedly for breaking the law: "Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men" (Tit. 3:1,2).

But the Romans 13 passage goes much further, saying that these "ministers" are ordained by God on His behalf, and therefore must be obeyed. Logically, therefore, one would have to obey whatever they said. Otherwise we would always be having to decide whether or not a Government minister was really ordained in God's behalf, or not. And Romans 13 seems to imply that all ministers are "ministers of God". And so for this passage I wish to suggest that it specifically refers to submission to the elders and apostles of the first century ecclesia, empowered as they were with the miraculous Spirit gifts and direct revelations of wisdom and judgment.

There is great stress in Rom. 13 that these "powers" punish evil / sinfulness. This is just not true of human Governments. Yet it is appropriate if the "powers" spoken of here are within the ecclesia. So we will consider the passage phrase by phrase- and we find that almost every Greek noun or verb in it is used elsewhere in a specifically ecclesial context.

*"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers" (:1).*

The Greek for "Higher" means 'to excel, to be superior, better than, to surpass'. The same word occurs in Phil. 2:3: "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of

mind let each esteem other *better than themselves*”. We may respect human ministers but we can scarcely esteem them better than ourselves in a spiritual sense. Yet authority held by ecclesial elders is earnt and not demanded- based on our respect of them as brethren more mature in Christ than we are.

For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained...

“Powers” is s.w. [same word] 2 Cor. 10:8 “our [apostolic] *authority*”; “*the power* which the Lord hath given me” (Paul; 2 Cor. 13:10). “Not because we [the apostles] have not *power*” (2 Thess. 3:9). Those powers are “ordained”- s.w. Acts 15:2 , where Paul and Barnabas were “determined”, s.w. “ordained”, to go to Jerusalem as representative elders; the family of Stephanas “addicted themselves”, literally ‘ordained themselves’, to the work of ministry in the ecclesia. Note how here as in Rom. 13, the ideas or being *ordained* to be a *minister* also occur together.

*[ordained] of God*

In the sense of 1 Cor. 12:28: “*And God* hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues”.

Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth... (:2)

Alexander “hath greatly *withstood* [s.w. resisteth] our words” (2 Tim. 4:15)- the words of elders like Paul. This doesn’t mean that elders are beyond any criticism- for the same Greek word is used of how Paul “*withstood*” Peter when he gave in to legalism and rejected grace (Gal. 2:11).

the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror... (:2,3)

“Terror” translates the Greek word used for how “fear” came upon the ecclesia when the elders exercised their powers of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:43; 5:5,11). Initially, Corinth showed such “fear” towards Paul (2 Cor. 7:11,15). Elders should rebuke publically those who sin, that others in the ecclesia might “fear” (1 Tim. 5:20). The situation in the first century as far as the authorities of the world are concerned was actually the very opposite of what we read here in Romans. The same word occurs in 1 Pet. 3:14, telling the believers to endure persecution from the authorities, not to cave in to their demands, and “be not afraid of their *fear*”. Note that the Greek word for “afraid” occurs in Rom. 13:3- we should be “afraid” of the powers God has placed in the ecclesia. The fact the two words occur together in both Romans and Peter leads us to the conclusion: ‘Respect and “fear” those who are elders truly; but don’t fear / respect those who are elders in name only and are in reality far from grace”.

[not a terror] to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? (:3)

The Greek word for “afraid” is the same word in Gal. 2:12, which criticizes Peter for being “afraid” of the Jerusalem elders who were teaching legalism. Paul doesn’t mean we should fear an elder merely because they have the office of an elder; but we fear / respect those who are indeed spiritually “higher” than us.

do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:

This certainly isn't true of worldly authorities and rulers. They don't praise righteousness, and they certainly didn't in the first century. Yet the same word is used in 2 Cor. 8:18 of how Timothy was "praised" in the ecclesiastis. Good elders and healthy ecclesiastis will give praise / encouragement to those who deserve it.

For he is the minister of God (:4)

Gk. *Diakonos*, sometimes translated "deacon". The word is used 31 times in the N.T., nearly always about ecclesial elders / ministers / servants. Paul speaks of himself and Timothy with the very same words: a "minister of God" (2 Cor. 6:4; 1 Thess. 3:2), who therefore ought to be listened to.

...to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain

This seems to be a reference to the ability which some elders had in the first century to execute physical affliction upon those who were disobedient. Peter smote Ananias and Sapphira dead. Paul seems to warn the Corinthians that he could "not spare" them if he convicted them of apostacy on his next visit. It even seems that the sicknesses spoken of in James 5 are a direct result of sinful behaviour, and the gift of healing could be exercised by the elders in the case of repentance. Jesus Himself threatened immediate physical judgment, presumably through the hands of His representatives, upon some in the ecclesiastis of Rev. 2,3. Respect for elders is something taught throughout the N.T. letters- "remember them that have the rule over you" (Heb. 13:7). Here the writer clearly refers to elders in the ecclesia, for he bids his readers consider the end of those men's faithful way of life and to follow their example. And yet they are described as 'rulers'. It's as if the point is that the real rulers of a first century believer were not the Roman administrators, but the ministers of God within their ecclesia. In illiterate ecclesiastis or those without access to the written scrolls containing God's word, the elders would have played a more critical role in their relationship with God than in our age.

*...for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also (:4-6)*

This could be referring to the Lord's well known example of paying tribute, and simply saying that the principle of submission to authority should extend out of the ecclesia, to all those who have power over us- so long as this does not contradict our conscience toward Christ. But it could also be a reference to some form of tithing or regular support of elders. There is historical evidence that this went on early in the Christian church.

"Be subject" uses a Greek word elsewhere used about submission to elders (1 Cor. 16:16). Note how the word occurs in 1 Cor. 14:34- the sisters were commanded "to be under obedience" to their men [Gk.]. I take this to refer to the need for those sisters to be submissive to their appointed elder. When we meet the word again in the command "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord" (Eph. 5:22,24; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1,5), I take this as meaning that they should treat him as they would an elder- in that Paul assumes he will teach and inspire her as the elders ought to have been doing.

for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing (:6)

The question arises, *what* thing? If the reference is to their reflecting of God's judgment against those who sin, this is simply not true of human Governments. The first century authorities were persecuting the Christians, fabricating untruth against them, killing them, and insisting that those who refused to accept Caesar as Lord be punished. The words can only be true of the ministers of God of whom we read elsewhere in the N.T.- i.e., the ecclesial elders.

The Greek phrase for "attending continually" is a catchphrase usually employed to describe the zealous pastoral care of the early apostles: "These all *continued* with one accord in prayer...*continuing daily* with one accord...and breaking bread...we will *give ourselves continually* to prayer, and to the ministry [another Romans 13 idea!] of the word" (Acts 1:14; 2:46; 6:4). By using the phrase, Paul is undoubtedly pointing us back to the example of the early apostles / elders.

*Render therefore to all their dues (:7)*

The Greek for "dues" is found in Rom. 15:27 about the due which the Gentile believers owe to materially support their Jewish brethren. We have no 'due' to this world (Rom. 13:8 Gk., s.w.), but our due is to love each other in the brotherhood. But admittedly Paul does seem in the next verses to extend the principle of submission further than just within the ecclesia. In the same way as elders should only be respected if they had earnt that respect, and were leading brethren in the way of Christ, so too the authorities of the world should only be followed insofar as they did not lead believers into disobedience to Christ: "...tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (:8-10).

## **Appendix 2: Winning The West**

### **2-1 Missionary Work In The West: Trends From Canada**

***Book Review:***

#### ***Where's A Good Church?***

Donald Posterski & Irwin Barker (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1996)

This book is a commentary on data arising from an extensive survey conducted amongst Canadian Protestants in the early 1990s.

One of the main concerns of the survey was why people switch churches. 39% of church members have switched churches, many of them more than once; and 54% have gone through long periods of not attending church. These figures are rising- in other words, the

church going public are less tied to their churches, and are often looking for another church. And there we are, seeking to convert them to us! It may seem to us that attempts to convert from other churches are too much hard work; but the reality is, many people in those congregations have switched churches before, and are actually on the lookout for something better! If we perceive 'Christians' to be glued to their pews and unwilling to ever join us: we're wrong. My own denomination expanded a century ago through converting members of other churches; this has tailed off, as we have become inward looking and perhaps less doctrine centred than we should be. But there is definite interest in conversion out there! Further, there are more people than we might imagine in the general public who are lapsed church goers, and who are likely at some time to return to an interest in attending a church. The survey found that there were trigger events that motivated this- having a child, going through a divorce, getting married, loss of a family member, serious illness. As we live in a world where all these things are daily life, we need to be getting in there with an appropriate word to people as they go through these triggers. Perhaps our witness ought to be specifically aimed at the bereaved, the recently divorced, the recently handicapped?

And the survey probed why people left churches. Here I found the results quite sad. Protestant religion in North America has been commercialised into just another consumer good, where people shop round for what they want, put it down when they don't like it and seek something better. The reasons for leaving were often centred on very selfish reasons; they were pathetic: too far to drive, hard pews, didn't like the pastor's wife, boring youth activities etc.. Here, we must see how membership in the Truth is different. We are in the body of Christ by baptism. Baptism isn't into a human church, it's into Christ. We cannot just resign from our membership of the Body because we want softer pews, as it were. All of us in some sense are converts: let's not see the Truth as just another town along the road, something we are in as long as it benefits and suites us. And let's not preach it like that either, as if we are a church who will meet your needs better. The Truth is something totally different, and our attitude to membership in it mustn't be moulded by how the surrounding world views church membership. But we must remember that on a human level, converts to the true faith come out of a world that gets up and goes when something bugs them. We must increasingly in these last days seek to avoid giving such offence.

Why do North Americans join specific churches? The reasons they leave a church, according to the survey, don't necessarily correspond to the reasons they join them. They may leave because of hard pews, but they don't necessarily run to the church with the softest pews. There seems incentive here to carry on with a doctrine-based, up front teaching of Biblical truths. Only 17% said they joined a church because it was near to them. People are prepared to travel to get to the right church. A massive 74% said they joined a church because of the quality of the teaching. This surprised me. They leave churches for petty reasons, but what attracts them in the first place is the message. Again, there 54% said that the involvement of the new church in outreach was a factor in attracting them. People like to see a group that is reaching out into the world. Inward looking churches attract nobody. And yet one wonders what impression Joe Public would get, walking into some of our services? Only 3% said they joined a church because it was big. So, small ecclesiastical needn't think they are no way attractive! 44% said that the existence of home groups within the church was an attraction factor. Which raises the question, whether we are too oriented around formal meetings in halls.

When it came to why people were converted to church going in the first place, the results are significant for us too:

<b>Christian upbringing [%]</b>	<b>Personal witness [%]</b>	<b>Evangelical rally [%]</b>	<b>Church service [%]</b>
Before the 1980s	50	25	15
1990s	21	58	10

Digressing for one moment from this book review, it is perhaps relevant to reproduce an analysis of Billy Graham's 1976 crusade in Seattle:

"Too much "distance" exists between the member of a local church and those who are outside the church. Little or no intentional relationship-building and follow-up work is done by most churches.

As an example, the 1976 Billy Graham Crusade in Seattle was analyzed by a number of studies on the immediate and longer-lasting effects of the crusade on the local Christian community. One year after the crusade, Arn and the Institute for American Church Growth conducted a study that focused on new members assimilated into local churches and on pastors participating in the crusade. Three and one-half years after the event, Glenn Firebaugh of Vanderbilt University conducted another study on area ministers, lay people, and crusade participants. The results of the study are instructive.

According to Arn's figures, of the 18,136 "decisions" recorded during the crusade, 53.7 percent were rededications. These were not considered in the study among new believers to be incorporated into churches, since they were, presumed already to hold church memberships. Of the remaining 46.3 percent (8,400 individuals), only 15.3 percent or about 1,285 people were found to be incorporated into local churches one year after the crusade. Therefore 84.7 percent (about 7,100) were not so incorporated. This is certainly cause for concern. In fact 82.7 percent of those responding to the survey said that the crusade's overall effect on the growth of their churches was little or none.

However, Arn notes a crucial point. Of those individuals who were incorporated, 82.8 percent already had friends or relatives in that particular congregation. The significance is clear: incorporation into a local church is most effective when a relationship is maintained between church members and those outside. A previous study by the Institute for American Church Growth (of 8,000 church members in 35 states and 3 countries) revealed that 75–90 percent of those responding entered their particular church as a result of a relationship link to either friends or relatives".

[*Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 142, April 1985].

People are becoming more and more open to conversion by personal witness. In a world where there are so many influences on childhood, children are less and less likely to follow the faith of their fathers. This shouldn't be so in our community; but what it means is that no longer should we roll our eyes when we meet a Roman Catholic or born and bred Baptist, thinking 'They'll *never* change, it's pointless'. And no longer should we rely upon adverts, fliers, pieces of paper to convert. *We* are the witnesses; our lifestyle and being is a placarding forth of the Lord Jesus (Gal. 3:1 Gk.). We would all prefer to stuff banknotes in a collection bag, give out bills, write to respondents to adverts, give and attend lectures and

seminars...than do what we all know is the really effective way to convert: talk to people personally. According to the survey results, we can do so with the knowledge that more people than we think are potentially interested. But we need to make our message relevant, reaching out to the groups that are likely to be triggered into conversion by their realisation of humanity's desperation, not relying on in-the-hall meetings, but reaching out to the hearts of men and women in personal eye-to-eye discussion. People *are* interested. The Anglican Church of Canada lost over 267,000 people between 1970 and 2000; and closed 523 churches from 1996-2000<sup>(1)</sup>. People are leaving mainline churches and searching for something better. Other writers have also highlighted the crisis of the evangelical movement: "The average length of a pastoral ministry in the United States is less than three years...pastoral resignations and firings are on the increase. Nearly 7 % of Southern Baptist ministers are fired annually by their churches"<sup>(2)</sup> . There are a lot of people out there who have faith, or Christian interest of some sort, but haven't found a church to attend which suits them. Philip Yancey claims that there are as many as three million Americans who identify themselves as evangelical Christians yet never attend church<sup>(3)</sup>. "The paradox is that while the media sometimes censors religion out of the public square and while the current assumptions in the culture create difficulties for the faith, [Western people] in general are still interested in the spiritual aspects of life. Rather than denying the reality of the spiritual, they are open to God and supernatural phenomena. It's just that very few plan on pursuing their quest for the spiritual inside churches" (p. 191). There is no reason why, given the surrounding religious landscape, the preaching of true Bible doctrine should not be marching off the map in terms of growth and success in the West, as we were a century ago. We have what so many need, in this hard land.

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### **Notes**

(1) Marney Patterson, *The Decline And Fall Of The Anglican Church* (Cambridge, ONT, 2000).

(2) James Means, *Leadership In Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) p. 20.

(3) Philip Yancey, *Reaching For The Invisible God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) p. 15.

### **2-2 The Potential Of The Unchurched In The West**

It seems to me that much of our doctrinal preaching is aimed at converting members of one church to another, i.e. ourselves. We mark our Bibles and become expert at explaining why, e.g., Revelation 12 doesn't mean that a personal devil literally got thrown down from the 99<sup>th</sup> floor. But rarely do we succeed in shifting the world view of the person with whom we are debating. Yet other such contacts, such as many who attend our seminars, are favourably impressed with our teaching, our Bible knowledge, but they see no need to change churches. We're not getting very far with converting this world to the wonderful truths with which we have been blessed. One of the things that perhaps holds us back is the fact that we are still very tied in to our 19<sup>th</sup> century roots. Then, our community grew through doctrinal argument and persuasion of other denominational members to join us. But now, the times have changed. The truth remains the same. But the environment is so different. For whatever reason, we're not attracting that many people to cross over from other churches into ours.

In Europe, it is widely apparent that the continent is now well and truly "post Christian", even if our history leaves us with a residual culture of 'Christendom'. "Western civilisation is

still defined by Christianity, but as a civilisation that used to be Christian"<sup>(1)</sup>. Writing in a European context, James Berkeley observes: " That dubiously vain rooster called Christendom- the organisational inbreeding of religion, culture and state- has gone the way of all flesh... Make no mistake: the cultural phenomenon of Christendom is dead"<sup>(2)</sup>. " The church has indeed lost its role as the keystone in the arch of European culture"<sup>(3)</sup> . " In unprecedented numbers, the British people since the 1960s have stopped going to church, have allowed their church membership to lapse... the two generations who grew to maturity in the last thirty years of the twentieth century, stopped going to Sunday School, stopped entering confirmation or communicant classes, and rarely, if ever, stepped inside a church to worship in their entire lives"<sup>(4)</sup>. And this is not just true of Protestant groups: " Attendance at mass in Roman Catholic churches [in the UK] fell from nearly two million to just over one million between 1965 and 1996"<sup>(5)</sup>. All this creates a huge challenge- how to reach the masses of unchurched people? No longer can we see our witness in the Western world as doctrinal persuasion of existing Christians to leave one church and enter another. We're dealing with a mass of people who truly have little clue about Christianity at all.

### ***The Potential***

My suggestion is that we turn our attention away from those who already are active Christians, towards the “unchurched”, defined as those who haven’t recently attended a church service. George Barna has recently published the results of an extensive survey of America’s “unchurched”<sup>(6)</sup> . The results are really fascinating.

There are about 100 million “unchurched” people in the USA, and many millions more in the other Western countries. In Barna’s surveys of this group in America, he found that 66% of them believe that “my religious faith is very important in my life”. They *are* potentially interested. They’ve not switched off to God, they’ve not become atheists. Half of them pray to God once / week. One fifth of them read Christian magazines; a quarter of them listen to Christian radio.

Amazingly, 70% of them said that they believe that “the devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil”. Barna, an evangelical, laments this; but for us, this should be an amazing encouragement to reach out into this group of people, who have already come to agreement with us upon an area where we usually run into insurmountable differences with those of other churches. And again Barna has to lament, but we take courage, that 63% said that they believe that “the Holy Spirit is a symbol of God’s presence or power but is not a living entity”. Just pause and realize what these figures mean. 70 million Americans believe that “the devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil”. And that’s just in America... And 38% of the unchurched interviewed said that they “probably” will return to a church- but they’re still looking around.

We tend to feel that we can never sensibly compete with the charismatic preachers of other groups. But amongst the unchurched, “the least stock was placed in whether the leader of the organization is “articulate and charismatic”: only 12% said they deem that to be very important”. Likewise the size of the church or the travel time to the meeting placed were seen by the unchurched as insignificant.

I have very often heard Western believers lament that their societies aren’t interested in the Truth because they are too wealthy. I’ve never been sure that this really is a major factor, and Barna’s data confirm this; for he shows that the household income of the unchurched is

actually lower than that of the churched in America [\$36,697 compared to \$39,245 for the “churched”].

### ***The Problems***

Barna enquired as to the personal characteristics of the unchurched compared to the churched. He concluded: “One of the important revelations in this research is that unchurched people are not “people persons”. They tend to be more combative, less relational, lonelier and less flexible”. And it’s hard to get such types to easily fit in to ecclesial life and structures. Yet these very characteristics were the hallmark of 19<sup>th</sup> century converts to the true Gospel, from what we can tell. The message of the Truth surely appeals to these types in a way which other religions don’t. Yet if we accept that many of our converts may be “less relational, lonelier...more combative”, it will be fatal to bring them in to a community where, e.g., they are expected to follow a certain rigid dress code, or articulate their separation from the world in the way that “we” generally tend to. If we want to seriously attract the unchurched, then we have simply got to make our ecclesias places where those who aren’t “people persons” and tend to be “more combative” can the more comfortably exist.

The West is an individualistic culture- people locked up in their apartments, obsessed with their job, few friends, small and often dysfunctional family, and with little permanence to relationships. We can usefully approach this culture through internet contact with such people- and offering to baptize people simply into Christ rather than into any church membership has proven attractive (7). Following up through online breaking of bread likewise has proven useful. And yet of course the whole point of true Christianity is that it can’t be lived alone, in front of a computer screen, by merely tapping keys on a keyboard in a certain sequence. It may start out like this, but ultimately, it must go further, into the very things which 21st century society finds so difficult- personal relationships, patiently continued in, forgiveness, commitment, loyalty, long term care for others... And of course one of our roles in this world is to give other people a vision of what life can be like freed from the bondage of selfishness and total individualism (8).

### ***Matching And Mismatching***

We must ask whether the Western brotherhood is geared up for this tremendous potential ‘market’. Barna comments upon his surveys: “Unchurched people are more likely to respond to a personal invitation than they are to surrender to pressure to belong to a group. They will be attracted via personal relationships more than media marketing...expect the unchurched to resist highly-polished marketing efforts. They are sceptical of institutions, especially of slick religiosity”. Our ecclesias *are* making efforts to preach. But the “highly polished marketing efforts” won’t [and don’t] connect to the millions of the unchurched. And we’re falling down again and again because we just don’t preach as we should through personal invitation to these folks. We’d rather, perhaps, put our money in the collection bag towards a slick presentation, than dare talk to our neighbour... Two thirds of the unchurched say they would respond positively to a personal invitation to attend a church if it came from someone they knew. And yet 73% of them said they had not been invited to attend church! The potential here is just enormous.

Barna asked the unchurched what they wanted to be described as by the “churches”. 52% of them said they’d like to be called “inquirers”; most of them strongly disliked terms such as “nonbeliever” or “the lost”. I think back with horror to how in the ecclesia of my youth there

were special hymnbooks provided for “the stranger” who dared to come to the Sunday evening lecture! In fairness, here I think we have improved; but we need to bear in mind that searching people want to be validated for who they are. Barna asked how the unchurched wanted to be treated should they enter a church meeting. A large 76% said that they did not want anything special done for them or to be treated any differently than anyone else. We need to bear that in mind. Significantly, Barna in an earlier survey in 1990 had asked the unchurched the same question- and only 56% said that this is how they’d like to be treated if they went to church. So clearly there is an increasing fear of being ‘forced’ into something they don’t want, or being treated in a condescending way.

Only 17% of the unchurched want a “service with little participation, where the people watch the leaders conduct the service”. Clearly enough, the days of lecturing an audience are over and done with. The unchurched want participation, discussion, a chance to express their opinion...and the format of our meetings needs to reflect this need. Likewise 85% said that they did not want “sermons which are based on studying a specific book of the Bible, with a verse by verse explanation of those passages”. All this reflects the overall trend in society towards greater participation in events, to control our environment, and the fear which there is of isolation in a crowd. This is perhaps also behind the unchurched’s preference for small churches rather than big ones. And we have no problem in meeting that criterion!

And once we have the unchurched giving us a hearing, how are we going to relate to them? They are “likely to reject sermons that tell them what to do. They prefer stories and questions that challenge what and how they think” [p. 40]. We have to ask whether our teaching style is still rooted in lecturing at an audience- or whether like Paul, we have adjusted our teaching style to make it relevant to our hearers [consider how he understands the cultural background of his hearers in his preaching in Acts 17]. This doesn’t involve changing our doctrinal content; I’m just referring to how we deliver the same material. And compare Barna’s comments with the teaching methodology of the Lord Himself: “[the unchurched] prefer stories and questions that challenge...”. Isn’t this exactly what the parables were? The Lord incorporated elements of unreality into His stories which arrest His hearers and make them think. For example, no normal shepherd would leave the 99 in the wilderness and go seek one lost one- but such is the enormous value placed by the Lord on the individual. No King would hold a banquet and nobody want to come- but such is the tragedy and hurt of humanity’s rejection of the Gospel.

Then there is the content of what we preach. We have grown somewhat shy of talking about our doctrines up front, because this tends to put off those from other churches. But the unchurched, according to their survey replies, are saying that the doctrinal position of the church they might attend isn’t important to them, it’s not a barrier to them; what they are more sensitive to is how the people treat each other and treat them. We have shown above that some of our key doctrines are actually of tremendous interest to the unchurched. So let’s not be ashamed to talk about them. But we also need to show them the relevance of our doctrines in daily life. Thus 70% of them believe that God created the world; but relatively few of them would agree that God rules the world today. They clearly haven’t thought through the implications of the doctrine they claim to believe; for the implication would be that God created the world only to as it were vanish out of sight, or He somehow lost dominion over it. In this case, we need to draw out the radical implications of believing that God was and therefore is the creator and sustainer of all, and that He is therefore just as active in human life today as He ever was.

Summing up, the unchurched population of the West is probably closer to us than many churched people. So often those who have converted to us from ‘outside’ have told me that what thrilled them about our doctrines was that they had passively understood a lot of them that way too, but it was us who articulated them in a way that made sense, it was us who codified what they realize they had already concluded. I’m not saying we should give up efforts at turning misbelievers into believers. Not at all. But let’s realize what huge potential there is in the millions of the “unchurched” out there.

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### **Notes**

(1) Robert Jensen, quoted in Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004) p. 18.

(2) James Berkeley, *Essential Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) p. 10.

(3) Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case- Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002) p. xi.

(4) Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001) p. 5.

(5) Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004) p. 6.

(6) George Barna, *Grow Your Church From The Outside* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2002).

(7) For more insight here, see Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); from a different perspective Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*

(8) See Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward A Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1976).

### **2-3 Australian Church Surveys**

On a visit to Australia I was kindly given two books: “*Build My Church, Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches*” by Peter Kaldor, John Bellamy, Ruth Powell, Keith Castle, Bronwyn Hughes; and “*Shaping a Future, Characteristics of Vital Congregations*”, again by the same authors. Their surveys of Australian church life coupled with some other statistics provide a lot of encouraging food for thought for us as we seek to win Australia for the Truth.

### **People are interested**

It can seem that Australians simply aren’t interested. But, 20% of Australians say they attend church monthly or more often, and 10% go weekly. A further 20% say they attend church at least yearly (Source: 1998 Australian Community Survey). The 20% of Australians who claim a regular involvement are a sizeable group. There are few activities in Australian life that can claim such a level of involvement. And yet around 35% believe in a personal God and 39% in a life-force of some sort. Only 9% feel there is no God. The fact that more Australians believe in God than attend church is also evident in the fact that while 20% attend church at least monthly, around 33% pray or meditate at least weekly, and 43% feel somewhat or extremely close to God. And again, only 9% say there is no God (Source: 1998 Australian Community Survey). Seven out of every ten Australians identify with one of the Christian churches (Source: 1996 Census of Population and Housing)- although it seems,

putting the figures together, that not many of them actually attend very much. The conclusion is clear: people do have a religious conscience. But they are tired of churches and turning out to meetings. My suggestion based on this, therefore, is that we shouldn't be selling ourselves as just another church on the religious landscape. I am not specifically involved in preaching to Australia, and yet on average, every day an Australian requests Bible Basics from the [www.biblebasicsonline.com](http://www.biblebasicsonline.com) website. We need to get into their homes, by internet, video, home visits, and above all by talking to people and forging relationships with them. This, it seems to me, is the way to win the West.

Excluding christenings, weddings, funerals and other special services, around 40% of Australians attend church at least once a year. According to the ABS, such contact is only bettered by attendance at the cinema (62%) and, marginally, sporting events (44%). Far more people are involved in church activities than visit museums or art galleries or go to the opera, theatre or dance. (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1996). And yet I have heard it lamented that the real religion of Australia is sport alone. The figures show this isn't the case. And Biblically, everybody surely has a religious conscience, even the pagans—according to Romans 1.

And people are out there searching, even amongst those who do attend church. Around 7% of attenders in an average week (Catholic and Anglican/Protestant) have switched from another denomination in the previous five years (Source 1996 National Church Life Survey).

The majority of Australians claim to have attended church or Sunday school prior to the age of 12 (Source 1996 Australian Community Survey). It isn't so that Australians simply know nothing of God. This may be so of the rising generation, but the folk we are preaching to aren't in this situation. And note that some 64% of attenders read the Bible on their own at least once a week or more often, while 68% pray frequently or habitually (Source: *Views from the Pews*, pp 86-89). It just isn't so that 'the churches don't know their Bibles'. Many of them do, but it's just that they have the information out of the right order. We need to aim at re-framing in their minds much of what they already know, rather than assuming they know nothing and we are the soul fount of Biblical information for them. And this is how the thousands of Jews converted in the first century came to the Lord; what they knew was reframed for them and put in a different, and correct, order.

It is also a myth that only the poor are really interested. Poverty distracts, terribly, from concentration on something like Bible study. It distracts and obsesses those afflicted by it just as much as wealth does. In Sydney, a blue-collar, multicultural region such as Blacktown has an attendance rate of 27 people per 1,000 and lower class Fairfield a rate of 16 per 1,000. Similar low levels of attendance appear in Melbourne in places such as Keilor (11 per 1,000), Broadmeadows (14 per 1,000) and Sunshine (15 per 1,000). Higher attendance rates are found in stable white-collar regions such as Ku-ring-gai in Sydney (78 per 1,000), Ipswich (93 per 1,000) and Toowoomba (91 per 1,000) in Queensland. (Source: *Are there Bible Belts in Australia?*, Kaldow and Castle, 1995). The conclusion: it just isn't so that only the poor are interested.

### ***Offering What They Need***

The Lord Jesus spoke to people "as they were able to hear it"—not as He was able to expound it. Reasons for non-involvement in church hinged around the perception that church services were boring or unfulfilling. Around 42% of respondents feel that unfulfilling or boring

worship services discourage them from attending, at least to some extent. (Source: 1996 Australian Community Survey). Now I am not saying we change our Gospel- for we cannot do that. But the presentation of it and its practical relevance need to be stressed. People just are not interested in a lecture about “God is one not three”. The population is not comprised of hobby-level theologians who are just waiting for such an event to be put on for them to attend. What the average Australian wants is to know this God and the power of a committed life...with this God whom 91% of them believe in, but very few worship.

The 1991 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) identifies a range of characteristics associated with numerically growing congregations:

1. Moving in new directions
2. Belonging and commitment are important bases from which to grow a congregation
3. The congregation is connecting with new arrivals in the area (given that half of the Australian population moves every five years- remember this statistic when assuming that an area has been ‘covered’)
4. Conflict does not help
5. Leadership style is important
6. The congregation is outwardly focused
7. Other factors – attenders are growing in their faith, buildings that are not uncomfortably empty for worship, attenders highly valuing the mission activities of the congregation, friendliness to newcomers

If people see transformed lives in practice, they will be attracted. And so it must have been in the first century. It was personal example which was the real puller. The radical difference between our lives and those around us must rest in the fact that our doctrine affects our living, practically, and that doctrine is what is so different.

The 1991 National Church Life Survey concluded that talks need to be short (not longer than 25 minutes) and simple in order to be understood, with stories to aid listening. Most people's attention span is about 15-30 minutes. Our community is very much based in the 19<sup>th</sup> century approach to sermonizing. The reality is that TV, the internet, breakdown in family and other communications, have resulted in short attention spans. We can lament it, but this is what has happened. These are the folk we are dealing with.

Some 71% feel that the important issues of their daily lives are being addressed in their congregations. For most (41%), this occurs through informal discussion of issues with other attenders. Only 30% feel that important issues are discussed through the formal activities of their congregation. (Source: *Winds of Change*, p 143). Again, we see that it is relationships within the church which teach the message. Yet we have tended to elevate platform speaking to such a position that we feel that what is written and spoken formally is the defining power in the thinking and being of an audience. It simply isn't like this. I for one can remember only a tiny percentage of the exhortation I heard last week...and scarcely anything from the ones I heard in the weeks before that. And yet I can remember the smile of the old sister, the grin of the excited young brother, the incident in a brother's life which they shared with me.

It isn't so that we need to water down our doctrinal approach in order to get a hearing. “A conservative orientation to the Bible is also positively related to attenders feeling a strong sense of belonging to their congregation and the likelihood of young adults being retained

within its life” Source 1991 National Church Life Survey. And remember, conversion is all about relationships, and showing to others the unity which we have reached. The way we plan our hall layout needs to be reflected upon, if it is really so that relationships are the key to conversion. The survey claims that “Ideally buildings should be full to about 80% of their seating capacity in urban areas and 50-70% in rural areas. People prefer to worship in a building that is comfortably full but not overcrowded”.

Consider carefully the following quote: “Congregations that focus only on church attenders or on affiliates of the same denomination within the area are less likely to grow numerically than other congregations. Attenders who are growing in their faith are more likely to be found in congregations which focus on all contacts and less likely to be in those which focus on church attenders or denominational affiliates” (Source 1991 National Church Life Survey). I am not arguing from this that we should be ecumenical. But rather, that we should be outward looking, with conversion and reaching out into this world as one of our main objectives. If we are inwardly focused, those outside will not be attracted in. The key to numerical growth is seen by the surveys as the willingness of attenders to invite people with whom they have built relationships into the life of the church. (Source 1991 National Church Life Survey).

Just 1% of attenders began at their current congregation as a result of seeing a newsletter, advertisement or signboard (Source: *Winds of Change*, p 155). Yet our assumption has too often been that placing an advertisement equals having preached the Gospel. Yet we all know, if we just pause and look around our ecclesias, that the real source of conversion is personal witness. Without being humanistic, we must show others that people matter; that you, really, for who you are, matter to me. “Many congregations are ineffective because they become preoccupied with programs and lose sight of the people whose needs the programs are intended to meet”; and whilst we are in some ways fundamentally different to other churches in terms of our doctrine, this conclusion in this case seems very relevant to us too.

Congregations which had experienced serious conflict over theological, social, financial or other issues in the previous ten years were less likely to grow numerically than churches which had not experienced such conflicts. And we could put this in Biblical context by reflecting how the Lord taught that our unity with each other is what would bring the world to know Him. The extraordinary fusion of Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and master in the early church must have been the main attraction and confirmation of their message. As Jew and Gentile separated within the early church, so the numbers of conversions declined. And we know all too well that ecclesial conflict has turned so many away from us. We need to urgently learn the lessons, both from Scripture and from the conclusions which this research presents. The surveys suggest that a key to mission is reaching society’s “unacceptable” persons, not just those who are like the congregation . And here we have a real challenge to our comfortable way of being. It is quite right that large families ‘in the Truth’ have developed, but unless there is a constant inflow of new converts from other backgrounds, it will become increasingly difficult to attract anyone from a more diverse background to come in and share with us. In a constantly, regularly converting ecclesia, an upward spiral can be broken into whereby one conversion leads to another. It is my honest, considered observation and belief that with thought and prayer and effort, Australia and indeed the whole Western world can break into this upward spiral before the Lord comes.

### **Appendix 3: One To One Preaching**

Do the role play in pairs. Try to imagine the body language / mannerism of each speaker. What were the problems in the first one, and the reasons why a rapport was built up in the second one? Notice how in the second dialogue, M. always repeats C.'s words and ideas.

#### ***Dialogue 1***

Missionary: Err, good morning, I'm Duncan Heaster from the Christian Fellowship. It's great to see you! [C looks confused]. It's great that you're so interested in the Bible, so I've just come to see you to talk to you about all the wonderful truths which there are there!

Contact: Sorry, who are you from?

M: Well, the Christian Fellowship, you know, the people who've been writing to you about the Bible.

C: OK, come in, I'm a bit busy at the moment but come in.

M: Thanks!

M doesn't take his shoes off. Walks in to the hallway, looks around at everything.

C: Please take a seat. Would you like something to drink? I'm sorry my English isn't very good.

M: No, no, I'm fine. And you're English is excellent!! Much better than my [Mongolian]! I can just about say 'hello'! No, we'll be fine, we just want to talk about the Bible don't we!

C: [Sitting on the corner of the sofa] Which town are you from in England?

M: London. There are quite a few ecclesiases in London, and I'm from one called Thornton Heath. We're about 30 members, a nice group really.

C: London? I've always wanted to go there! I have a friend who went there, she loved it. She sent me a postcard, you can see it here on the wall.

M [not looking at it]: Yes, that's nice. Do you have a Bible?

C: Umm...somewhere.

M: [Looking at her as if expecting her to run and get it]. Well, do you have any questions about the things you've studied on the course?

C: Err...well yes, I always have questions about the Bible, but...err...I'd need to prepare them. I find it all very complicated.

M: Well OK, don't be afraid to write them to me any time. You know, I really love answering questions from students about the Bible.

C: So you deal with university students, yes?

M: No, no, I mean people like you who are out students doing the course. If we just let the Bible explain itself to us, most of the questions are really quite simple. Just read the Bible and let us direct you to the right passages, and it all explains itself. Even very simple people can understand the Truth. The Truth is really quite simple. I know a lot of people who have found the Truth from our course, actually there are over 1500 of our people baptized in Eastern Europe! Well, err, you don't have a Bible, so..

C: Well I *do* have one somewhere, but...

M: No matter, I have mine here.

C: Oh! What a lovely Bible! And all those little notes in it!

M: OK, if you like to take it and have a look at Galatians 3:16.

C: Is this a modern translation? I don't think I've seen an English Bible before!

M: It's an NIV, OK, Galatians is....just here, let me show you. There we are! OK, would you like to read it?

C: Read it?

M: Yes that's right! Read it out loud.

[C reads, stumbling].

M: Great! You read very well! OK, you see, Jesus Christ was the son promised to Abraham, that's what it says, is that clear? OK, now if you like to read verse 8, it says that this is actually the Gospel preached to Abraham

C: Please, let me get you some tea! I know Englishmen like their tea! I have some Lipton, actually.

M: OK you're very kind, maybe later, I just want to explain that the seed...

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## ***Dialogue 2***

Missionary: [Smiles, takes a step backward]. Hello, I'm Duncan, the person you have been writing to in England. I know this isn't the best time to call, but I was in the area so I couldn't resist just calling round.

Contact: Oh...*Duncan*? The one, about the Bible?

M: Yes, but I do feel bad just calling on you like this. I just wanted to at least say hello.

C: Oh what a surprise! Please *do* come in!

M: Are you sure it really is convenient?

C: Yes, of course! Please come in. [M takes shoes off].

C: Oh don't worry about shoes! Would you like something to drink?

M: Yes, that would be great. But just something cold, thanks.

[He sits for 1 minute while she brings him the drink]

C: Which town are you from in England?

M: London, the South East part of it.

C: London! I've always wanted to go there! I have a friend who went there, she loved it. She sent me a postcard, you can see it here on the wall.

M: Really? I'm glad your friend loved it when she went to London. You know, I saw a postcard the other day that said just 'I love London!' and I thought 'Well, I'm glad somebody does!'. [M looks at the postcard]. Well it's years since I was at the Houses of Parliament. I don't have much interest in it in some ways.

C: But! How can you not love London if you are from there?!

M: Well, I did used to feel differently about it all. But now, it doesn't mean so much.

C: What do you mean? I'd *love* to be from London!

M: Yes, I know what you mean. But the more I read the Bible, the more I see all these things are just on the surface, what life is really all about isn't thought about very deeply where I am from. It's all bright colours and flashing lights, but there's nothing deeper. Do you know what I mean?

C: You know, I do. I watch those things on the TV. and part of me would love to be there, but you know, part of me realises it is all just rubbish.

M: You know, I feel just the same! Isn't that strange, we both see it the same way....part of me loves it, but part of me, and now the bigger part of me, sees that it's just all rubbish. I think I've come to see it like that from just keeping on reading the Bible. I don't know if you recall that bit in the lessons that talks about the big image that came crashing down with the little stone, but that tells me that...

C: [interrupting] Yes, I liked that bit, I think it was in lesson 2, that part about the dream that Pharaoh saw and David interpreted it.

M: Wow, that's great you remembered it! The bit I like is when the little stone, which is like Jesus, comes to earth and breaks up all the image.

C: Yes, that's like the Kingdom of God being set up isn't it?

M: Yes! That's just it! ....

C: You know Duncan, I just so love these ideas. But I really just don't have a clue about reading the Bible for myself. I can read the lessons but not the Bible, I just get confused. I'd love someone to just read it to me and explain it.

M: You know, there was a time when I used to feel the same. I'm not saying I have all the clues now, either. Well, I've got a small Bible on me. It's convenient, being so small. My mum gave it to me for a birthday present years ago. It's too small to share, but can I just read you the bit about the image, and try to explain it? You'll get the main ideas...

C: Your mum? How old is she?

M: My mum? 69. I don't have any brothers or sisters. [searching for the place] OK, there it is. I'll just read it....

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**One person plays the Christian preacher and the other plays the interested party.**

***Example:***

Scenario: " You have met a woman who has three children and comes from a Catholic background. You are uncertain what has happened to her husband but he doesn't seem to be around. You struck up a conversation about the Bible in a public place (e.g. on the train, waiting in the doctor's surgery, at playgroup etc) but were cut short. She is interested in talking to you further but, upon establishing that you are a member of a denomination other than hers, she became a bit more nervous about your religion and motives. Her behaviour is friendly but slightly defensive. You would like to meet up with her again and continue the conversation" .

1. Consider how you would normally approach an interaction about the Bible with a Catholic - become aware of and note down any feelings you already have about this interaction - (e.g. reluctant, nervous, confident, defensive, annoyed, positive, anxious, uncertain etc etc).
2. Using the techniques we have just outlined, think about how would you now approach this interaction. Include in your notes how you would arrange a meeting, what you would say, how you would establish rapport, what you would discuss etc.
3. After making a rough plan, act out this role play with another person. Try and get into character as much as possible. Imagine what her feelings might be. Concentrate on empathy, compassion, rapport building.
4. Note down what worked in this interaction and what didn't. Did you feel like you had lost connection with her at any stage? Did the conversation 'succeed' - did you feel like you had

made mistakes - what were they? Ask your partner how they felt about you during the interaction - note down any of their constructive comments and criticisms - e.g. 'I felt like you were being really pushy'.. 'I felt uncomfortable'.. 'I felt really comfortable' etc.

5. Now reverse the role play. This will give you a more full perspective

***Situation #1:***

Alison: " Hi Laurie, how's it going?" (broad unspecified opener which is helpful to facilitate communication)

Laurie: " OK I guess...I'm just very tired..."

Alison: " Oh!" " You are tired?" (non-verbal behaviour such as tilting the head or leaning forward with a brief remark can imply 'continue I'm listening')

Laurie: " Yes, I've just had a terrible week trying to do everything for my church."

Alison: " What church to you belong to?"

Laurie: " That small catholic church in Pottersfield...just at the corner of Main and Elm."

Alison: " Yes, I'm familiar with that church. I drive by it every day when I go to work. So what did you have to do that made you so tired?"

Laurie: " Well, it's a rather old congregation, that is, hardly any new members...there just aren't enough parishioners who are willing to do anything. So I do it and then the women resent me for it!"

Alison: " So you're saying that the women resent you?" (clarifying to validate perception of the situation)

Laurie: " Yes I do...I think they're just jealous...I also spend a lot of time helping out our priest as well...with the cleaning of the church and washing all of the fine linen. They all speak so rudely to him and I don't...I try to be nice to everyone, you know!"

Alison: " Right. I can appreciate how it feels to try to be nice to others and then feel like they don't value your genuineness." (expressing acceptance)

Laurie: " Yeah well you were always kinda different...do you have such problems at your church?

Alison: " Well we don't have priests but I think we all tend to be guilty of not sharing the workload!" (laughter...)

Laurie: (laughing...) " You don't have priests?"

Alison: " No, we don't have priests...we all share individual responsibility for learning about God through the study of His word the Bible. Do you read the Bible?"

Laurie: " Actually, I do...in our church we take turns reading a few verses from the Bible during the mass."

Alison: " That's great that you do read the Bible! If you're interested I do have a kinda binder that helps to explain how to read the Bible effectively. I dunno if you'll find it much good as a presentation but the content of what it says from the Bible is, well in my opinion, excellent"

Laurie: " Really? I never knew there was such a thing. What kind of things are contained in this binder?"

Alison: " Well just off the top of my head I think that there are various sections such as; how to use aides to help understand the written text, the books of the Bible, historical perspectives and so on...Would you be interested in having a copy of this binder?"

Laurie: " Sure, but can I pay you for it?"

Alison: " It's free...could I pop it over to your house sometime soon?"

Laurie: " Yes...how about tomorrow night?"

Alison: " That's fine...let's say around 7:00 p.m. and I'll bring some yummy coffee-cake that I made just yesterday?"

Laurie: " Great! See you tomorrow."

### **Situation #2:**

Michelle: " Hey Helen, get a look at this in the newspaper!" (calling out)

Helen: " What is it?"

Michelle: " It's today's horoscope...I'm going to be meeting my prince charming today!"

Helen: (without getting up from her workstation or looking up) " Yeah well I think that's a waste of time!"

Michelle: " What is? Meeting my prince or reading the horoscope?"

Helen: " Reading the horoscope...it's nothing but a quick fix of nothing that supposed to validate who you are and make you feel good as a person and somehow justify what is or isn't going to happen to you."

Michelle: " So what! It's harmless and it's fun! You're not against having fun are you?"

Helen: " It's not a matter of having fun, it's doing what God would like you to do"

Michelle: " What! God is against horoscopes? That's absurd...isn't He the God of love and understanding and beauty? Didn't He create the stars and moon and planets? And anyways, the heavens exert a force on nature so it's obvious that we are influenced by the stars..."

Helen: " It's not a matter of what He created or whether or not creation itself has an influence on us...it's a matter of believing in a medium outside of God Himself." (angry tone...face flushed)

Michelle: " What! Now God is going to control how I think? What planet are you from?" (laughing)

Helen: " Forget it..."

Michelle: " Yeah, I'd better get my work done so I have time for my prince...."

**Situation #3:**

Kate: " Hi Tom, I see you're back from your trip...where did you go again?"

Tom: " To St.Anne's...there was a week's conference...JW members from all over the world were there...I met up with some long-time friends...it was great...but, we really didn't have anytime to look around the city!"

Kate: " Was the weather nice?"

Tom: " Actually it rained a lot but we were indoors all the time so I guess that was OK..."

Kate: " I'm glad you had a nice time."

**3-1 Building rapport in conversations**

**Sensitivity To Our Audience**

If we really want to make encounters and conversations work, we need to consider who we're talking with. The Lord's parables of Mt. 13:44-49 make it clear that people have different motivations when they first encounter our preaching. Some are merely fish caught in the Gospel net and compelled to come in; others are as the merchant man who is searching for good pearls, who sells all he has to get that pearl and just have it, gazing at it with admiration and appreciation each day; others are as the man who finds something of value in a field, maybe he sees there's some precious raw material he can exploit there, and so he buys the field in order to get some benefit for himself. The strange (to my ears) comment in Mt. 13:44 that the man 'hides' his discovery appears to contradict the reality that we should joyfully share our discovery of Christ with others. Perhaps the picture is being painted of a man with all the wrong motivations, who comes to the treasure from the viewpoint of 'What can I selfishly get out of this' (it may be in our age... a desire for welfare support, a partner, a social club...). And yet all the same he has come to the treasure, been called to it, allowed to find it... that is perhaps the point. All these types of people have differing motivations, and need to be treated differently by us. Noah's ark is a well known type of the salvation which humanity can find in Christ; and yet close analysis of the Genesis record reveals that there were some animals whom Noah had to bring into the ark and take them with him (Gen. 6:19; 7:2); and others who came to Noah and entered into the ark of their own volition (Gen. 6:20; 7:9,15,16). The same Hebrew is found in Gen. 8:9, about how the dove came to Noah of its own volition, and Noah welcomed her and took her into the ark. Putting all this together, we are to compel men to come in (Lk. 14:23); and yet we are also to be there to welcome in the seekers who seek of their own volition. It's easier to do the latter; to put up a website, waiting there for some eager seeker to come and find. But we are also to compel people in, and to also bear in mind that there are some who will be attracted to the Gospel from selfish reasons, as the man who buys the field thinking that he can exploit it for his own benefit. These too we

are to take on board and not turn away. Whilst people, with all their wonderful uniqueness, should never be pigeon-holed nor over-categorized... all the same, we need to consider the type of person we're dealing with as we plan out our approach. For if we seek them, we will consider who they are, and how appropriately we can engage them.

Preaching is essentially about building relationships, not platform evangelism. The Lord taught that His preachers were not to go "from house to house" but rather to remain within an acceptable household and make that their base (Lk. 10:7). In modern terms, I think we could interpret this as meaning: 'Focus on building relationships; don't build up a shallow relationship with a lot of people, but rather try to get deep with one household'. But in our internet age, how do we build relationships; how do we conduct ourselves in real face-to-face conversations?

- The Lord maintained eye-contact with His listeners: Mt. 19:26; Mk. 3:5,34; 5:32; 8:33; 10:21, 23,27; Lk. 6:10; 20:17; 22:61; Jn. 1:42. These are all separate occurrences; the fact is really being emphasized. This paying appropriate attention with eye contact is also a good strategy for matching the silences that occur from time to time in any serious conversation. Most of us can tell when another is thinking by observing the eyes, and when they are not their eyes will tell you.
- There is a sense of mutuality and rapport built up between the preacher and the hearer in all successful preaching. Jonah "cried" to Nineveh (Jonah 1:2; 3:2,4) and they "cried" to God in response to his 'crying' to them- the same Hebrew words are used (Jonah 3:5,8). As Jonah cried to God from the belly of the fish, so the Ninevites were inspired- presumably by what he related to them of his own life- to cry mightily to God for undeserved deliverance (Jonah 3:8).
- Be yourself, relate as a real person, not some do-gooding missionary with all the answers talking in his own in-house jargon, but behave appropriately to the circumstances, not only culturally but situationally. Don't pretend to be an expert. Be friendly to the dog if you like dogs, but don't romp on the floor with it etc. Remember how the Lord healed the blind man and then told him not to tell anybody (Mt. 9:30). Clearly the man wanted to shout out his good news. But by quietly walking around, seeing life as it really is, being his normal self, this would be an even more powerful witness.
- The missionary needs to know why they are there. This sense of purpose helps us cope with the rejections better and also gives a positive feel to the contact.
- Make constant affirmative response like "uh-hm, a-ha, yes, OK, right," etc., just to affirm we are listening if the contact is talking for any length of time. Also matching their speed of talking is another way of showing empathy.
- Matching, or mirroring, non verbal behaviour and posture is another good rapport builder. Matching speed and tone of speaking and the speed of breathing, empathy is conveyed, if this has been done effectively then it is highly likely that if the missionary slows down his/her breathing, speaking, and shows signs of relaxing, then C may follow.
- Allow your sense of humour to come out if appropriate. Focus on the contact's needs, not your own, you are there for your reasons, but your reasons are not to dominate. Empathise, i.e., walk with the contact in the conversation, sometimes leading sometimes following, but

don't try too hard to lead. Try to steer a balance between positively teaching truth and correcting error whilst at the same time constantly affirming the contact and showing signs of acceptance of them on a personal level.

### ***Turning Conversations Around***

In practice, this is what preaching is all about. We all mix with people. We nervously seek to start conversations about the Lord, and yet so often they go wrong. The person refuses to 'play ball', i.e. they change the direction of the conversation; or they get even more committed to their own position.

At the outset, we need to note that the majority of 'conversations' between people aren't conversation at all. Each person has their own agenda and point of view which they want to get across, talking *at* the other rather than listening and responding appropriately. We see it all the time- in dialogue between politicians, parents and children, husbands and wives, women and men.

Many people have strong feelings, stemming from past experience, in which they may have felt their opinions etc were discounted or of little value. They therefore become all the more desperate to make their point. There are so many people from abusive and dysfunctional backgrounds that this is getting a very common feature of society world-wide. Some will articulate this by talking loudly over the top of another, or constantly interrupting, dominating or trying to dominate the conversation. Some are more masked than others in the way they do this, but this desire to be heard and valued are so strong in the majority of those we meet with. If the impression we give is that we are here to prove others wrong and ourselves right, then we may be guilty of harnessing our knowledge of God's Truth for our own ego. On the other hand, there is in Scripture the concept of 'Truth' and error. And we are to be a light to those who sit in darkness. And we are to perceive ourselves this way. And yet if we are going to lead others to Truth, we need to be aware of where they are coming from, and be all things to all so that by all means we may save some.

We have all walked away from verbal exchanges where we have sought to preach the Truth, wishing we had said something different, wishing we had had the presence of mind to give a better answer to a difficulty question; or berating ourselves, having forgotten a crucial point central to our argument etc. It seems to me that whilst on one hand preaching can be likened to a warfare, a tearing down of the bastion of unbelief, the Lord's servant taking people captive unto the will of God (2 Tim. 2:26 RV), this is only one facet of the picture. Taken too far, we can become motivated perhaps by a fear of failure, we try harder and only get into a verbal battle, a jousting match, or worse. We will often 'lose' these exchanges, because we were unable to convince our 'adversary'. Thus such exchanges become like a court battle of who's right and who's wrong, one-upmanship and point scoring. We will then end up feeling that the person has rejected the calling of the Father simply because my argument wasn't good enough. This need to win, this fear of failure, is the way of the world not the way of God, it is not " reasoning together" . There is too much ego involved. Preaching, though it might seem otherwise at times, is not a competitive sport. If we failed it's not because we did not try hard enough, nor is it because we did not know enough, perhaps it's because we tried too hard driven by a fear of failure, or perhaps we have thought too highly of ourselves, thinking we speak for our God?

Before we get into situations we need to ask ourselves certain questions:

- What's in it for me?
- What is my motivation? why do I, personally, preach?
- What do I get out of this activity or what do I expect to get out of it?
- What am I afraid of?

The answer/s and other questions will probably be different for each of us. There are some other things we also need to be clear on too. Such as: What is preaching? What is it I am actually 'preaching'? What are my personal weaknesses and strengths? We need to be clear on these sort of things as they impinge upon our attitude toward who we are, what we do, how we do it, and most importantly how we consider others, particularly those to whom we, in this context 'preach'. This has a lot to do with how we perceive ourselves. As a distinctive minority group it was natural to be always on the defensive, and in the past our preaching has been characterised by a confrontative and at times an adversarial approach. It could be that because of our possession of Truth, of the right interpretations which form *part* of our covenant relationship with God, we have tended towards self righteous invulnerability, to not admit any possibility of our being mistaken, to give the impression we have the answers to everything and our audience are totally ignorant. We forget that those to whom we preach have more knowledge, factually, both about life and often the Bible, than we assume. We need to get it in the right place and order for them, not *only* teach them new information.

I submit that because we have been too 'confrontational' in our perception of preaching, too based around winning an argument, that there was until a few years ago a reluctance to 'preach' because for one reason or another, many brethren & sisters feared they will not measure up and fail in their own eyes and let the rest down. Both the adversarial approach and the fear of failure are unscriptural. And it is a joy to see the younger generation far more committed to witness. This can only be a positive sign. Preaching is done as a natural response to the grace we have ourselves come to know, from a desire to share the Hope of Israel with our fellow human beings, not out of the shoulds, oughts or musts of blind obedience, obedience without content, or fear that if what is perceived as an 'order' is not obeyed one's eternal life is in jeopardy. We will avoid being patronising, preaching *at* rather than *to* people, if we remember we are no better than they and that the way to pass on this Gospel is through a genuinely sincere relationship of equals, of men and women who know their desperation.

To be able to gain the trust of others one needs to show oneself trustworthy and in this atmosphere of mutual consent, one can at times, guide or lead the conversation. In the end, this is what we are seeking to do. And it is easier than it may seem as most people genuinely want to be able to trust others, to be trusted themselves, and be treated as equals or at least feel valued. So what we need to do when we are in such situations is to be genuine, be oneself. In every situation in life we can choose to either play a role or be ourselves. Though in the past we may have tried to be, none of us are experts with all the answers, we all have vulnerabilities, doubts about ourselves and even about our understanding of some difficult passages in the Bible. We can pretend to be otherwise but this will soon be noticed and acted upon even if only subconsciously. We need to know these things about ourselves and be OK with them. God will speak through us if we allow it, not so much with expert answers but with love, charity, and empathy for the human condition. The focus in this relationship is not upon our needs but upon the needs of the other. So rather than churning over quotes in our own minds, talking to ourselves, and just waiting for the opportunity to 'blurt' them out, we need to listen to the other person make a conscious and thoughtful response. By at least

acknowledging to our God and ourselves that we are not perfect in the sense of being 'all good' and righteous but that we make mistakes, have failings etc., we can be more 'real' in our relationships. The more real the more believable, the more believable the more willing the other is to let us lead at times. By being real, not behaving as others say we 'should', 'ought' or 'must' we attract others who may feel oppressed by the "obedience without content" control structures of our/their society. Paradoxically, people want a leader. They want to be themselves and be valued for who they are, to be listened to, but yet they also realize deep down how they are floundering in a cruel and hard to understand world.

And so to the skills of good communication. We must show a value for what the other person is saying. This is also called "active listening" which is basically letting the other know we are focusing on them and giving them our full attention. Included in these are the appropriate use of expressions like, "a-ha", "uh-hum", "yeah", "OK", "right", "oh", "I see" "I hear what you say", "I understand" etc., with the accompanying tone of voice and non-verbal behaviour such as eye movement, facial expressions, body posture and rate of breathing which mirrors that of the other. It is very important to maintain a high level of eye contact, but not to stare as this may be disconcerting. Focus on the other while they are speaking rather than rehearse the next response no matter how many times one may have heard the same thing. Silence will probably indicate the other is thinking about what has just been said and is important, there is no need to fill the gaps, it is more important to be friendly and real than have all the answers off pat. On the other hand when the other has stopped thinking, (the eyes will indicate this) it may be worthwhile to:

1. Paraphrase or reflect the content of what the other has just said. Paraphrasing is not the same as parroting, though this is sometimes useful in helping the other finish a sentence. The former is reflecting the important content in one's own words. Reflecting the content, though we may not always get it right, helps the Other clarify their thoughts and get to the real issues which may not be what is presented. For example "Oh yeah, well if God is so good and loving why does He allow so much suffering?" may be presented whereas the underlying issue may be of some kind of abuse being suffered by the other or someone known to them, or an untimely death in the family. By accompanying the Other on their walk along their own path of thought rather than trying to defend God which may also include some element of self defence, we allow the other to think more clearly and in a constructive way. By defending God, or ourselves by launching into some monologue on "good and evil" in this encounter we put the Other on the defensive and serve only to entrench the possible thought that God is unloving and unjust.
2. Reflect *feelings*. Rather than launching into a speech about "good and evil" or asking a 'why' question in response to the above, the reflection of content response may also include a reference to feelings, "It sounds as if you're angry at God. That He can't possibly be loving if He allows so much suffering." Twist your face up if the Other recounts suffering to you. This sort of response allows the Other to explore their feelings more fully and feel the pain that is hidden by the anger. The result of which is the dissipation of the angry feeling and the exploration of the real problem. Of course its not that simple in reality and there may be a few more steps before the underlying problem is reached. There is also a problem in our response to the anger or any other strongly expressed feeling. In our culture we learn to deny our feelings and encourage others to deny theirs, to philosophise about our problems as if they are 'out there' and don't really belong to us. This is a coping or survival mechanism. Staying in our heads enables us to cope with the fiery darts of the wicked and not show our vulnerability, but there is a price, unexpressed feelings warp our discernment. Reflection of

feelings enables the other in recognition of these repressed feelings. We need to realize in such situations that though the expression of feeling may be directed at us or what we have said may have elicited an emotional response, in most cases we are not responsible and should not take it on board nor feel guilty.

3. There are three predominate modes of sensory perception and communication; they are seeing, hearing and feeling. These correspond to three different ways of thinking, visual imagery, mental self talk or auditory, feeling or bodily sensation or anaesthetic. Often in our communication we mix up these modes of awareness, we say "feel" when we mean "think" , " see" or " hear" when we mean " know" or " understand" , that sort of thing. Though some people may be equally versatile in all three modes, most of us rely more strongly on one mode, by carefully listening to the words used by the other one can identify their generally preferred mode of thinking. This is helpful to good communication in several ways. It give insight into personality, mutual understanding is increased and by matching the words used in the conversation, trust is facilitated and strengthened.

4. Asking questions is a way of controlling the direction of the conversation. Asking too many questions though can be intimidating and the other will either shut down and wait for the next question, become angry and stone wall, or feeling violated will become defensive and possibly even offensive and aggressive, or withdraw and possibly even terminate the exchange. Be that as it may There are two major categories of question, some are called "open questions" and the other " closed questions" . Closed questions are a form of control, leading to specific answers, often already known or presupposed, are used by lawyers in courtrooms to restrict witnesses in their range of answers and in other instances where the questioner like a government instrumentality has power or seeks to gain such. Usually the answers to such questions are short. The other may choose to expand on their answers but is unlikely to do so if feeling threatened. However when the other makes generalisations, as is sometimes the case with " open questions" , closed questions are a useful tool in helping them define and focus on the real issue.

One type of question falls between and that is the " Why" question. We are usually taught very early on in our social development that the " I don't know" response to a why question is not adequate and to avoid a punitive response from a usually angry parent or other authority figure we need to have a well thought out intellectual response even if it's not true. Such questions in adulthood may elicit a similar intellectually thought out reason in reply which as in childhood are often, to varying degrees, unconvincing and frequently fall into the category of " excuses" , " rationalisations" or outright lies, as the childhood pattern of denial to escape consequences has been frequently and successfully indulged in a shame-based society where such denial and lack of trust is commonplace. Open questions are very different in their effect particularly if a bond of trust has been formed. There is still room for a pre-programmed response, for the other to read between the lines or give an answer they think one wants, but given such freedom is more inclined to be open and give a freer answer. The open question is an invitation to explore what is important or of most interest to the other person.

5. Summarising is a bit like paraphrasing but like the word suggests it is a summary of a number of statements picking out the salient features and presenting them in such a way that self and the Other have an overview of what has been discussed until that point. Summarising clarifies what has been said and puts it into a fairly organised format which enables the Other to absorb and ponder what has been shared. This is a necessary part of the process as often

people are confused, in denial and resistant or are unable to think or talk through their belief structures coherently.

6. After summarising there is an opportunity to do a little ‘Reframing’, something our Lord did a lot. We all get stuck at sometime or another in a frame of reference the origin of which is exterior to ourselves and likely reflects how others see us, or think we should, must or ought to be and what we have come to believe about ourselves. The idea behind reframing is not to deny the way the Other sees the world, as inappropriate as this may seem to be, but to carefully present another, perhaps expanded, view of the world based upon what has been revealed in the conversation and though specifically articulated is known to the other. This enables the Other, if they so choose, to see things in a new way, from another point of view which may be more appropriate. Reframing allows a shift in attitude out of a false self of shame or grandiosity, where projection, blame (shaming others), denial etc are the survival tools or coping mechanism of a dis-eased self worth, where the ego or self is the God-like centre of the universe, ‘imbued’ through ‘socialisation’ by cultural agents e.g. parents, older siblings, other family and educators with a God-like responsibility for the feelings and actions of others, into the light of the reality of individual self-responsibility.

*Note: This is the outcome of discussion with John Stibbs, who should take credit for much of the above.*

#### **Appendix 4: Why Do Some Areas Respond Better Than Others To The Gospel?**

Anyone with any mission experience will have reflected on this. The following are just some thoughts to provoke some discussion, hopefully:

- **Language.** You won’t make many converts in (e.g.) Russia or Mongolia or South America if you only preach in English. Those mission brethren who have been more sensitive to this have generally achieved more.
- **Culture.** The finest Christian missionary probably wouldn’t make major inroads in terms of numbers if he started a mission to Saudi Arabia etc. [in the same way as our attempts to convert the post-Christian West aren’t too spectacularly successful either]. A Muslim or other background religious culture is hard to shift en masse. A nominally ‘Christian’ area like many African states has a much higher potential for large numbers of converts. But if we have the spirit of world-wide *witness* rather than simply seeking mass conversions to our Faith, we will be supportive of those who labour in the non-Christian or Islamic world. Men from every nation / tongue / dialect will be, finally, accepted before the throne. But from some of them, there may well be very few indeed.
- **The sovereign, unfathomable choice of God.** He may simply desire certain geographical areas to have larger numbers of His people in.
- **Human need.** The key to conversion is surely knowing our desperation. It seems rather superficial analysis to say: ‘The poorer countries respond better’- although it may seem like that. On this basis one would expect no conversions of rich Western people and huge responses from feeding camps in Africa. But it isn’t quite so- rich Westerners still convert, and people on the verge of death from starvation also don’t respond so well. It isn’t the experience of poverty in itself that converts, but a realization of ones’ desperation. It has to be said, though, that the self-satisfied are therefore unlikely to convert. It’s the spirit of self-

satisfaction rather than the possession of material wealth in itself which seems to hinder the conversion of the West.

**- God prefers to work through personal witness rather than through bits of paper, adverts, lectures etc.**- not that I am knocking them in themselves. They are inevitable in the process of establishing the preaching work in a new area. But in the mission areas where the most spectacular growth has occurred- e.g. India, Malawi- this is largely due to the personal witness of locals rather than Western advertising etc. And this fits in to a definite feature of Western preaching- personal witness is far and away the preferred method of calling men to God's Truth rather than, e.g., leaflet distribution. The lesson seems to be, therefore: establish the Truth in an area and then concentrate in building up the local converts and encourage them to preach, rather than endlessly mount 'campaigns'. They are far better preachers than we are; and the interest we might attract runs the risk of being for 'loaves and fishes' rather than genuine interest in the message. We want to build up a community that magnifies God's Name, not just produce numbers of visitors at lectures etc. I am sure we are all quite genuinely agreed on this. Our 'preaching' efforts should be directed to fresh areas.

**- The effort / quality of work put in by the Western missionaries.** This may sound as if we save men rather than the Lord. I don't obviously mean this. But then on the other hand, it seems that God does as it were 'limit' Himself by delegating the work of witness to us. We beseech men in Christ's stead, and therefore His manifestation of Himself to the world is to some degree limited by us. This is a frightening and yet inspiring thought. Whilst our personal salvation is not on account of our works, it is true that if we don't witness the Gospel of salvation to men, they therefore may not have a 'chance' of that salvation. God *could* save and instruct whom He will- he requires not help from man. And yet in His wisdom He has delegated this work to us His servants. This is one reason why some mission areas reap a greater harvest than others- because of the effort of the preacher. Now I am not saying that if you preach in an area for years and make hardly any converts, therefore you are working more shoddily than the preachers who gain many converts. This *could* be the case; but not necessarily, because there are other factors apart from the effort of the preacher which must be considered when seeking to understand why some areas are more fruitful than others. But because it *could* be the case, we all need to ask ourselves: Is this *my* problem, in *my* area??

Paul speaks of how he had been given areas in which it was potentially possible for him to preach in, and he didn't enter into those areas which had either already been preached in, or which were another brother's responsibility. This seems to suggest that God does indeed look down from Heaven and as it were divide up the world amongst those who could preach in it. This is why Paul perceived that he had been 'forbidden' from preaching in some areas [e.g. Macedonia] and yet a door was opened to him in Achaia. This language is allusive to the way in which the Lord forbade Israel to conquer certain areas on their way to the promised land (Dt. 2:37). The point is, between us, our preaching is a war of conquest for Jesus, pulling down strong holds and fortresses as Paul put it; or, as Jesus expressed it, taking the Kingdom by force, as stormtroopers.

#### **Appendix 5: "To the Jew first"**

## **5-1 Why We Should Preach To Israel**

There is some quite compelling evidence to this effect:

- The Gentiles " have now obtained mercy (i.e. the merciful opportunity to hear the Gospel) through their (Israel's) unbelief. Even so have these (Israel) also now not believed, that through your mercy they may obtain mercy" (Rom. 11:30,31). " Mercy" here cannot be read on a surface level; it cannot be that by showing mercy, another race may obtain mercy. " Mercy" is surely being used as a figure for the preaching of the Gospel. Through our mercy to them in this way they can obtain mercy.
- The theme of Romans is the Gospel, and in this context Paul makes the point that because both Jew and Gentile are saved by the Gospel, *therefore* we should preach to both Jew and Gentile (Rom. 10:9-18). In this context, Paul quotes from Is. 52:7 and Nah. 1:15, both concerning preaching to Israel: " How shall they hear without a preacher? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of *them* (cp. 'he' in the originals- our preaching is a manifestation of the Lord) that preach the Gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings" . The Nahum passage is in the context of preaching to Israel the good news of their ultimate freedom from the Assyrian invasion which was then imminent. We are in a strikingly parallel situation in these last days. Rom. 10:16 then goes on to quote Is. 53:1, which again refers to the preaching of the Gospel to Israel, and applies it to our preaching.
- Although Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, I understand Rom. 11:25,26 to mean that he preached to the Gentiles motivated by the knowledge that when the full number of the Gentiles had "come in", then "all Israel" would be saved by the Jews then turning to Christ. The conversion of Israel was primary in his thinking. In any case, although he was the apostle to the Gentiles rather than the Jews, he usually sought to offer the Gospel to "the Jew first" in his missionary work. He tried "by any means" to provoke Israel to acceptance of Christ (Rom. 11:14). This alone indicates how we should preach to Israel!
- The primacy of preaching to Israel is reflected in Paul's reasoning in 1 Cor. 14:21,22. He reasons that the Law had foretold that one of Israel's punishments was that they would be spoken to in languages which they did not understand; and Paul applies this to the gift of speaking in foreign languages. He concludes: "Wherefore tongues are a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not...but if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not...". The major example of speaking in tongues was of course to the Jews in Acts 2. "Them that believe not" are clearly the Jews, in Paul's thinking. And Paul's concern is that the Jews should be preached to in languages which they understood, rather than 'rubbing in' their curse for disobedience by speaking to them in languages they didn't understand. His whole thinking is based around the assumption that our priority in preaching is to the Jews.

The Jewish conscience about the cross is predicted by the Lord in Jn. 8:28: "When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he". But the Jews generally were not subsequently persuaded that Jesus was indeed Messiah, bearer of the "I am" Name of God. Potentially, in their consciences, they *did know* that He was, once they crucified Him. The words of Jesus were of course true. But they didn't confess that faith, because they suppressed it in their conscience. This is why to this day there is this Jewish conscience about the cross. And it's why conversion to the Lord Jesus cannot be far from the heart of every Jew.

***“We each...”***

Paul explains his approach to Jewish conversion in 2 Cor. 3:15-18. Whenever they read Moses, they have a veil over their minds, but when a Jew turns to the Lord, that veil is removed. He is perhaps alluding to the Jewish practice of covering their head and even face with a prayer shawl or *tallit* when reading or hearing God's word (Mk. 12:38). And this perhaps is behind his demand that brethren should not cover their heads in ecclesial meetings in 1 Cor. 11:4. They are like Moses, hiding his face behind a veil. But when the veil is removed by conversion, then the glory of Christ will shine forth from them. The implication surely is that a true Jewish convert to Christ will in turn radiate forth the Lord's glory to others. We *each*, with unveiled face, have like Moses seen the glory of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18). When Moses saw the glory, he was immediately given a ministry to preach to Israel, to share that glory with them (Ex. 34:34). And Paul drives home the similarity; we *each* have had the experience of Moses, and so “therefore seeing *we* (too, like Moses) have this ministry”, “we each” are to exercise it to Israel.

The glory of the “similitude of the Lord” that Moses saw and reflected (Num. 12:4) is likened to “the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). Like Moses, Jewish people have that glory, but they have it veiled; they potentially have it, but it is hidden, because their minds are veiled. This could possibly suggest that Paul saw more potential in the Jewish mind for Christ than other races; thus he speaks in Rom. 11 of how the natural branch which has been cut off [Israel] will be more effectively grafted back into the olive tree than the wild Gentile branches. This of course has similarities with the Lord's teaching about Himself as the vine, whose unfruitful branches had been cut off (Jn. 15:2). Israel “much more” than the Gentiles can be grafted back in, whereas Gentile converts do this “against nature” (Rom. 11:24). In the context of Israel's final repentance, God speaks of how every one of the Jewish people has been potentially created for His glory, because they carry His Name (Is. 43:7). Although Israel have been “quenched as a wick” for their sins (Is. 43:17 RVmg.), we are to realize that the wick is still smouldering, and are to follow the Lord's example of never totally quenching it but instead seek to fan the wick of Israel back into life (Is. 42:3).

### **Romans 11**

Paul's positive approach to Israel's conversion is reflected in his whole reasoning in Romans 11, his classic statement about preaching to Israel. He begins by saying that God has not cast off His people Israel totally, because some, e.g. himself, have turned to Christ. So, seeing that God will not cast off His people Israel in the ultimate sense, it perhaps follows that in every generation some of them will come to Christ as Paul did (Rom. 11:1,2). In some sense, God has cast off His people (2 Kings 21:14 RV; Zech. 10:6); and yet, because a minority of them will always accept Christ, it is not true that God has cast off His people in a total sense (Rom. 11:1 RV). It was only because of this remnant that Israel have not become like Sodom (Rom. 9:29)- even though Old Testament passages such as Ezekiel 16 clearly liken Jerusalem to Sodom. Yet they are not as Sodom ultimately, for the sake of the remnant who will believe. Perfectly in this context, Paul draws out the lesson from Elijah's mistake (Rom. 11:2); Elijah had thought that God had totally cast Israel off, but he didn't appreciate that there was a remnant of faithful within Israel. And the existence of that remnant may likewise have been concealed from the Christian church, Paul is perhaps implying. Only *part* of Israel are blind to Messiah; a majority, but not all of them (Rom. 11:5,7,25). I don't think that Paul is merely speaking of the situation in the first century, where clearly some Jews did believe. I say this because Jer. 31:37 clearly states that Israel will never be “cast off”; yet, according to Romans

11, Israel are only not cast off because some of them do believe in Christ. The fact Israel are not now totally “cast off” therefore indicates that there always will be a remnant of faithful Jews- faithful to God’s Son and trusting in grace rather than law (Rom. 11:6). Therefore we should be hopeful that at least a remnant will respond to our preaching to them. The Jews who do not believe were “cast off” at the very time the world was reconciled to God, i.e. when they crucified Jesus (Rom. 11:15 cp. 5:10,11). It was through their “trespass” in crucifying Him that salvation came (Rom. 11:11 RVmg.). And the resurrection and second coming which actualizes that salvation will only come once they repent (Rom. 11:15). So, Israel as a whole are not “cast off” because of the remnant of Jews who will always believe in the grace of Christ; but those individuals who crucified the Lord and uphold that position have cast themselves off from God. The practical upshot of all this is that we should preach to Israel, with faith that some will repent!

### ***The Love Of God***

Israel is so often set up as the bride of God (Is. 54:5; 61:10; 62:4,5; Jer. 2:2; 3:14; Hos. 2:19,20). This is why any infidelity of theirs to God is spoken of as adultery (Mal. 2:11; Lev. 17:7; 20:5,6; Dt. 31:16; Jud. 2:17; 8:27,33; Hos. 9:1). The very language of Israel 'selling themselves to do iniquity' uses the image of prostitution. This is how God feels our even temporary and fleeting acts and thoughts of unfaithfulness. This is why God is jealous for Israel (Ex. 20:15; 34:14; Dt. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15)- because His undivided love for them is so exclusive. He expects them to be totally *His*. When God said that " I have been broken with their whorish heart" (Ez. 6:9 RV), He meant it. Sinful Israel broke the heart of Almighty God. The tone of God's speeches in Jeremiah varies wildly, moving abruptly from outraged cries of pain to warm entreaties of love, and then to desperate pleas for a new start. He is responding like a jilted lover, who gained His Israel by wooing them in the wilderness. He felt the pain of Israel's rejection, and went through very human-like reactions to this. The book of Hosea shows all this lived out in a real human life. Hosea was representative of God, and yet he married a slut called Gomer, and in their life together they portrayed graphically the pain of God's relationship with His people. The image of God as the wounded lover which we meet in Hosea and Jeremiah ought to deeply impress us. The God who created all of existence subjects Himself to such humiliation from His creation. One is almost haunted by the reality of a God who lets our response to Him count that much. It inspires us to implore Israel and all men, on our hands and knees, to not reject the love of God which is in the Gospel. I feel I want to beseech Israel for the sake of God's hurt and pain over them alone, if for no other reason. Just think of His emotional response to them. He tells them He has punished them less than their iniquities deserve; but then He feels He's been too hard on them. He tells Jeremiah not to pray for them as He won't hear him; but then Jeremiah does pray and God hears and changes His mind as a result of this (Jer. 42:7,10).

In Hosea 11, God likens Himself to Israel's father, teaching His little child to walk for the first time. As the child ‘makes it’ into the Father’s arms for the first time, there must be a tremendous *excitement* for the Father. A few uncertain, jittering steps- and He is thrilled and telling the whole world about it with joy. No matter how clever or powerful that man is in the world. And so this is how God was with His people, it's how it is with us too as we take our first unsure steps after baptism. He has the capacity for thrill and excitement, just as we do, who are made in His image. Remembering how He had felt towards His child Israel in earlier days, God cries out with a stab of pain: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?”. The memory of Israel's childhood was just too much. It made God change His mind with regard to totally rejecting His wayward son. In preaching to Israel, we are

beseaching the prodigal child to return to the desperately grieving Father...for His sake we do this. It is too much for me to think of God so hurt...we surely *have* to do something about it, to appeal to His people. Ezekiel 25:3,6,8,15 reveal how sensitive God is to what is said and felt about the people whom He loves. Because Ammon mockingly said "*Aha!*" when Israel went into captivity, because Moab sneered that Judah were like any other nation now, because the Philistines had "despite of soul" (RV) against Israel... therefore God so condemned them even though Israel were so spiteful to Him at that very time. Even though they betrayed Him, His sensitivity for them, His feeling, His emotion, His passion, His pleading with them...surely inspires us to plead likewise with them, for His sake. For the sake of His feelings, His passion...

In another figure, God speaks of Israel as if they were His beloved baby child: "Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it. But [so tragically] my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me...oh that my people would hearken unto me, that Israel would walk in my ways!" (Ps. 81:10-13 RV). This passage alone makes me want to plead with Israel to return to their so loving Father.

And the love of God for Israel isn't just something in the past. You may have noticed how the blessings for Israel's obedience are actually in a strange way somehow still given to them even in their disobedience. The blessings of many children and general prosperity have somehow been fulfilled to the Jewish people; they have somehow prospered "in all that thou settest thine hand unto...and all people of the earth shall see that thou art called by the name of the Lord...and the Lord shall make thee plenteous in goods...and thou shalt lend unto many nations...thou shalt be above only, and thou shalt not be beneath" (Dt. 28:3-13). This has all come true for the Jewish people in their unbelief, from the Jewish taxi driver in Vilnius who somehow makes more than the other guys, to the Jewish bankers of New York—and all achieved despite every man's hand against them. Here we see the grace and love of God for Israel. And thus finally He shall give them the valley of Achor, symbol of their shameful disobedience, for a door of hope. The ineffable love of God for Israel continues. And we, as God's children, should show forth that same love, expressed supremely in seeking to turn them to Messiah.

## 5-2 Preaching To Israel In The Last Days

We should preach especially in the last days, knowing that a witness must be made to all nations before the Lord comes; and Phil. 4:5 seems to imply that just because "the Lord is at hand" we should let our "moderation" [RVmg. "gentleness"] be known unto all men" in the hard world of the last days. But there is reason to think that we should especially preach to Israel in the time of the end:

- "I will scatter thee among the heathen, and disperse thee in the countries, and will consume thy filthiness out of thee" (Ez. 22:15) suggests that as the day of the second coming approaches, Israel will be progressively purged and move closer and closer towards repentance.

- "The remnant" of Israel will be saved, those who believe in Jesus, "For the Lord will execute his word upon the earth, finishing it and cutting it short...as Isaiah hath said before, Except the Lord of sabaoth had left us a seed [i.e. the remnant] we had become as Sodom" (Rom. 9:28,29 RV). This associates the shortening of the last days for the sake of the Jewish remnant. Paul is surely expanding the Lord's own words, that the days will be shortened "for

the elect's sake". And that "elect", according to Paul's inspired exposition, are the Jews who repent and accept Jesus in the last days. Quite simply, the quicker we get the remnant of Israel to repent, the quicker the Lord will be back.

- There is reason to think that there has always been a "remnant" of Jews who believe in the true Messiah- Paul's reasoning in Romans certainly implies this. If some Jews have always 'held the truth'- then did we not ought to be seeking them out? For there aren't so many within our community. Only if Heaven above can be measured "then will I cast off *all* the seed of Israel" (Jer. 31:37 RV). Clearly not *all* Israel have been cast off- only if the Heavens pass away will all the seed of Israel cease from being "before me", i.e. in some sort of covenant with God (Jer. 31:36). Paul surely alludes here when saying that God has not [totally] cast off His people because there is always "the remnant". There will always be a remnant of Israel open to true conversion in every generation.
- In similar vein Is. 55:1-6 bids Israel seek the Lord, and then comments that His word will accomplish what He wants it to achieve; the earth / land will respond to the rain of His word which He sends upon it (:11). This seems to be saying that somehow there will always be response from Israel to the Gospel. And the following verses hint that this may be specifically so in the last days, for v. 12 says that the result of the land's response to the word will be that "ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing". Their response to the word in the last days ushers in the Kingdom.
- When Israel return to the Lord and swear in truth that "the Lord liveth", then all the other nations of the world will be blessed in the coming of the Kingdom (Jer. 4:1,2 RVmg, NIV).
- "I will hiss for them, and gather them; for I have redeemed them" (Zech. 10:8) is perhaps an example of the 'prophetic perfect' tense; God is going to gather His people so as to redeem them. The regathering of Israel is therefore related to their redemption. The fact so many have now been regathered to the land is surely an indication that their redemption draws nigh; and should we not therefore tell them of the Gospel which they must accept as part of that redemption?
- Isaiah 40 is a prophecy which essentially concerns the time of the Lord's second coming. Verses 4 and 6 contain several references to Is. 2:10-12, which concerns this time; v. 5 = Rev. 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:13; v.10 = Rev. 22:12. Before the Kingdom comes, there must be a witness to Israel of the blessed time that is coming, comforting her (v.2) that her time of punishment for sin has now ended (this can only really have a latter day application): " O thou that tellest *good tidings* to *Zion*, get thee up into the high *mountain*; O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength...say unto the cities of Judah, Behold *your God!* behold, the Lord God will come..." . This is the language of Is. 52:7: " How beautiful upon *the mountains* are the feet of him that bringeth *good tidings*...that saith unto *Zion*, *Thy God reigneth*" . We know these words of Is. 52:7 apply to *our* preaching, according to Paul's use of them in Rom. 10; and yet they specifically refer to the latter day witness to Israel, according to Is. 40. Therefore it is us who should be making this witness in the last days. Not only Isaiah 40 but also Is. 57:14 teach that a level way must be made amongst the Jewish people, i.e. the stumbling blocks and 'valleys' must be removed from their path. "*Cast ye up*, prepare the way, take up the stumbling block out of the way of my people" is therefore a command to God's people to undo the generations of false shepherding which Israel have experienced: "They have caused them to stumble in their ways from the ancient paths, to

walk in paths, in a way not *cast up*" (Jer. 18:15 s.w. "cast...up" in Is. 57:14). Once we have prepared the way in this sense, then the highway is in place over which the Lord Jesus will return. This is how vital our work is for the Jewish people.

The whole latter part of Isaiah is full of descriptions of this preaching to Israel, appealing to them to repent, humble themselves, quit their materialism and idolatry, and accept the Lord Jesus as Messiah (e.g. 55:1-5). The preaching of Is. 52:7 is the "report" concerning Christ's cross of Is. 53:1; the message of "peace" of Is. 52:7 is the Gospel of peace with God through the sacrifice of Christ (Is. 53:5). And Isaiah 40 expands this message to include the mortality of man and the primacy of God's word. All these things are distinctive Bible doctrines; it is surely we who ought to be making this witness!

The 144,000 are redeemed from all the tribes of Jewry in the last days, and they wash their robes [through baptism] in the blood of Jesus as a result of "the great tribulation" (Rev. 7:14 RV) which they pass through. This great multitude are Jews yet out of every nation and language (Rev. 7:9)- for as Ron Abel shows in *Wrested Scriptures*, the great multitude and the 144,000 are to be read as identical. The witness to them will thus be world-wide. This "great tribulation" is one of many links discernible between Revelation and the Olivet prophecy. The Lord had prophesied that the "great tribulation" such as never was for Israel will occur in the very last days before the return (Mt. 24:21). It is only for the sake of "the elect" that the days of the great tribulation are shortened. This elect are surely the 144,000 of Rev. 7- Jewish brethren in Christ, converted during the very last days. It is this "elect" which is to be gathered from "the four winds" (Mt. 24:31) by the Angels. This suggests that they are not just Jews in the land who are converted, but those throughout the world-wide Diaspora. For the time of Jacob's trouble, worse than anything they have ever experienced (including the holocaust) must affect all Jewry world-wide. And this includes the USA and other apparently pro-Jewish or tolerant nations.

The shortening of the days for the sake of a remnant is predicted in Is. 65:8,9: "As the new wine is found in the cluster, and one saith, Destroy it not, for a blessing is in it: so will I do for my servants' sakes, that I may not destroy them all. And I will bring forth a seed [Jesus] out of Jacob...and mine elect shall inherit it, and my servants shall dwell there". The "elect" are paralleled with "my servants". Because of them, the minority of faithful fruit, the whole tree is not destroyed. This is exactly the image of the fig tree parable; because of the beginnings of spiritual fruit on the tree of Israel, the whole nation will not be cut off and they will be saved by the coming of the Kingdom. The Lord's description of the shortening of the days uses some rather odd past tenses: "Except the Lord had shortened the days, no flesh would have been saved: but for the elect's sake...he shortened the days" (Mk. 13:20 RV). One wonders if we have here an allusion back to the days of Noah, where again there was the possibility that no flesh would have been saved. The 150 days of flooding is perhaps the basis of Rev. 9:10, where Israel is to have 150 days of tribulation at the hands of her Arab enemies in the last days. The connection between the passages would therefore seem to be teaching that the final 150 days tribulation will be shortened due to the repentance of the remnant.

The LXX uses this same word for "tribulation" in several passages pregnant with latter day significance:

"The day of my [Jacob's] distress" at the hands of Esau (Gen. 35:3)

“The *anguish* of his [Joseph’s] soul” at the hands of his half brethren and the Ishmaelites (Gen. 42:21)

“I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and *troubles* shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?” (Dt. 31:17)- a passage in the Song of Moses regarding Israel’s latter day tribulations.

“Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of *trouble*, and of rebuke, and blasphemy” (2 Kings 19:3)”- Sennacherib’s Assyrian invasion at this time was a clear prototype for the latter day invasion described in Ezekiel 38 and elsewhere.

“The time of Jacob’s *trouble*” from which he will be delivered (Jer. 30:7)

“There shall be a time of *trouble*, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book” (Dan. 12:1). This time of trouble is specifically for Israel in the last days.

### ***A Remnant Will Repent***

Any ideas of witnessing to Israel must be seen against a significant backdrop of evidence that there will be a repentance of a remnant in Israel in the last days. Consider:

- Am. 9:9 says that Israel’s moving to and from amongst the nations is to be likened to corn being “sifted in a sieve”. It follows that the longer they move amongst the nations, the more the corn will be prepared for final ingathering. The longer they suffer, the nearer they are to repentance. Reflect too that “yet shall not the least grain fall to the earth”. Does this imply that there has always been a faithful remnant amongst Israel, throughout all their wanderings amongst the nations?

- Reflect carefully upon James’ justification of Peter’s preaching to the Gentiles: “To this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written (in Am. 9:11 LXX)...I will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men may seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called” (Acts 15:15-17). He is surely saying that because the house of David has been rebuilt, therefore it is now O.K. to help the Gentiles “seek after the Lord”. James perceived that firstly the Gospel must go to the house of David, the Jews, and once they had responded, then it would go to the Gentiles. Perhaps the Lord had the same principle in mind when He bad His preachers to not [then] preach to Gentiles but instead [at that stage] concentrate on preaching to the house of Israel (Mt. 10:5). Yet the primary fulfillment of Amos 9 is clearly in the last days- then, after Israel have been sifted in the sieve of persecution amongst the Gentiles in the latter day holocaust, the tabernacle of David will again be ‘rebuilt’, the Gentiles will turn to the Lord, and then “the plowman shall overtake the reaper...the mountains shall drop sweet wine...and I will bring again the captivity of my people Israel...and I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be plucked up out of their land” (Am. 9:13-15). Surely what we are being told is that there must be a repeat of what happened in the first century. What happened then, in the repentance of a minority in Israel, the spread of the Gospel to the world and then the Lord’s ‘coming’ in AD70...this must all be repeated on a far greater scale. Thus some in Israel must repent in the last days, after the pattern of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. This will bring about the great latter day gathering in of the

Gentiles at the establishment of the Kingdom, when the whole Gentile world will seek to come up to Zion (Is. 2:3; 19:23; 11:10; 51:4,5; 60:3,11; 66:20; Zech. 8:21).

- Acts 3:19,20 RV suggests that the repentance of Israel is a precondition for the sending of the Lord Jesus. We hasten the Lord's coming by witnessing to Israel.

- Ps. 24:9 clearly states that when the gatekeepers of Zion lift up their heads [to God in truth], then the King of glory will come in. And the Lord applies these words to His true people of the last days in Lk. 21:28- they are to likewise lift up their heads [so that] their redemption will draw nigh, or be hastened.

- The Lord will come to those who have turned from ungodliness in Jacob (Is. 59:20); although Paul's citation of this is deliberately altered to teach the truth that the *majority* of Israel will not turn before He comes. To them He will come and turn ungodliness away from them (Rom. 11:26).

- " Unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise" (Mal. 4:2)- He returns to those in Israel who already fear the Name.

- " Come, and let us return unto the Lord...after two days will he revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight (language of the Lord's resurrection)...his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the land (second coming language)" (Hos. 6:1-3). This seems to be a description of Israel seeking to repent in the last days, wishing to associate themselves with the resurrection of Christ, so that when He returns they might share in it.

- When Jerusalem sees Jesus again, they will be saying: "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Mt. 23:39). This would suggest they are waiting for Him. And these words being taken from the Passover hallel, it could be that the Lord returns to them at Passover time, when they traditionally expect Him. Indeed, Jerusalem will not see the Lord *until* they say "Blessed is he..."- as if the time of His return depends upon their 'seeing' / perceiving Him beforehand.

- When "all the tribes of the earth / land mourn [in repentance]...then shall they see the Son of man coming" (Mt. 24:30).

- Dan. 12:3 speaks of "they that be wise...they that turn many to righteousness". This group of people are defined in Dan. 12:10 as "the wise" amongst latter day Israel who are purified and refined in the latter day time of Jacob's trouble such as never was for Israel. The very same phrase occurs in Dan. 11:35, where we read that some of these wise and understanding ones will perish during "the time of the end...the time appointed" (RV)- of the three and a half year tribulation? One wonders if the Lord had these "wise" in mind in His parable of the "wise virgins" of the latter days. This would all suggest that some amongst Israel will repent and zealously preach in the last day tribulation, even if it costs them their lives. And Rev. 11 seems to be saying something similar.

- The shooting forth of the fig tree is given as the special sign that the Lord will return (Lk. 21:30). This must be understood in the context of the Lord coming to the fig tree in Mk. 11; He sought for at least the beginnings of fruit shooting forth, but found only leaves. And therefore He cursed the fig tree. He evidently saw the shooting forth of the fig tree as a figure

of Israel's acceptance of Him, however immaturely. Likewise the parable of Lk. 13:6-9 makes the same connection between fruit on the fig tree and repentance within Israel. " Learn a (the) parable of the fig tree" (Mt. 24:32) may suggest that we are to understand the fig tree parable in the light of these other fig tree parables. And there are several OT links between fruit on the fig and spiritual fruit in Israel (Mic. 7:1 cp. Mt. 7:15,16; Hos. 9:10; Hab. 3:17,18). When the branch of Israel "is now become tender", i.e. immediately this happens, we are to know that the eternal Summer of God's Kingdom is nigh (Mt. 24:32 RV). The tenderness of the branch is surely to be connected with the hard heart of Israel becoming tender through their acceptance of Jesus and the new covenant. When we see just the beginnings of Israel's repentance, through a remnant responding, we are to know that "he is near, even at the doors" (Mt. 24:33 RV). The idea of Christ at the door is repeated by the Lord Himself in Rev. 3:19,20- where it means that Jesus is asking others to repent and turn to Him. Opening the door means the Lord has granted forgiveness- His being at the door implies surely that He is asking for repentance. All this evidence steers us away from the idea that the fig tree became tender through the re-establishment of the nation of Israel- and towards an understanding that this is all about Israel's repentance <sup>(1)</sup>.

- Romans 11 speaks all about the conversion of Israel. My summary of the teaching there would be something like this: Initially, God's intention was that "the Jew first" would be saved, then the Gentiles. But this didn't happen. Paul's mission to the Gentiles ended up more successful than the mission to the Jews run by the Jerusalem brethren- perhaps because of their weakness, but this was how it happened. Thus God has revealed through Romans 11 a kind of re-think in the plan; now, the success of the mission to the Gentiles would provoke the Jews to conversion. It could be that the wave of Gentile conversions in the very last days dry up, and lead to Israel's conversion, which heralds the time when all peoples will be saved, or at least "all Israel" both over time and space, spiritual and natural, will be ultimately saved through the return of Jesus. Thus the conversion of the Jews, or at least a remnant, heralds the Lord's return.

- The Lord says that when the abomination of desolation appears, then His people should flee Jerusalem; and "let him that readeth understand" (Mt. 24:15-17). Whatever application this had to the events of the three and a half years tribulation of AD67-70 was at best a sketchy and incomplete fulfilment. The tell tale phrase is "let him that readeth understand". This is inviting us to be like Daniel in Dan. 9:22-25, who also wanted to understand the meaning of the "abomination" prophecy. But he was told that the meaning of that vision about the abomination that desolates would only be revealed in the very last days, i.e. at the time of its fulfilment (Dan. 8:17,26; 12:9). The implication of all this is that there will be believing Jews living in the Jerusalem area at the time of the setting up of the abomination; and they will have special understanding of this prophecy which will lead them to flee. The importance of this for our present study is that this indicates that there will be believers in Israel just before the Lord returns. They will have "understanding" and will be motivated by this to respond. "*Let him...understand*" is paralleled with "*let him* that is on the housetop [flee immediately]...*let him* that is in the field not return". Understanding leads to action- both then and now.

### ***Elijah Movement?***

Would it be going too far to suggest that our initial preaching to Jews could be the Elijah ministry to Israel? For John "was Elijah" without being Elijah personally. What about, therefore, some specific campaigns aimed at the Jewish communities in England, Argentina,

Russia, South Africa and especially the USA? In any case, whatever our view of ‘Elijah’, surely none can deny that the pattern of the first century brethren was always “to the Jew first” (i.e., most importantly). Even when they rejected the message and Paul turned to the Gentiles, he still preached “to the Jew first” despite being the apostle to the Gentiles. So, who could really pour cold water on a specific outreach to the Jews? We can all ‘go for it’ with the Jewish folk in our own nation or community.

Rev. 8:3-5 as well as Rev. 11:6 certainly allude to Elijah as a pattern for our latter day witnessing. Much incense of latter day prayer is added to the existing incense, resulting in fire being brought down on earth after the pattern of Elijah (Rev. 8:3-5 RV). The especially intense prayers of the latter day remnant are added to the cumulative prayers of former generations, and result in the second coming and the beginning of the final judgments. We have commented in *The Last days* upon the Biblical insistence upon intense prayer in the last days, and that this is a precondition for the second coming.

In the ex-USSR, roughly 1 in 100 people are Jewish. Amongst those we have baptized there in the last 10 years, roughly 1 in 10 were Jewish.

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### **Notes**

(1) For more on this see *The Last Days* chapter 14.

### **5-3 The Preaching Commission Of Isaiah 40**

The message of Is. 40:3 is that before the final coming of the Lord, there will be a proclamation of this by His people: “Prepare ye [plural] the way of the Lord”. As the King’s servants went ahead of him to make the path he had to travel smooth and plain [remember there were no motorways then!], so we go ahead of the returning Lord of all the earth, to prepare the way / road for Him. The fulfilment of this commission by John the Baptist in the first century is therefore a great pattern for our fulfilment of it before the Lord’s *second* coming in our age. And yet within Isaiah, there is ample evidence that *God* prepares His *own* way: “I will do a new thing...I will even make a way in the wilderness” (Is. 43:19). Perhaps the element of unreality here, the ‘new thing’, is that the King Himself prepares His own way or road. Or again: “I will make all my mountains a way” (Is. 49:11). The connection with Is. 40:3 is that in the work of preparing the Lord’s way, in the last great preaching appeal of all time in the lead up to the second coming, the Lord Himself will work with us to make that way plain and clear. In all the challenges of the latter day fulfilment of the great commission, the Lord Himself will work with us.

The Isaiah 40 passage is therefore a command for our latter day witness to all the world, Israel especially, to prepare their way for the Lord’s coming. We are to “cry” unto Zion that “her iniquity is pardoned”, but we are also to ‘cry’ for her to repent, to be “made straight”, for the rough places to be ‘made plain’; to “cry aloud...lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression (Is. 40:2-4; 58:1). It’s exactly because we have in prospect been forgiven that we are called to repent. The forgiveness has already been granted; iniquity has been pardoned. We are to ‘cry’ out this fact; and also to ‘cry out’ for repentance. But we have to respond to that. It’s similar to how Saul/Paul was called ‘brother’ even before his conversion and baptism. The world’s redemption was achieved through the cross; but we

have to appeal to the world to accept it. And in our own lives we must live out what we are preaching to others; exactly because we have already been forgiven, we need to repent of what we've been forgiven of, to as it were claim that forgiveness as our very own. And the same Hebrew word translated ‘cry’ occurs in the same context in Is. 40:26; 43:1; 45:3,4; 48:12; 54:6, where we read that it is God Himself who calls every one of Israel back to Him, just as He calls every star by its own personal name. And so in our personal calling of men and women, in our crying out to them in these last days to be prepared for the Lord’s coming, we are workers together with God. He is crying out to them, through our feeble, shy, embarrassed, uncertain words of witness. Likewise it is God Himself who makes the crooked places straight in Is. 42:16 and 45:2- whereas Is. 40:3, it is we the preachers who are to do this.

What then of the message? It is that the valleys are to be lifted up, and the mountains made low, thus creating a plain. I read this as meaning that those with too low a view of themselves are to be lifted up, and the heights of human pride brought down. The over confident and under confident alike are to levelled so that they can be a path for the Lord’s glory. “Made low” in Is. 40:4 is surely in the spirit of Is. 2:11, which predicts that in the day of judgment, “the lofty looks of man shall be *humbled* [s.w. ‘made low’], and the haughtiness of man shall be bowed down”. The experience of condemnation in the coming day of the Lord will mean that “the proud and lofty” will be “brought low” (Is. 2:12,17; 5:15). In fact, Isaiah is full of references to the proud being ‘made low’ by judgment- the same Hebrew word is common: Is. 10:33; 13:11; 25:11; 26:5. Perhaps Paul had this in mind when he said that our preaching is a bringing down of every high thing that is exalted against God (2 Cor. 10:5). Our message is basically that we must be humbled one way or the other- either by our repentance and acceptance of the Gospel today, or through the experience of condemnation at the day of judgment. We’re calling people to humility. And we must ask whether the content and style of our preaching really does that. But when John the Baptist quoted and preached this passage, he interpreted it beyond a call to humility. He said that in order to prepare the way of the Lord, to make a level passage for Him, the man with two coats should give to him who had none, and likewise share his food (Lk. 3:11). So the ‘equality’ and levelling was to be one of practical care for others. We have to ask, how often we have shared our food, clothing or money with those who don’t have... for this is all part of preparing for the Lord’s coming. It could even be that when there is more of what Paul calls “an equality” amongst the community of believers, that then the way of the Lord will have been prepared. And He will then return.

The primary reference of the Isaiah 40 passage is to the Jews. But even more specifically, it is to be cried out “to Jerusalem”. I submit that the most specific fulfilment of the prophecy will be in our latter day preaching resulting in a remnant of Jews repenting in Jerusalem, so that the Lord’s return will be to a faithful Jewish remnant in literal Jerusalem. The ‘making straight’ is to be done in “the desert” (:3)- a description elsewhere of Jerusalem (Is. 51:3). “Every [Heb. ‘the whole, complete’] mountain and hill” (:4) which is to respond to the Gospel may refer to people on the temple mount, upon which the Lord shall “come down, to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof” (Is. 31:4; 10:32). The Hebrew words used here for ‘mount’ and ‘hill’ are identical in the passages. The Lord will return to Zion to find a repentant remnant there, converted by our preaching. Mal. 3:1, a clearly related passage, says that when the way has been prepared, then “the Lord... shall suddenly [Heb. ‘immediately’] come to his temple”. It seems that He comes as soon as, almost to the moment, that the way is prepared. Is it going too far to imagine that when the last Jews are baptized in Jerusalem,

perhaps literally on the Temple Mount, then the Lord will immediately return there, “to his temple”? Then the Lord shall “come down to fight for mount Zion and for the hill thereof”.

### **5-3-1 John The Baptist’s Style Of Preaching**

If ever a man was hard on himself, it was John the Baptist. His comment on his preaching of Christ was that he was not worthy (RVmg. ‘sufficient’) to bear Christ’s sandals (Mt. 3:11). The sandal-bearer was the herald; John knew he was heralding Christ’s appearing, but he openly said he was not worthy to do this. He felt his insufficiency, as we ought to ours. Would we had that depth of awareness; for on the brink of the Lord’s coming, we are in a remarkably similar position to John. Paul perhaps directs us back to John when he says that we are not “sufficient” to be the savour of God to this world; and yet we are made sufficient to preach by God (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5,6 RV).

Although John preached the excellence of Christ, he didn’t even consider himself to be part of the mystic bride of Christ; for he likens himself to only the groom, watching the happiness of the couple, but not having a part in it himself (Jn. 3:29). And note how John appeals for men to be baptized with the twice repeated personal comment: “...and I knew him not”, in the very context of our reading that the [Jewish] world “knew him not” (Jn. 1:10, 31,33). He realises that he had withheld the knowledge of the Son of God, just as others had. When asked who he was, John’s reply was simply: “a voice”. Amos, in the same way, was told not to keep on prophesying; but he replies: “I am no prophet... the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy” (Am. 1:14,15 RV). It’s almost contradictory: ‘I’m not a prophet... I am a prophet’. He was truly selfless, like, John, just a voice for God. In the same way as John was merely a “voice”, so we find in the New Testament a marked de-emphasis upon the human agency through which God has called us to Himself in baptism. It’s never stated who baptized the disciples. Despite several times recounting and alluding to his conversion experience, Paul never mentions the name of the man who baptized him, Ananias. Samuel spoke of himself at a distance from himself when he told Israel: “The Lord sent Jerubbaal...and Samuel...and delivered you” (1 Sam. 12:11). Luke’s record of the preaching of the Gospel makes no reference to the deaths of Peter and Paul, even though they were central to his historical account. Clearly he reflected the fact that personalities are not to be important in preaching; there is a selflessness about true preaching and also the recording of it. Matthew’s preaching of the Gospel makes reference to himself as if he had no personal awareness of himself as he recounted his part in the Gospel events (Mt. 9:9). There is reason to believe that Matthew was himself a converted Scribe; the way he has access to various versions of Scripture and quotes them as having been fulfilled in a way reminiscent of the Jewish commentaries (compare Mt. 4:12-17 with Mk. 1:14,15) suggests this(3). The point is that in this case Matthew would be referring to himself when he writes: “Every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old” (Mt. 13:52). Yet he does so in a beautifully oblique and selfless manner.

John’s humility is further brought out by the way John fields the question as to whether he is “the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?” (Jn. 1:25). He could have answered: ‘I am the Elijah prophet’- for the Lord Himself said of John that “this is Elijah”, with perhaps conscious reference back to this question (Mt. 11:14). But John didn’t answer that way. His reply was simply to speak of the greatness of Christ and his unworthiness to be His herald (Jn. 1:26,27). John’s humility is brought out yet further by reflection on the fact that he clearly baptized huge numbers of people, and yet also had a group of people known as ‘the disciples of John’. Clearly he didn’t intend to found a sect, and was so taken up with trying to prepare people for

the Lord's coming that he simply wished to lead them to some level of repentance and baptize them, without necessarily making them part of 'his disciples'. John's low self-estimation is seen in how he denied that he was "Elijah" or the "prophet" whom the Jews expected to come prior to Messiah (Jn. 1:21). The Lord Himself clearly understood John as the Elijah prophet- "this is Elijah" (Mt. 11:14), He said of John. John wasn't being untruthful, nor did he misunderstand who he was. For he associates his "voice" with the voice of the Elijah prophet crying in the wilderness, and appropriates language from the Elijah prophecy of Mal. 4 to his own preaching. His denial that he was 'that prophet' therefore reflects rather a humility in him, a desire for his message to be heard for what it was, rather than any credibility to be given to it because of his office. There's a powerful challenge for today's preacher of the Gospel.

### **The Old Testament Background**

The message of Is. 40:3 is that before the final coming of the Lord, there will be a proclamation of this by His people: "Prepare ye [plural] the way of the Lord". As the King's servants went ahead of him to make the path he had to travel smooth and plain [remember there were no motorways then!], so we go ahead of the returning Lord of all the earth, to prepare the way / road for Him. And yet within Isaiah, there is ample evidence that God prepares His own way: "I will do a new thing...I will even make a way in the wilderness" (Is. 43:19). Perhaps the element of unreality here, the 'new thing', is that the King Himself prepares His own way or road. Or again: "I will make all my mountains a way" (Is. 49:11). The connection with Is. 40:3 is that in the work of preparing the Lord's way, in the last great preaching appeal of all time in the lead up to the second coming, the Lord Himself will work with us to make that way plain and clear. In all the challenges of the latter day fulfilment of the great commission, the Lord Himself will work with us.

The Isaiah 40 passage is therefore a command for our latter day witness to all the world, Israel especially, to prepare their way for the Lord's coming. We are to "cry" unto Zion that "her iniquity is pardoned", but we are also to 'cry' for her to repent, to be "made straight", for the rough places to be 'made plain'; to "cry aloud...lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression (Is. 40:2-4; 58:1). It's exactly because we have in prospect been forgiven that we are called to repent. The forgiveness has already been granted; iniquity has been pardoned. We are to 'cry' out this fact; and also to 'cry out' for repentance. But we have to respond to that. It's similar to how Saul/Paul was called 'brother' even before his conversion and baptism. The world's redemption was achieved through the cross; but we have to appeal to the world to accept it. And in our own lives we must live out what we are preaching to others; exactly because we have already been forgiven, we need to repent of what we've been forgiven of, to as it were claim that forgiveness as our very own. And the same Hebrew word translated 'cry' occurs in the same context in Is. 40:26; 43:1; 45:3,4; 48:12; 54:6, where we read that it is God Himself who calls every one of Israel back to Him, just as He calls every star by its own personal name. And so in our personal calling of men and women, in our crying out to them in these last days to be prepared for the Lord's coming, we are workers together with God. He is crying out to them, through our feeble, shy, embarrassed, uncertain words of witness. Likewise it is God Himself who makes the crooked places straight in Is. 42:16 and 45:2- whereas Is. 40:3, it is we the preachers who are to do this.

### **John's Message**

What then of the message? It is that the valleys are to be lifted up, and the mountains made low, thus creating a plain. I read this as meaning that those with too low a view of themselves are to be lifted up, and the heights of human pride brought down. The over confident and under confident alike are to be levelled so that they can be a path for the Lord's glory. "Made low" in Is. 40:4 is surely in the spirit of Is. 2:11, which predicts that in the day of judgment, "the lofty looks of man shall be humbled [s.w. 'made low'], and the haughtiness of man shall be bowed down". The experience of condemnation in the coming day of the Lord will mean that "the proud and lofty" will be "brought low" (Is. 2:12,17; 5:15). In fact, Isaiah is full of references to the proud being 'made low' by judgment- the same Hebrew word is common: Is. 10:33; 13:11; 25:11; 26:5. Perhaps Paul had this in mind when he said that our preaching is a bringing down of every high thing that is exalted against God (2 Cor. 10:5). Our message is basically that we must be humbled one way or the other- either by our repentance and acceptance of the Gospel today, or through the experience of condemnation at the day of judgment. We're calling people to humility. And we must ask whether the content and style of our preaching really does that. But when John the Baptist quoted and preached this passage, he interpreted it beyond a call to humility. He said that in order to prepare the way of the Lord, to make a level passage for Him, the man with two coats should give to him who had none, and likewise share his food (Lk. 3:11). So the 'equality' and levelling was to be one of practical care for others. We have to ask, how often we have shared our food, clothing or money with those who don't have... for this is all part of preparing for the Lord's coming. It could even be that when there is more of what Paul calls "an equality" amongst the community of believers, that then the way of the Lord will have been prepared. And He will then return.

The primary reference of the Isaiah 40 passage is to the Jews. But even more specifically, it is to be cried out "to Jerusalem". I submit that the most specific fulfilment of the prophecy will be in our latter day preaching resulting in a remnant of Jews repenting in Jerusalem, so that the Lord's return will be to a faithful Jewish remnant in literal Jerusalem. The 'making straight' is to be done in "the desert" (:3)- a description elsewhere of Jerusalem (Is. 51:3). "Every [Heb. 'the whole, complete'] mountain and hill" (:4) which is to respond to the Gospel may refer to people on the temple mount, upon which the Lord shall "come down, to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof" (Is. 31:4; 10:32). The Hebrew words used here for 'mount' and 'hill' are identical in the passages. The Lord will return to Zion to find a repentant remnant there, converted by our preaching. Mal. 3:1, a clearly related passage, says that when the way has been prepared, then "the Lord... shall suddenly [Heb. 'immediately'] come to his temple". It seems that He comes as soon as, almost to the moment, that the way is prepared. Is it going too far to imagine that when the last Jews are baptized in Jerusalem, perhaps literally on the Temple Mount, then the Lord will immediately return there, "to his temple"? Then the Lord shall "come down to fight for mount Zion and for the hill thereof".

### **John's Style Of Preaching**

There was an intensity and critical urgency about John and his message. John urged people to make their path "straight"- using a Greek word elsewhere translated "immediately", "forthwith" (Lk. 3:4 s.w. Mk. 1:12,28 and often). Getting things straight in our lives is a question of immediate response. He warns people to "flee from the wrath to come" (Lk. 3:7). This was what their changed lives and baptisms were to be about- a fleeing from the wrath to come. He speaks as if that "wrath to come" is just about to come, it's staring them in the face like a wall of forest fire, and they are to flee away from it. And yet Paul (in one of his many allusions to John's message, which perhaps he had heard himself 'live') speaks of "the wrath

to come” as being the wrath of the final judgment (1 Thess. 1:10), or possibly that of AD70 (1 Thess. 2:16). But both those events would not have come upon the majority of John’s audience. And the day of ‘wrath to come’ is clearly ultimately to be at the Lord’s return (Rev. 6:17; 11:18). Yet John zooms his hearers forward in time, to perceive that they face condemnation and judgment day right now, as they hear the call of the Gospel. This was a feature of John; he had the faith which sees things which are not as though they already are. Thus he looked at Jesus walking towards him and commented that here was the “Lamb of God”, a phrase the Jews would’ve understood as referring to the lamb which was about to be sacrificed on Passover (Jn. 1:29). John presumably was referencing the description of the crucified Jesus in Is. 53:7; for John, he foresaw it all, it was as if he saw Jesus as already being led out to die, even though that event was over three years distant. And so he could appeal to his audience to face judgment day as if they were standing there already. We need to have the same perspective.

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The ideas of fleeing wrath and preparing a way are surely based upon the Law’s command in Dt. 19:3 that a way or road should be prepared to the city of refuge (symbolic of Christ- Heb. 6:18), along which the person under the death sentence for manslaughter could flee for refuge. John was preparing that way or road to Christ, and urging ordinary people to flee along it. They didn’t like to think they were under a death sentence for murder. They were just ordinary folk like the soldiers who grumbled about their wages, and the publicans who were a bit less than honest at work. But they had to flee. But they wouldn’t be alone in that. If a man prepares his way after God’s principles (2 Chron. 27:6; Prov. 4:26), then God will ‘prepare’ that man’s way too (Ps. 37:23; 119:5), confirming him in the way of escape.

Likewise John says that the axe is laid to the root of the trees; his hearers were about to be cut down and thrown into the fire of condemnation. And He says that the Jesus whom he heralds is about to come and divide the wheat from the chaff in judgment, gathering in the wheat, and burning the chaff with “unquenchable fire” (Lk. 3:17). But the ‘fire’ of condemnation and the

division of wheat and chaff is to be done ultimately at the Lord's second coming (Mt. 13:30; Mk. 9:48). But for John, the moment his audience met Jesus, they were standing before the Lord of judgment, the Judge of all the earth. In their response to Him, they were living out the final judgment. And this is just as true of us, both as preachers and hearers of the Gospel.

This intense, urgent presentation of the ultimate issues of life and death, acceptance and rejection, brought forth a massive response. People lined up for baptism. And John was hardly polite. He called his baptismal candidates a "generation of vipers", alluding obviously to the seed of the serpent in Gen. 3:15. Yet his tough line with them, his convicting them of sin, led them to ask what precisely they must do, in order to be baptized. They didn't turn away in offence. They somehow sensed he was for real, and the message he preached couldn't be ignored or shrugged off as the ravings of a fanatic. Time and again we see the same- the very height of the demand of Christ of itself convicts men and women of Him. And it's for this reason that it seems almost 'easier' to convict people of Christ and the need for baptism into Him in societies [e.g. radical Moslem ones] where the price for conversion to Him is death or serious persecution... than in the easy going Western countries where being 'Christian' is the normal cultural thing to do.

The nature of how demanding John was is reflected in his response to the soldiers and publicans. He didn't tell them to quit their jobs, but to live with integrity within those jobs. He told the soldiers to be content with their wages- implying he expected them to not throw in their job. This is juxtaposed with the command for them to do no violence. But not grumbling about wages was as fundamental an issue for John as not doing physical violence to people. To have as Paul put it "Godliness with contentment" [another of his allusions to John's preaching?] is as important as not doing violence. And yet our tendency is to think that moaning about our wages is a perfectly normal and acceptable thing to do, whereas violence is of an altogether different order. It's like Paul hitting the Corinthians for their divisiveness, when if we'd been writing to them we would likely have focused upon their immorality and false doctrine. John would have been far less demanding had he simply told the publicans and soldiers to quit their jobs. By asking them to continue, and yet to live out their lives within those jobs with Godly principles, He was being far more demanding.

### **John's Humility**

But there's another reason why John personally was so compelling as a preacher. His comment on his preaching of Christ was that he was not worthy (RVmg. 'sufficient') to bear Christ's sandals (Mt. 3:11). The sandal-bearer was the herald; John knew he was heralding Christ's appearing, but he openly said he was not worthy to do this. He felt his insufficiency, as we ought to ours. Would we had that depth of awareness; for on the brink of the Lord's coming, we are in a remarkably similar position to John. To carry the master's sandals (Mt. 3:11) was, according to Vine, the work of the lowest slave. This was how John saw himself; and this is what witnessing for Jesus is all about, being the lowest slave and servant of the Lord of glory. It's interesting in this context to note how the Lord Jesus states that in some sense, John 'was Elijah', whereas he himself denies this (Mt. 11:14; 17:12; Mk. 9:13). Such was his humility. Or consider how John's comment that he came "after" Jesus, and that Jesus was the redeemer rather than he himself (Jn. 1:15) contain a strange allusion to the words of the redeemer-who-was-incapable-of-redeeming in Ruth 4:4- Boaz told him that "I am after thee", but in the end the incapable-redeemer plucked off his shoe as a sign of unworthiness to redeem (Ruth 4:7). And John surely also had this in mind when he commented that he was unworthy to unloose Messiah's shoe (Jn. 1:27). The allusions are surely indicative of the way

John felt like the unworthy / incapable redeemer, eclipsed before Boaz / Jesus. The extent of his humility in referring to unlosing the Lord's shoe is underlined once we're aware of the Rabbinic saying: "Every work which a slave performs for his lord, a disciple must do for his teacher, except lossing his shoe" (1). And yet John felt unworthy to do even that.

How terribly wrong it is, then, for missionary service to be gloried in and somehow a reason for those who do it to become puffed up in self-importance. Perhaps John's Gospel purposefully inserts the comment that John the Baptist said this whilst he was baptizing so many people (Jn. 1:28)- as if to draw a link between his humility, and the success in preaching which he had. Paul perhaps directs us back to John when he says that we are not "sufficient" to be the savour of God to this world; and yet we are made sufficient to preach by God (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5,6 RV). Although John preached the excellence of Christ, he didn't even consider himself to be part of the mystic bride of Christ; for he likens himself to only the groom, watching the happiness of the couple, but not having a part in it himself (Jn. 3:29). And note how John appeals for men to be baptized with the twice repeated personal comment: "...and I knew him not", in the very context of our reading that the [Jewish] world "knew him not" (Jn. 1:10, 31,33). He realises that he too had withstood the knowledge of the Son of God, just as others had. When asked who he was, John's reply was simply: "a voice". He was nothing; his message about Jesus was everything. In all this there is a far cry from the self-confident, self-projecting speaking off the podium which characterizes so much of our 'preaching' today. So John's appeal to repentance was shot through with a recognition of his own humanity. It wasn't mere moralizing. We likely don't preach as John did because we fear that confronting people with their sins is inappropriate for us to do, because we too are sinners. But with recognition of our own humanity, we build a bridge between our audience and ourselves.

There was another reason behind John's appeal for repentance. It was that he perceived how eager God is to forgive, and how our acceptance of that forgiveness is His glory and His salvation. John says, quoting Is. 40:5, that if men repent and ready themselves for the Lord's coming, then "all flesh shall see the salvation of God". But he is changing the quotation- Isaiah said that all flesh shall see the glory of God. But saving men and women is the thing God glories in. John's father had prophesied that John would "give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, because of the heart of mercy of our God" (Lk. 1:77,78 RVmg.). The fact that God has a "heart of mercy"- a lovely phrase- is His glory. It leads Him to glory in overlooking sin. And on this basis John appealed to people to repent and claim that forgiveness, thus allowing God to glory. In the light of all this, one wonders in what tone of voice John spoke. The cold printed words in our Bibles can lead us to imagine him speaking in a gruff, austere manner. But perhaps even his comment "Generation of vipers" was said with a heart of love and appeal, reflecting the "heart of mercy" which he had come to know in the Father. He was "the friend of the bridegroom" (Jn. 3:29)- the one who introduced the groom to the bride and arranged the marriage and then the wedding. John's "Generation of vipers" stuff was all part of his attempt to persuade the bride, Israel, to accept the groom, the Lord Jesus. He wasn't angrily moralizing, lashing out at society as many a dysfunctional preacher does today, working out his own anger by criticizing and condemning society in the name of God. No, John was appealing. He had an agenda and an aim- to bring Israel and the Son of God together in marriage. John's Gospel features the Lord Jesus confidently stating "I am...". The context is set for this by the way John's Gospel begins by describing how John the Baptist said "I am not..." ("I am not the Messiah", Jn. 1:20; 3:28; "I am not [Elijah]", Jn. 1:21; "I am not worthy", Jn. 1:27. By confessing his own weakness, who

he was not, John the Baptist was paving the way for the recognition and acceptance of Jesus. And our self-abnegation will do likewise.

John knew surely that he was the Elijah prophet- for he consciously was preparing the way of Messiah and calling Israel to repentance. He was preaching in the very wilderness area from where Elijah had been taken up at the conclusion of his ministry; and he surely consciously chose to dress with the hairy garment and leather belt which had been Elijah's badge of office (1 Kings 1:8; 2:13,14). It's also been pointed out that the Essene and other Jewish groups at the time taught self-baptism, whereas John was consciously baptizing people himself, as if he saw himself as specifically preparing them for something. The Lord Himself of course understood John to have been the Elijah prophet. And yet- John denies he is Elijah, but focuses instead on how he is but a "voice". I therefore conclude that his humility was such that he was totally downplaying his office- as if to say 'I am so much a mere voice, that effectively I'm not the Elijah prophet- the message I preach is so far more important than the office I bear'. Those who bear 'offices' in the church of Jesus would do well to have his spirit. Perhaps this is why he seems to have made very few personal disciples- although thousands were baptized by him, having been so impressed by his message. The Epistles of Clement number his disciples at about 30; and Jn. 4:1 comments that the Lord Jesus made more disciples than John did. I take this as a fine reflection upon his selfless witness, focusing so much on his message rather than developing any personal following. He was 'the friend of the bridegroom', the one who arranged the marriage of the bridegroom and sought out the bride. And that, really, is what we are about too, with all the sense of dedication and earnestness which a such a person has when aiming to find a partner for one they know to be a truly good man.

When asked who he was, John's reply was simply: "a voice". He was nothing; his message about Jesus was everything. In all this there is a far cry from the self-confident, self-projecting speaking off the podium which characterizes so much of our 'preaching' today. So John's appeal to repentance was shot through with a recognition of his own humanity. It wasn't mere moralizing. We likely don't preach as John did because we fear that confronting people with their sins is inappropriate for us to do, because we too are sinners. But with recognition of our own humanity, we build a bridge between our audience and ourselves. In this context it's worth reconsidering Lk. 3:7: "Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?". John said these words to those who were coming to him wishing to be baptized by him- exactly because he had warned them of the wrath to come. It's possible that John meant this as a rhetorical reflection, thus enabling us to paraphrase him something like this: 'And what kind of man am I, who am I, just another sinful guy like you, who has warned you to flee? I'm nothing- don't get baptized because of me, but because you repent and are committed to bringing forth the fruits of repentance".

And it's worth meditating that if Israel had responded to his preaching, then the glorious salvation of God might have even then been revealed in the form of the Kingdom coming on earth, even then. But instead of heeding John's message, Israel in the end crucified their King, necessitating a latter day John the Baptist mission (Mt. 11:13,14; 17:11,12). And it's not going too far to suggest that our latter day witness to Israel and indeed to the world is to be conducted in the spirit of John's preaching; hence the crucial importance of understanding the spirit and content of his witness. John clearly had a strong sense of mission. Notice how many times he uses the "emphatic I": "I am not the Christ... I am not [Elijah]... I am the voice... I baptize with water... I am not worthy... he of whom I said... I knew him not... therefore am I come baptizing... I knew him not... I saw... I am not the Christ... I am sent

before... I said..." (Jn. 1:20,23,26,27,30,31,33,34; 3:28). This stands out in the Greek text. The same sense of realizing who we are, what our aims and mission are, should characterize our witness. He testified what he 'saw and heard' (Jn. 3:32), and we are called to do likewise (1 Jn. 1:1,3). For John's witness prior to the Lord's first coming is to be repeated by us prior to His second coming. Four times in the New Testament we read of John 'preparing the way' for the Lord's return; the only other time we meet that phrase is in Rev. 16:12, where in the very last days, the way of the Kings [or, the one great King- the Lord Jesus] is likewise to be prepared.

### **Our Example**

Eph. 6:15 speaks of our each being 'sandalled' with the preparation of the Gospel. Who prepared the way of the Lord by preaching, wearing sandals? John the Baptist. It seems Paul is alluding to John here, setting him up as the preacher's example. The reference to "loins girt" (Eph. 6:14) would also be a John allusion- the record twice (in Mt. 3:4; Mk. 1:6) stresses how John had his 'loins girded'. The Lord spoke of how if we confess Him before men, He will confess knowledge of us before the Father; and if we deny Him, He will deny us (Mt. 10:32). This language is applied by John to John the Baptist- for he comments that John the Baptist "confessed and denied not, but confessed, I am not the Christ" (Jn. 1:20). In this sense, John Baptist is being set up as our example in preaching- and again, John comments that we too are to confess the Son and not deny Him (1 Jn. 2:23), after the pattern of John the Baptist. And yet note what John's 'confession' was- it was a profession of his unworthiness, that although he was the herald of the Christ, he was not Jesus. Again, we see here a pattern for our witness to the Lord.

### **Notes**

(1) Ketubot 96a, quoted in Charles Scobie, *John The Baptist* (London: SCM, 1964) p. 67.

### **Appendix 6: Tears In Heaven: A Missionary Obituary**

For Sister Michelle Jamieson, who gave her life in mission work,

21st May 2000

Some readers will have known something of Sis. Michelle Jamieson (Newcastle, Australia). She had dedicated her life to the spreading of the Gospel, through campaigning in Eastern Europe, Israel and finally Fiji- in addition to extensive involvement in correspondence work in many areas. She fell asleep in Christ following a tragic road accident during a campaign in Fiji. She will always have a special place in my heart and that of many who knew her, as a truly spiritual sister, with an unpretended zeal for her Lord and His service, and an exceptionally high level of spiritual development for her 23 years.

For those of us who remain to continue her work and strive to emulate her example, the 'why?' question remains. Why did a loving Father take *her* life, of all our community...with so much in front of her? This 'why?' question will afflict all of us in the tragedies of life. Why is God apparently so cruel, to set up a young sister like that, so naïve, so pure, in His service... and then take her life in such a way? Why, her, and not some others sitting next to her in the fateful vehicle? I am aware that for some, these questions and other ones related to other tragedies, loom large.

I was with Michelle shortly before the tragedy; having spent the weekend with her parents, she drove me to Sydney airport, where I flew to New Caledonia and she flew to Fiji. She was full of her plans to visit upcoming Bible Schools in Israel, Latvia and Russia. I was very nearly with her in Fiji, but cut short those plans because of needs to be back in Europe. My own grief for her revealed what came to the fore in many hearts: Would God I had died for her. For in all sober intellectual honesty, in all practical reality, I fain would have done if I could have. And surely so would all who knew her. For a righteous person, some would even dare to die. Not as David for a worthless Absalom, but as the lesser believer for the altogether more spiritual. One can only resolve to live life, especially in the sphere of preaching, as she would have wished us to live. Our response to the death of the Lord, the just for the unjust, must be the same. His death, if meditated upon, elicits in us a desire to die for Him, not that this is possible literally, but therefore in the life of hourly doing of His will, living and being and seeking to achieve what we know His will was and is.

This is all we can do in tribute to Him, and to Michelle. In seeking to know *why* she died as she did, I admit to coming up against a dead end, a brick wall, or more like, a steel one, incapable of the slightest penetration. If we are to suppose that it was for reason x or y, then immediately the question arises: ‘Well in that case, that result could have been produced in another way that didn’t require such a tragedy’. In our seeking to plumb the exact reasons for the death of our Lord- our brother- we do have some degree of understanding. But in the end, why *that* death, why *that* method for our redemption, rather than any other, surely remains mysterious. We have rightly observed that the shedding of the Lord’s blood as red liquid did not in itself ‘appease’ God. This is a wrong view. To say it was to fulfil the types of the Law only, to me, throws the question one stage further back- for those types were not deterministic of the Lord’s sufferings. They were there because of God’s foreknowledge of how it would be. All we can say is that the Lord died as He did in order that we might respond. There could have been another way to elicit the same response from us, but for some reason the terror of the cross was chosen. And so with the response to the passing of our dear Michelle. The response which it elicits from us could have been provoked another way. But the Lord chose *this* way. We ask, before the cross of our Lord, ‘Was it for me...’, for the sake of *my* response, that this was as it was...? And yes, it was. And before the loss of our dear Michelle, we may in the end come to the same conclusion. If ever I am sure any of us will be in the Kingdom, it is that Michelle will surely be there. We, or I at least, cannot be passive to her death. It is an imperative to us to respond.

But let us not think, ever, ever, that God is cruel or hard or unfeeling. He arranged her death, just as He arranged that of His Son. The shocked, grieving community of disciples frequently stressed that it was by the determinate will and foreknowledge of God that His Son died. And yet He grieved for the loss of His Son. It hurt Him. Amos 8 describes how there would be darkness at noon, as at a funeral for an only child. This was all in prophecy of the cross. There, God Almighty mourned for His Son. As the spear pierced the side of Jesus, and blood and water flowed, Yahweh’s own words in Zech. 12:10 came true: “Me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for *Him* [Jesus]”. Yahweh Himself was as it were pierced there. Just as Mary’s sensitive soul was pierced when she saw the same event (Lk. 2:35). The Father, like the mother, felt intensely the death of His Son. They were both united with similar feelings. He was as the owner of the vineyard who sent His only Son to receive the fruits, and found the tenants killed Him. We are left to imagine the deep sense of shock and disappointment and grief. Yet He brings all these things about... and yet feels so hurt and cut up about them. Whilst we can never to the end “find out God”, this assures us of one thing: God feels for us in what seem cruel tragedies, and He doesn’t do it to be cruel to us. Because

He feels just as much as we do. There were tears in Heaven as the spear pierced the side of the Lord's naked body, just as there were tears on Mary's face. And there were, as it were, tears in Heaven as the breath of life was withdrawn from our dear Michelle.

That the Father, Son and their Angels *feel* for us is so hard to grasp, because we are aware of God's omnipotence and foreknowledge. But consider again the parable of the life of Hosea, reflecting as it does the feelings of God. Hosea, as God, reared rebellious children, and loved an adulterous wife (all representing Israel). Hosea experiences the heartache and betrayal of God as he vainly hoped for reconciliation, somehow, some place, some day. And it is God Himself who cries out in Hos. 11:8 "How shall I give thee up [to destruction by their enemies], Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee [to captivity], Israel?...mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together". He told them they would be taken into captivity, and arranged that they were. But Almighty God struggled awfully with doing this. The way He did it can be read as an omnipotent God bringing about tragedy. Yes, they were taken to captivity, but not without the acutest grief and pain of God Himself. The reality is, God can be aggrieved, hurt, feel rejected. Even though He is Almighty and could avoid all the situations that cause Him these feelings from arising in the first place. Or take Jer. 31:20: "Is Ephraim my dear son?...for since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him". And the later grief and emotional breakdown of Jeremiah in Lamentations, sitting by the street with none to comfort him, tears dropping in the dust, clutching his hair with his hands...was an intended statement to Judah of God's feelings for them.

God can feel for us. He allows His omnipotence to be in some ways limited by us. So identified was He with His people Israel that He says that in Egypt, *He* heard a language which He understood not. He so felt Himself as in their shoes. And likewise the Lord Jesus is truly empathetic with us, a High Priest who can feel for us in our need for succour. Surely He too cries for us. For He is our representative, not our substitute. It is stressed many times in Hebrews that the Lord is now *sitting* at the right hand of the Father, mediating for us. And yet in Acts 7, Stephen sees the Lord *standing* at the right hand, mediating for him. The Lord Jesus isn't passive to the condition, needs or sufferings of His little brethren and sisters here on earth. He rose up to stand, in passion and feeling and pleading. And so He did for the thousands of faithful prayers offered for Michelle as she lay in a coma for some days before her death. Let us never doubt the activity and passionate feeling of the Lord, even though it can seem as if Heaven is silent to our crises.

We hope, in utter certainty, for the resurrection at the Lord's coming, and our desire for that day is all the more heightened after this tragedy. And yet for now, all we can say is that there are tears in Heaven, as it were, along with ours. The Father and His Son are with us. Yes, they look to us to respond to Michelle, especially it seems to me in her well known zeal to give her all for the sake of the spreading of the Gospel. And yet all the same, they feel for us not only in our grief over her, but in all our griefs. In all Israel's afflictions in Egypt and in the wilderness, Yahweh was afflicted, as was the Angel of His presence. We have the tendency to see Him as passive to our sufferings, bringing them into our lives in a calculated way that lacks any feeling. But His dealings with His people earlier show this is just not the case. More positively, there is *joy* in Heaven over the sinner who repents- as the parables of the lost coin, sheep and son all portray. The woman [Jesus?] calls together others [the Angels?] to share His joy. Of course, it is foreknown who will respond to the Gospel, but this doesn't take away the joy of Heaven at the actual moment of response, be it a heartfelt prayer of repentance, or the ceremony of baptism. And by the same token, He foreknew the death of

His Son and that of His daughter Michelle. And that foreknowledge and prearranging was something the grieving brethren so often comment upon in the Acts record, as many of us have too in this present context. And therefore we can know that there were tears in Heaven, just as there is joy in Heaven at repentance and in our realistic efforts to respond to the deaths and tragedies we face. Brethren, sisters: we must rally ourselves and respond. For Michelle's sake, and above all, for the Lord's sake. Now we see through a glass darkly, and only face to face in the Kingdom. Then, we will see how and why all had to be as it was. But for now, we can only respond in quietened and humbled service.

## **Appendix 7: Capitalism And Welfare Policy In The Mission Field**

We all have a tendency to overlook where we are situated within life, and the nature of the social, economic or family system which we are part of. It seems to me that Western believers need to give some more thought to the simple fact that they live within a capitalist system, and to appreciate some of the features of that system within which they live. There would appear to be a tacit assumption amongst Western brethren that capitalism is somehow right, or at least, better and more justifiable than socialism; that the right wing of politics is better than the left.

In the context of seeking to conduct our mission work from the purest of motives, we need to reflect upon the historical progress of capitalism. As capitalism developed in the West, there arose a need to expand markets and find sources of raw materials. Expansion is necessary to fuel capitalism; it can't work without growth, without the creation of wealth, without the creation of new markets and cheap labour. This is why Marxist critics have always predicted that capitalism must ultimately come to an end once the whole world has been 'colonized' by capitalism. And so it was in the search for cheap raw materials and new markets that imperial colonialism began. The Western European nations began sailing the seven seas, running up their flags around the world.

Capitalism, however, affected the areas it invaded. They are sucked into what Milton Santos called a "core-periphery model" <sup>(1)</sup>. This core-periphery syndrome works itself out on different levels. In a Western country, the 'core' may be the owners of a factory. The 'periphery' are the workers who work for low pay in order to make large profits for the owners. Capital and resources tend to agglomerate, i.e. the 'core' people tend to come to live in the same areas, notably big cities. They may open a plant in a poorer or geographically isolated part of their country. The local managers of that plant in turn become the 'core', living in comfort, whilst the workers are again not given a fair share of the wealth created. Capitalism is characterized by its cyclical nature; production of goods and profits rise and fall over the years in cycles. In the downturn years, it's the periphery which suffers. The periphery plants are closed down for a few months, often with no compensation for the workers left with no income. When the economy picks up, the periphery is again brought into action.

Once the Western nations started to geographically spread their influence, the countries they arrived in became the 'periphery' to them. And yet the local people with whom they forged the deepest ties became the 'core' in their local context. The Western nations assumed that the areas they arrived in had no history; even today, the history of the American Indians, or the Australian Aborigines, or the Zulu tribes, are very poorly researched. It was assumed that Western culture would be exported there; that the 'White man's burden' was the spreading of his culture into the newly invaded areas. Eric Wolf wrote a classic study whose very title

sums up his whole thesis: *Europe And The People Without History*<sup>(2)</sup>. He discusses in detail the case of the American Indians, as does Immanuel Wallerstein in his study of *Historical Capitalism*<sup>(3)</sup>. The Western traders arrived, and showed an interest in the skins which the Indians wore to keep warm. They exchanged trinkets and alcohol for skins. Suddenly, skins became really important. The Indians were running everywhere hunting and skinning animals. The Indians who learnt English and did the deals with the visitors became the ‘core’. Then the Westerners offered them guns for skins. The Indian who possessed a gun became in a far stronger position to kill far more animals more quickly, and to therefore get more skins, and get more guns, with which to kill yet more animals. These men therefore started to employ people to skin the animals; they started a primitive production line. And they suddenly had more power and goods than anyone else ever had. No longer was the tribal chief the most powerful and important person. The men with guns and skins were. These wealthy ‘core’ people were then able to indulge themselves. They started employing people to be their personal slaves; they amassed luxury goods. Things which were just occasional treats in their culture became things which the ‘core’ people regularly enjoyed. Money was introduced. Everything became commodified; things which had had no special meaning in the past, like skins, suddenly took on new meaning as a commodity. The meaningless trinkets bought from the Western visitors took on special value.

The same process repeated itself throughout the world, especially in Africa and Asia. Railways and transport networks were developed- not for the benefit of the local country, but in order to develop the links between core and periphery. Christianity was brought to these areas along with the economic exploitation. Nobody doubts the sincerity of the missionaries themselves; but there is no doubt that consciously or unconsciously, capitalism found the spread of Christianity convenient. It got the local people on their side; they could use the need to protect missionaries as a pretext for military presence; and it tied the local people into Western culture. David Livingstone was a medical missionary originally sent to Africa by the London Missionary Society, “but he later returned under government auspices as an explorer ” to open a path for commerce and Christianity” . The French likewise used missionaries in Algeria and Tunisia as an excuse to “set up a religious protectorate that preceded the political protectorate. Gambetta said of [the missionary] Lavigerie, “His presence in Tunisia is worth an army for France” ,<sup>(4)</sup>.

Over time, the colonies were given independence. But there was a politics to that independence. It wasn’t true care for the value of freedom or independence which led Britain and France to encourage their colonies to become independent. They wanted to retain them as their economic colonies, without the need to support their poverty- the poverty which they had created. And it’s the same with the expansion of the E.U. into the poorer areas of Central and Eastern Europe. Cheap labour and easy markets are clearly the motive for dragging these new areas into the periphery of Western capitalism; for the core will remain in the Western countries.

Against this background, we must consider the simple fact that our brethren have been amongst those who went out from the West to ‘convert’ Africa; and in more recent times, have set out from England to ‘convert’ Eastern Europe, at the very time when that area is being tied in to the capitalist core-periphery model. John Thomas, the first Christadelphian missionary, wrote of England as “...the noblest and most exalted nation of the world- an impressive lesson to princes that God is the rewarder of them that fear Him” ( John Thomas, *History Of Hackney*, 1972 ed., p. 274, quoted in Mark Smith, ‘Reflections On Dr. John Thomas’ *History Of Hackney*’, *Logos* Vol. 72 No. 4, January 2006 p. 183.). That is

unashamed and surely inexcusable nationalism, assuming that one Gentile nation is more noble than others, more ‘rewarded’ by God, and therefore the source of God’s Truth to the rest of the planet.

The question we must ask in the context of mission work is simply ‘To what degree are Western believers caught up in the attitudes and assumption of the Capitalist system to which they belong?’ . When they enter e.g. Lithuania, or when they entered Kenya some time ago, are or were they bringing with them even unconsciously the Capitalist Western attitudes, assumptions and motivations which other Western missionaries have brought with them?

It would appear that the interaction between Western believers and those in what they call ‘the mission field’ does have elements of the core-periphery model about it. For example, English is seen as the ‘core’ language; the local ‘core’ members in the periphery are characterized by good English skills, email access etc. Often they are bought computers and mobile phones or have internet access paid for, by the Western brethren. Is this in essence any different to the colonial powers building railway and transport networks in the ‘peripheries’ which they invaded? One doesn’t doubt the genuine motivations behind it all, and yet there is an uncanny similarity. The result often is that a core-periphery scenario is re-enacted in some newly preached in country, and the local ‘core’ in the new country end up with AV Bibles marked up in the very same way as one might encounter in Adelaide, Australia; even learn how to pray using ‘Thee’ and ‘Thou’; and end up bonding with other similar local ‘core’ members. They learn to sing the English language hymns, in a way which is comforting and reassuring to the Western visitors (the singing of local hymns in another language by the ‘periphery’ is found often to be rather disturbing by the Westerners). The doctrinal orthodoxy of the ‘core’ members is then presented in the West as an example of the success and high standards of ‘the Mission’, with many appeals to patiently wait for the local ‘periphery’ members to ‘get there’. But unity is not the same as uniformity; such examples are rather an admission of spiritual colonialism, rather than giving individuals the freedom which is in Christ, and which the cross opened up for every man and woman to whom we share the Gospel.

### ***Power And Control***

Power and control are what capitalism is all about. And one cannot easily dismiss the possibility that the same factors have crept into mission politics. If the Lord Jesus is our head, all concept of core-periphery vanishes. His greatness, the magnitude and extent of the Lordship which He exercises over us, should mean that we look to nobody else as our head or ‘core’. All resources are *His*- not ours to manipulate. The teaching of the Lord Jesus places a huge value upon the value and meaning of the individual, with absolutely no distinctions made in terms of race or social / economic position. The very talk about ‘the mission field’ can smack of core-periphery. The ‘core’ is the Anglo-Saxon Christian heartlands of North America, the UK and Australasia. The ‘periphery’ is the ecclesial worlds of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe etc. Although there are now more non-Anglo Saxon believers than Anglo-Saxon ones, the core-periphery model seems to be in place in some ways. Ecclesiases in the periphery are not accorded the respect nor autonomy of those in the core. It has not been unheard of for a ‘core’ ecclesia to disfellowship a member of a ‘periphery’ ecclesia; and the position of some mission agencies is that they decide the validity of baptisms performed in many ‘periphery’ areas, not recognizing the baptisms performed by local members there unless they have their approval. Welfare funding is made conditional upon being a church

affiliated to the mission; whereas those who are simply, e.g., Jamaican ecclesias are not granted that welfare support.

The dynamic in all our relationships must be the love of Christ. That alone must constrain us. We are under the constraint of all the principles which arise from seeing and knowing His person. Nikita Khrushchev pointed out many years ago that capitalism was by its nature unprincipled. It just went on growing. He saw a difference between what he called the principled world and the unprincipled world; and he feared the inevitable encroachment of the unprincipled upon the principled. He perceived that there was no care for individual people in unprincipled capitalism. It was survival of the fittest, a social form of Darwinism. Those with wealth and initiative and opportunities developed. Government intervention was only necessary in cases of acts of God like earthquakes, or in order to enable the working classes to do their jobs. We need to reflect upon Khrushchev's warnings and observations. For care for *the individual* must be paramount. It matters not what ecclesia or fellowship our brother belongs to; he is our brother, or she is our sister. Their needs are our needs. All our giving out in welfare or time or worry or support must be fashioned after the love and grace of our Lord to us. It is given out not to be controlling, without conditions- because it is grace. This was the Lord's point when He spoke of how in the world, those who are benefactors are those who exercise authority- but it is not to be so amongst us, He warned. In other words, our giving is not to be in order to get any power over anyone. And it also needs to be noted that poverty has a way of distracting, terribly so. Merely giving aid to the poor won't automatically make converts- true converts. It's simply not true that desperately poor people will somehow respond more eagerly than others to the Gospel. The Jews left in the land at the time of the exile were the very poorest (Jer. 39:10). But actually these were the spiritually weaker in the long run, and it was the more wealthy who went to Babylon who were the "good figs" of Jer. 24:3-8.

### ***Culture***

There is a cultural arrogance about the West, an assumption that their way, their literature, their language, their economic principle, simply has to be better than that of the 'periphery'. This is unconsciously assumed, even in our own mission programmes. Economic or technological superiority is confused with cultural superiority. If a Western brother shows his love for his Lord by wearing a tie to the memorial meeting or by pronouncing the Name 'Yahweh', he has no right to assume that his cultural perspective is automatically superior to that of a brother in, e.g., Central Africa who has a different culture. There are worrying signs that the Western desire to recreate the rest of the world in their own image has spread in some ways into our approach to mission work. Hymns are to be sung from the English hymnbook, or at best to be translated from English into a local language; the 'converts' are encouraged to learn English, a Christadelphian ecclesia in the middle of the South American jungle or the ice fields of northern Russia is expected to have the Birmingham, England 'Statement of faith' as the basis of their constitution, etc. It would be unheard of for the periphery to influence the core. The Western brotherhood [even though they are numerically smaller than the non-Western brotherhood] would likely feel insulted if they were asked to adopt, e.g., the Karachi Statement of Faith, or the Moscow Amended Statement of Faith. And yet in Christ, we learn from each other. The exhorter comes back exhorted. We are built up by that which every other member of the body supplies. No part of the body can think that they somehow are the source of power and vitality; for the Head is the Lord Jesus. True leadership is in servanthood, and respect or superiority is never demanded nor assumed- it is always loving given by the undemanded respect of others.

The West has always been fascinated with non-Western cultures, but they only see what they want to see- e.g. African or Arabic art, literature or cooking is depicted in mission publicity meetings as exotic, quaint, etc. Yet it's just as valid as anyone else's culture. Believers in the 'periphery' often complain of being treated as animals in a zoo, stared at and photographed by fascinated Western visitors. Europe perceived that the rest of the world was without history, without culture, and needed to be graced by their presence. And this attitude can rub off on Western preachers.

"When President William McKinley told a delegation of church leaders that God had counseled him to annex the Philippines and "to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them," few Americans knew that the Philippines had an educational system older than that of the United States and that the majority of Filipinos were Catholic" (5). There is an assumption that 'they' must be helped by 'us', because 'they' have absolutely nothing of intrinsic value or ability- rather than dealing with each other as equals in Christ. The whole concept of equality in Christ turns the capitalist model on its head.

The local 'core' brethren in the 'periphery' of the 'mission field' often end up adopting the spiritual culture of the West, rather than allowing e.g. Chinese believers to be Chinese believers. One hears local brethren even speaking of themselves as being in 'the mission field', or even as 'overseas brethren'. But the very concept of a mission field, or being 'overseas', is all relative; 'overseas' from where? Over which seas? Indeed, one mission agency welfare presentation features an African brother warning his white brethren that 'We blacks are always liable to be dishonest with money'. He had been abused by generations of economic and spiritual imperialism, of which his own mission had sadly been a part, to perceive his own people as the White West perceived them.

### *Politics*

Exporting Western Christian division into the mission field is a grave sin. Acts 6:1-6 makes the point that aid to the poor widows was cut off or impaired, because the other believers were arguing amongst themselves. It would appear that the Hebrew Christians went to the temple daily (Acts 2:46), whereas the Greek widows wouldn't have done (Acts 7:48,49). So the common theological disagreement about how far the Jewish Law should influence Christian life- resulted in old and needy ladies in the ecclesia suffering.

### *Welfare*

The giving of welfare can be used as merely another link in the core-periphery model. True grace, or 'giving' as *charis* means, gives a genuine freedom of choice to the person helped. Such grace empowers. Giving, true, grace-inspired giving, is never a means of control. God's grace of giving His Son, and the "all things" which are in Him, is pure grace. Pure grace does not expect results, response, adulation etc. Those who grasp it do of course respond; response is inevitable, all because grace by its very nature doesn't expect this response. In the giving of welfare, those who are in a position to do so are to reflect the grace / giving of God; and His grace is never given in a controlling sense. Grace by its very nature is not controlling. Grace is sensitive to needs. No impoverished brother or sister should have to come cap in hand, Oliver Twist-style, asking for help. Help and support are given as part of a whole relationship. Never should it be emphasized that 'We have the money, you have the need'- for this is the stuff of control and core-periphery. If Western brethren are perceived solely as the source of welfare, then something of the 'Cargo Cult' will develop as it did in New

Guinea 100 years ago. Missionary planes landed on the island and gave the people beads, food, goods etc. as aid- and then the planes flew off again. The local people worshipped the planes as God. The missionaries were playing God, unconsciously of course. No relationships were built. But the locals became loyal members of their church. This isn't what we want to see happening.

The view that the world should be left to go its way to its destruction, whilst the believers concentrate on their own acceptability before God, effectively leads to a *laissez-faire* approach to society- which is exactly Capitalism's view. Let the economy develop, intervene with social welfare if there are 'acts of God' such as floods or disaster, but let society care for itself, believing that capital will always trickle down to help the poor. And, therefore and thereby, the poor are poor because they are basically lazy. Welfare policy of the Bible missions appears to be similar- intervene in disasters, but little else. It may be shocking to think that true believers are in fact so 'political' as to be passive supporters of Capitalism in this way, when we pride ourselves on being so apolitical. But it doesn't take much to figure out that *if* many of us were to vote, the majority would vote for right-wing, Conservative parties who consciously enshrine the principles of Capitalism.

I have heard very many talks, exhortations, sermons etc. from our community which use a piece of business training or ideology in order to make a spiritual point. The message is that we can, e.g., serve the Lord more effectively and efficiently if we... develop good management practice and the like. There is little wrong with this in itself (although I would prefer all exhortation to be directly Jesus-based); but what this reflects is a tacit acceptance of overt capitalism. Here we see the tensions within much Christian mission work. On the one hand, the message is that we should not trust in ourselves, in human strength, but only in that strength which comes from the Lord. And yet on the other hand, there is a *laissez-faire* attitude to capitalism, and a tacit support of it, when this philosophy is all about human strength and trusting in the power of money for security.

There has been the strong message in previous decades that God is somehow especially with America and the Anglo-Saxon world, and somehow He is especially against the Russian and Arabic speaking world. Can it be coincidental that these very areas were the two sections of the globe that the West failed to fully colonize, never succeeding in drawing them into the periphery where the West was the core. The African, Asian and South American sectors of the global economy are generally treated with some kind of paternalistic pity by mission organizations; and these are the very areas that were well and truly sucked into the core-periphery model of capitalist expansion. Yet the Russian and Arabic speaking worlds have undoubtedly been treated by our community especially with more suspicion and negativity. Controversies over whether or not the converts there were valid broke out, whereas this didn't happen very much in the other areas. Far more cynicism has been expressed by us over meeting welfare needs there; and there has even been the comment that the Arabs shouldn't be helped but Jews should be. The existence of paradoxes of this magnitude can only be debilitating to any mission organization; they can only sow the seeds of confusion and disharmony within the lives and thinking of those whom it converts.

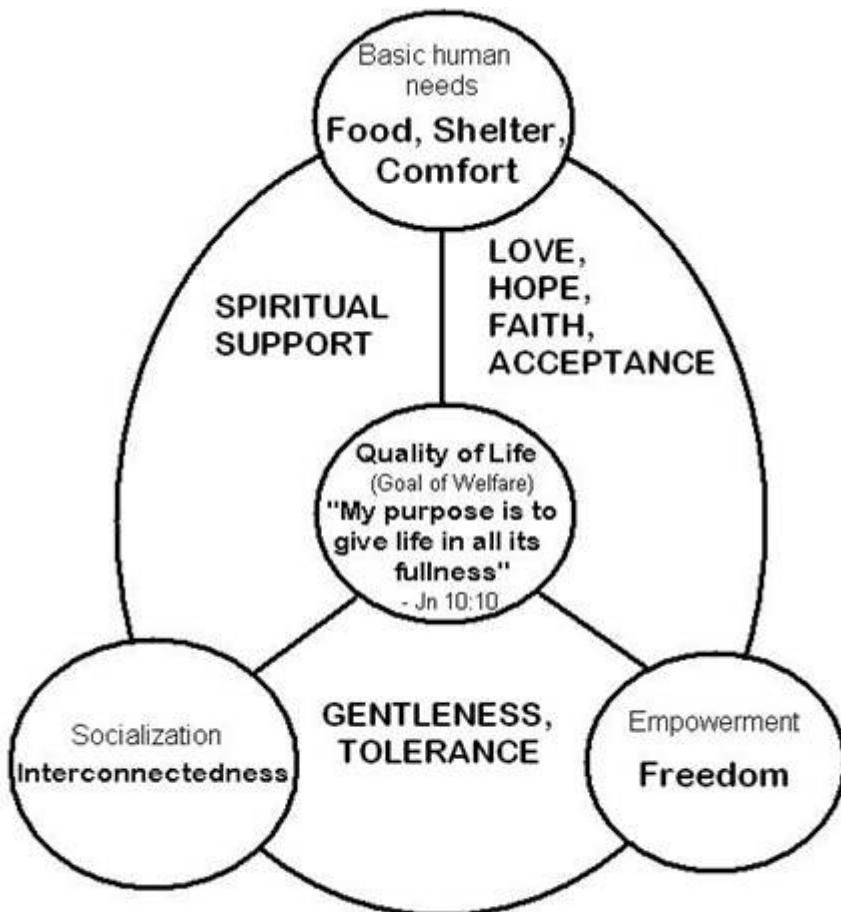
In capitalism, there has been what Wallerstein called 'the commodification of everything'. In spiritual terms, we could better talk about the objectification of everything and everyone. The value and wonder of the individual human person, so stressed by the Lord Jesus, is lost. Relationships are utilitarian, and can be severed even after 30 years. Relationships are a means towards an end, rather than being enjoyed for what they are in themselves- the natural

bonding of men and women in Christ. Standard Christian mission work has a very sad history of argument, dispute, betrayal and broken relationships- along with a poor track record of caring for the needy *individual*. Could this not be because of the ‘objectification of everything’? Of course, none of this has been consciously done. It has all been an unconscious, tacit result of not firmly establishing spiritual principles *first*, and insisting on working according to *them* rather than according to political expedient.

### **Towards A Holistic Welfare Policy**

This study has mainly sounded only caveats. More positively, building on these points, we would like to present the conclusion of a study by Sister Ruth Stibbs (Brisbane, Australia):

“From a social welfare point of view, welfare means people feeling connected to others, of being part of a group, of not being alone in the world. But from the spiritual welfare aspect which we are promoting, I would rather call this ‘True Fellowship’, despite the somewhat legalistic context in which it is understood these days. True Biblical fellowship provides the most loving, supported interconnectedness with others and is really what we are getting at:



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### **Notes**

(1) Milton Santos, *The Divided Space* (Rio: Alves, 1978).

(2) Eric Wolf, *Europe And The People Without History* (University of California Press, 1982).

(3) Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism* (Verso, 1996).

(4) Quotes from David Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon* (Knopf, 1966). This thesis is expanded upon in Brian Stanley, *Bible and the Flag: Protestant missions and British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* (Intervarsity, 1990), and in Brian Stanley and Alaine Low [eds]: *Missions, Nationalism and the End of Empire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

(5) Helen Toribio, Abe Ignacio and Jorge Emmanuel, *Malevolent Assimilation* [quote provided by John Stibbs].

## Appendix 8 Missionary Training Program

### 8-1: Carelinks 10 day Missionary Training Program

#### Daily timetable:

09:30- 11:00 Bible readings [with comments by participants]; 11:30-12:30 session 1; 12:30-13:00 workshop; 13:00-15:00 lunch 15:00-16:00 Session 2; 16:30-17:00 workshop; 17:30-18:30 Session 3; 18:30-19:30 supper; 19:30 closing meditation [by participants]

In the evenings, participants will have the opportunity to work on developing a Personal Action Strategy, and they will have at least two private sessions with the course leaders to discuss this. They will then present their Strategy to the group on the last day.

In addition to the ten study days, there will be two days of on the street preaching in the centre of Riga, in English, with feedback and discussion; and some pastoral visits with feedback and discussion.

#### Day 1

1-1 Defining our aims, knowing our motivations WORKSHOP: Personal Action Strategy [DH]

1-2 Basic doctrine [1]: The promises of God and the death state, hell WORKSHOP: How to deal with difficult passages [JA]

1-3 How to study the Bible and share it with others WORKSHOP: [JA]

#### Day 2

2-1 Basic doctrine [2]: The nature and work of Jesus WORKSHOP: [DH]

2-2 Basic doctrine [3]: The devil and demons WORKSHOP: Explaining difficult passages [DH]

2-3 Basic doctrine [4]: The nature of God and the Holy Spirit (including Holy Spirit gifts) [JA]

#### Day 3

3-1 The Carelinks model for preaching, following up interest and baptizing into Christ WORKSHOP: How to email [DH]

3-2 Basic doctrine [5]: The Kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit (including Holy Spirit gifts)  
WORKSHOP: [JA]

3-3 The early church [1] [DH] [The obstacles they faced; how and why they succeeded]

#### **Day 4**

4-1 Basic Psychology for Preachers [1] How to teach, how to talk with people WORKSHOP: Lesson plans, planning follow up visits and spiritual development programs for the newly baptized [DH]

4-2 Forgiveness issues [1] WORKSHOP: [SG]

4-3 The early church [2] [DH] [Where and why things went wrong, and the lessons for us]

#### **Day 5**

5-1 Basic Psychology for Preachers [2] How to counsel, how communities and relationships develop  
WORKSHOP: [DH] Developing small groups; assessing the needs of your target group; self-criticism.

5-2 Forgiveness issues [2] WORKSHOP: [SG]

5-3 Apologetics / Other religions [Islam] [1] [JA]

#### **Day 6**

6-1 Basic Medical Knowledge for Preachers [Identifying common illnesses, psychological problems]  
WORKSHOP: First aid [CH]

6-2 Dealing with the poor WORKSHOP: Responding to requests for aid [DH]

6-3 Apologetics / Other religions [Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism] [2] [JA]

#### **Day 7**

7-1 Fellowship and baptism [1] WORKSHOP: [JA]

7-2 Leadership issues WORKSHOP: Conflict management [JA]

7-3 An outline of Christadelphian history [DH]

#### **Day 8**

8-1 Fellowship and baptism [2] WORKSHOP: Why people don't get baptized [JA]

8-2 Pastoral Issues [1]: Bereavement, Addictions, Counselling people WORKSHOP: Role plays [DH]

8-3 Eldership [JA]

## **Day 9**

9-1 Pastoral Issues [2]: Sexual issues, marital and gender issues WORKSHOP: Role plays [JA]

9-2 Dealing with people of limited literacy / intelligence / mental health; communicating across language barriers WORKSHOP: Explaining the Gospel in pictures; matchstick men [DH]

9-3 An outline of latter day prophecy [JA]

## **Day 10**

10-1 Specific problems of new converts [loneliness, marriage within the faith, unbelieving partners] WORKSHOP: [JA]

10-2 Your questions and feedback [JA, DH]

Presentation and critique of Personal Action Strategies

## **Appendix 8-2: Carelinks Missionary Methodology**

1. Gathering initial interest- from our internet sites [hundreds of responses / day, 10,000 + unique views / day] and from response to literature in libraries and simply in the hands of people worldwide [nearing 1 million pieces of literature distributed in nearly 30 years]. Occasional targeted advertising in newspapers, internet etc. to get interest in a specific area.
2. Follow up by email- discussion of questions, encouragement to be baptized, building personal relationship, maybe including visits / meetings
3. Baptism visit
4. Encourage them to network family and friends
5. Provision of material support where appropriate to them or their surrounding society by networking with other individuals or groups able to provide humanitarian aid
6. Provision of spiritual support to assist their growth in Christ; provision of regular teachings; networking them with other believers / converts
7. Encouragement of them to take responsibility for other converts and to develop small groups

## **Appendix 8-3: Some Psychology for Preachers**

For those prayerfully intent on converting others to Christ, perhaps technique isn't necessary to analyze. Some of the most successful preachers of all time, both Biblically and in our own experience, were not professional preachers. They were ordinary, often poorly educated people who simply shared their experience of God's grace with all they met, and the evident intensity and integrity of their own experience was of itself enough to persuade men and women of the Gospel. On the other hand, we are to cast the net on the other side at the Lord's command; Paul "so"

preached that men believed. Technique and examination of technique isn't, therefore, inappropriate.

The changes associated with conversion to Christ involve a radically changed state of thinking; and we are the human means used by the Father and Son to present, model and at times effect that psychological change within persons. We too need to appreciate that these changes are happening to us too, as we continue to experience the process of a new creation going on within our own minds. And it's not enough to simply teach the Gospel to a person and baptize them; by doing these things, we become their spiritual parent, and our care for them is to continue. The problem is that those people often have a whole range of personal problems with which we may feel quite inadequate to engage. It's all very well telling someone to "get professional help", but in the reality of a late night conversation with a weeping friend, or an earnest appeal for advice over coffee together, we are the help at that time and in that place which God has sent that person. For God works through persons. And yet we feel so inadequate, for most of us are not professionals. We need to get over the idea that only a professional can help; there is nothing wrong with seeking professional help, but very often in the mission field it is simply not available or inaccessible. In our inadequacy is perhaps our strength in God's sight, as we stand in His hand as David against the Goliath of human psychological problems.

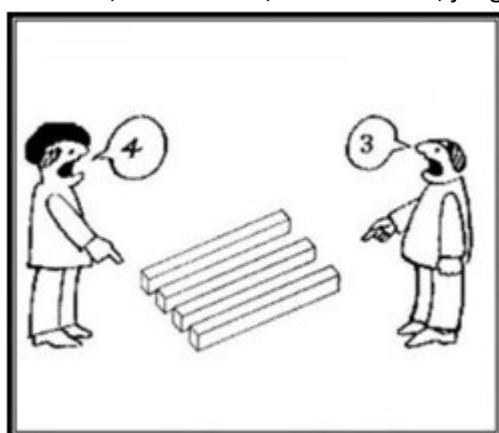
For all these reasons, let's take a look at basic psychology for Christians:

- The psychology involved in teaching and converting others
- Psychology relevant to ourselves
- Psychology in a pastoral context.

#### **The psychology involved in teaching and converting others**

##### **How People Perceive Things**

In the same way as there are optical illusions, so it depends from which perspective we look at doctrines, Bible verses, ethical issues, judgment calls on various issues. Consider the picture of two men viewing some planks of wood.



The man on the left feels justified in insisting that there are four planks of wood. The man on the right is indignant that the other man can't perceive that obviously there are only three planks of wood. And so it is with looking at something like the supposed existence of the Trinity. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one" (Dt. 6:4) may appear to me to be clear proof that God is one and not three. And yet this very same verse is beloved of some Trinitarians as proof

that there is one God- but in trinity, whereby the unity of God means that the Son and the Holy Spirit must be one and the same as God the Father, because "God is one". The fact there are optical

illusions doesn't mean that the illusion is reality; truth is not merely defined by our perceptions. There is an ultimate truth on many issues, which exists outside of ourselves, and is with God and is revealed to us in His word. My point is that we shouldn't be surprised nor disappointed that people cannot see what appears to us to be Biblically obvious. When it comes to spiritual matters, humans aren't rational. We assume we make rational decisions- we don't drive over a red light, look before crossing the street and so forth. But the human heart can become so wicked that we even fail to perceive how wicked it has become (Jer. 17:9). In the same way as we ourselves have [hopefully] changed our worldviews, rejected ways of viewing issues which were wrong- so we must remember that the people to whom we witness are themselves likewise in various psychological binds which won't be easily or quickly broken by the mere logical forcefulness of our arguments and reasoning.



Consider the picture. What do you see first? Some would see an old woman with a long nose covered in a shawl, looking downwards in mourning. Others would see an elegantly dressed young woman looking to her right; her nose is the left eye of the old woman. Older people tend to see the old woman first; younger people tend to see the young woman first. From this we learn that who we are, our position in life, influences how we perceive things and who we relate to. A young sister may relate strongly to the pregnant Mary of Luke's Gospel; as she grows older she may relate better to Naomi with her family problems and desire to put right the poor judgments of youth. After you have been looking at the old woman for some time, it may be hard to again perceive the young woman, and vice versa. If you had not read above that the young woman's nose is the left eye of the old woman, it may have taken you longer to perceive the two women presented. What these observations mean is that we as teachers and 'preachers' are really just giving information which will jog the audience to realize that there is another way of seeing a picture. We may, e.g., explain how Isaiah 14 refers to the King of Babylon rather than the traditional understanding of "Lucifer", and this is like telling you that the young woman's nose is the left eye of the old woman. It is a trigger, a jog, but the change in perception cannot be made for another person. As you thought "Ah! Now I see! There are two women portrayed!", so the discovery of Bible truths is totally personal. All we can do is to provide triggers for it in our teaching. But the actual realization, the perception of the new picture, must be internal to the person. If we simply tell someone ahead of time "Now here's a picture which is of both a young woman and an old woman"- it's not as effective as the person looking at the picture for themselves, seeing the young woman, and then seeing the old woman. All

we can do is to draw their attention to the old woman's right eye and the young woman's nose, and ask them to focus upon those points. I have mentioned that younger people will tend to see the young woman first; we relate to the Bible according to our own background, undertaking the task of interpretation influenced by who we are and where we have come from.

With this in mind, which animal do you see in the picture of an animal? Some see a rabbit looking to the right, others a duck looking to the left. Which did you see first? I carried out this little experiment at a Bible school in China, and everyone without fail reported seeing a duck first. Because ducks are common in Chinese experience and culture. Urban Europeans tend to see the rabbit first- ducks don't waddle around European cities, but you can see rabbits in some woods and parks; Europeans from rural areas sometimes see a duck first, sometimes a rabbit- probably depending upon their exposure to these two animals in their home area. Africans tend to see the duck, because rabbits aren't so common in Africa. And so it is that people raised within a Trinitarian culture will tend to interpret "I and my Father are one" (Jn. 10:30) as proof that Jesus is God Himself, whereas those raised within a Moslem culture will never want to accept that God has any equal and will see the verse as simply stating that Jesus was a man who felt close to God. But the first picture we see isn't the only picture- that's the point. From our perspective as preachers, we must remember that our audience are initially seeing only one picture. Don't be too frustrated by their inability to see the other picture. The duck's bill can be so visually impressive that for some, it seems impossible to see it ever again as the ears of the rabbit. And likewise the details of some Bible verses lodge in the perceptions of people, indeed in *our* perceptions, making it difficult to see any other picture- until we are prodded by someone who's seen the other picture.



We too as preachers and pastoral helpers will also see the world, and see people, through the spectacles of our own background and life experience. Let's be aware that there are many different schools of psychology, just as there are many different ways of looking at the world. Our psychological worldview will influence how we approach people and seek to deal with them. If we see people as being basically evil, whose human side is worthy only of condemnation, who act in a way determined by their nature and environment, then we will see people as needing to be pressured into repentance and then pastored in a heavy handed way, with us forcing Divine truth down their throat. This was the way of many Calvinist missionaries from mainland Europe who went to the former French, Belgian and Portuguese colonies in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. And the subsequent hard and bad treatment of local people by their colonizers led to the rebellions and internal fracture which is still seen in areas like Angola and Congo today. The British missionaries by contrast were theologically liberal, seeing people as basically good, free to choose, rational, and aware of themselves. They treated people better and with more respect than their French speaking counterparts, and the subsequent history in those areas was generally better.

We are heavily influenced in our views by the power of conformity and obedience. People sitting in a dark room were asked how much a point of light was moving. It was not moving at all, but people's answers were influenced by what others reported. People were asked to choose which one of three lines was the same length as a standard line. The majority chose an obviously incorrect line if it was the one chosen by others. Most people were willing to administer painful, and potentially dangerous electric shocks to research participants when ordered to do so by an "experimenter". This is particularly true when it comes to religion; people accept the doctrines they are taught by others and assume that the majority must be correct. And within congregations of believers, the same is true; groupthink can occur with ease, despite our repeated emphasis upon "*read the Bible for yourself*".

### **Different Points of View**

How we understand people affects how we treat them- it's as simple as that. The various schools of psychology each have something to contribute to our understanding of people in spiritual terms. The behavioural school, for example, considers that human behaviour is determined by external input or stimulus (in contrast to the Freudian school, which believes that behaviour is influenced by internal, unconscious factors, the id controlled by the ego). Behaviourists will argue for environmental determinism- put a person in a positive environment, and they will act positively. In the light of spiritual, pastoral experience and in Biblical perspective, there are elements in all the schools of psychological thought which have value and relevance. If someone from a bad background, always obsessed with the limitations of poverty, marries someone from a good spiritual background and the marriage exists without undue financial limitations, it's possible that the good environment will influence the person for good. Some flourish within the good environment of a functional church, whereas without that environment they would spiritually wither and perish. But then the Biblical emphasis must be considered: that sinful behaviour comes from within (Mk. 7:15-23; James 1:13-15), our words are a result of our thinking (Mt. 12:34), the heart is a "treasure chest" out of which actions flow (Lk. 6:45), as a man thinks in his heart, so is he in practice (Prov. 23:7). Right behaviour isn't solely determined by environment- it is a fruit of the Spirit, the result of response to God's word. Put an unspiritual person in a wonderful Bible School environment, surrounded by love, grace, spirituality- and they will not necessarily change at all, because their heart is elsewhere. But then clearly enough, environment plays a part. Our actions are indeed influenced by our thoughts, and spiritual mindedness is truly the essence of Christianity; but we also have the ability to do good things when we are thinking otherwise, and a generally spiritually minded person is also capable of occasional bad behaviour, or bad behaviour in some specific area of life. The problem is, man on one hand is a well endowed animal, responding to environment and stimulus in a fairly predictable way; at the other end of the spectrum, he is made in God's image and being transformed into the image of God's Son. Frequently in our ministry to others, we can assume that if only we could change a person's environment, then they would spiritually flourish. If we take that person out of poverty, out of an impossible marriage, out of a fundamentalist Islamic state which limits the expression of Christianity, out of a war zone, free them from a disease- that they will then be able to grow spiritually. But so often, spirituality is developed exactly by those experiences. God places us in situations like that because He knows they are for our spiritual good. It is He who brings trials and tribulations; and He places us each within the matrix of life situations which He knows is what we need to reach His Kingdom. So often it has happened that believers who spiritually shone under

persecution have escaped to the West- and spiritually collapsed. But then it is also true that spiritual mindedness is indeed of the essence, and this can be achieved in any human situation.

Our view of human nature inter-relates with our view of our mission amongst men in this world. If we perceive, as I believe we should, the great spiritual possibilities implicit in being human, we will more positively approach our task of encouraging people to grow into the image of God and His Son. We will have a real message of hope and possibility for those we encounter who are struggling with addictions, or who are consumed by a depressive negative self-image. If we consider humanity to be basically evil, our emphasis will rather be on steel-willed self-control and the wretchedness of our position before God- about which, apparently, we can do very little. All the emphasis will be upon the future change of nature at Christ's return, but this carrot of a future hope often fails to long term motivate people struggling with their humanity here and now. It's hard to make sense of the very positive New Testament passages which stress the experience of victory and spiritual growth right now- if we resign people to a belief that they are intrinsically wicked and shall continue their patterns of spiritual failure.

Each of us must decide what we really think the Bible teaches about human beings. Are we basically evil, sinners by nature as well as by thought and action? In this case, we are saved only by God's grace and all we can do in this world is to try to limit the effects of our sinfulness and try to restrain ourselves. Or are we basically good by nature, as the humanistic school of psychology suggests, and our failures are a result of external pressures from our environment which lead us to act poorly only because we are making an inevitable response to the stimulus we receive? In this scenario, the son of an alcoholic father will become an alcoholic, alcoholism is declassified from a sin to being a disorder. We must each decide for ourselves what view of humanity we think the Bible teaches; remembering that whatever we postulate about human nature, we are saying about the Lord Jesus who fully shared our nature and yet was perfect. Personally I don't view us as having a choice between "evil by nature" and "good by nature"; the Bible rarely uses the concept of "nature". Rather do I suggest that we can view ourselves as human beings from various vantage points, and the view I see is a spectrum ranging from man as an animal, and man created in the image of God and in process of transformation [in the case of believers] into that image in fullness, with all that implies psychologically. The Bible seems to me to share this perspective, speaking in places of human evil, and in others of the great possibilities which there are for humans. The Lord Jesus shared our nature but was sinless and "one" with the Father; this is surely the profoundest essay in the potential which there is in being human. We are clearly not inevitable sinners; we cannot excuse our sin by simply saying that we are human. That is in essence the same as saying we are innocent of sin because a personal Satan is to blame. Nobody is doomed to sin- even those who appear to have come from and live within the worst imaginable spiritual environments. We must avoid the tendency "to make sinfulness the distinguishing characteristic of humanness". If we consciously treat people as "sinners", this will affect our relationship with them, indeed it affects our own self-understanding; and some people come to act and feel how we perceive them. Israel failed to inherit God's Kingdom because "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them" (Num. 13:31-33). Not only was their self-perception negative, paying no attention to the potential within them which God clearly recognized; but they went further and assumed that how they saw themselves was how others saw them. The account of Rahab shows how wrong they were- the Canaanite tribes perceived them to be mighty men with an invincible God behind them. Clearly

enough, self-perception is important. And in any case, we aren't to fear the possible perceptions which others may have of us. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were taught this at the start of their ministries-God told them that He had made them strong, and they were not to "fear their faces, lest I confound you before them" (Jer. 1:17). They weren't to fear the possible perceptions ["faces"] of others, even amongst their own people; and if they did, then they would become like that perception they feared others had of them.

## **Fear**

This fear of others and their perceptions of us is partly linked to pride, but also to lack of faith. Remember that their view of you is only a perception. When we try to summon the courage to raise spiritual things in conversation, be it with believers or unbelievers, we are facing our fears. When we see a believer going astray and it falls to us to say something, again we have the same fears. Dorothy Gish did a large survey of 970 missionaries, and asked what made them to feel stress as they worked in other cultures. The word and idea which kept surfacing in the majority of responses was "confrontation"- with fellow missionaries, unbelievers, new converts etc. Her work was published in the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* for 1983, and is available online at <http://www.missionarycare.com/dbFullArticle.asp?articleid=94>. In the course of our spiritual work with and for others, confrontation is going to be a major issue. If we are secure in Christ and in the knowledge of His love and acceptance of us, much of the fear is taken out of confrontation; and yet all the same, we need to remember that others' perceptions are just that, merely perceptions, their seeing just one of many possible pictures of us. And if we are convinced of our experience of Christ's positive perception of us, then we will not allow their possible perceptions of us to feedback into our own perceptions of ourselves. For the point of reference in *our* self-perception is not *them* but the Lord.

## **Guilt**

Guilt and fear have been understood as "negative reinforcers"- in that human beings change their behaviour patterns in return for reward [positive reinforcement], and also out of fear of negative experiences or feelings, just as physically we will keep away from something which gives us an electric shock or statics us. Human beings don't like experiencing guilt and fear; and they will try to flee from them. A million false theologies have been built on this. The Bible faces both guilt and fear head on, and indeed seeks to convict sinners of their guilt through a healthy fear of God's judgment. But we must be aware that people really don't like guilt or fear; they will pay tithes, attend church meetings, even read the Bible daily, in order to avoid guilt. We need to recognize this and without being overly cynical, ask ourselves whether the groups we are developing are really as committed as they seem. Realizing this fear factor and the psychological dimension to spiritual acts [tithing, church attendance etc.] cushions the blow for us when apparently active believers suddenly turn round and quit. Their fear of guilt and fear was removed or replaced, and so they began to act differently. You may also experience the strong desire from someone you're working with to confess sins to you, often accompanied with tears. Of course, they should be encouraged to confess sin to God through Christ, and not to us. It seems to me that this desire, which I have so often observed, is because of a

desire to reduce guilt feelings. Often the failings confessed aren't the real failing[s] which might be responsible for the guilt feeling. And the 'confession' often doesn't reduce the actual guilt, all that happens is that the guilt *feelings* are temporarily reduced. The wonder of a real commitment to Christ in baptism is that the actual guilt is dealt with, not just the guilt feelings.

Some psychologists suggest that guilt is involved in the development of all disorders. Seeing that it is "the poor in spirit" who tend to respond to the Gospel, we find many fresh converts to Christ suffer various disorders. It is beyond us to seriously engage with their actual disorders; but we can usefully explore with them the issue of guilt, the way that baptism is a washing, a cleansing of the conscience (Heb. 10:22); and that the good news of the Gospel is that really, we should be able to say with confidence that if Christ returns at this moment, we will surely be saved into His Kingdom. If we are not making this point up front in our teaching, then all we are doing is teaching someone a form of theology, a set of doctrines, which make them responsible to judgment but give no guarantee of salvation in themselves. Our message can then become actually *bad* news rather than good news. The good news is not simply that the Kingdom of God shall come on earth at Christ's soon return; but that we shall be there, by His grace.

There is of course false guilt. Many people suffer hugely because of this. Sources of guilt feelings can include:

- Falling short of others' or your own expectations.
- Not forgiving yourself
- Being guilt tripped by others, who often unconsciously try to get others to join in their scheme- Martha guilt tripping Mary for not helping enough with the cooking, and seeking to get Jesus involved in the trip, is a classic.
- Oversensitive or dysfunctional conscience. Parts of our conscience are learnt within our upbringing or culture, leading us to feel guilty for some things which aren't sinful.
- Survivor guilt- feeling guilty that you survived when others did not, or feeling guilty about what you had to do to survive.
- The experience of temptation can make us feel guilty. But Jesus was perfect despite being tempted in all points like as we are (Heb. 4:15,16).
- We may confuse guilt with shame. Shame is related to falling short of others' expectations, that's all. It may be that in early childhood we were shouted at by our mother one Summer for taking our clothes off and walking naked on the balcony. Perhaps she said: "Shame on you!". And every time we take our clothes off outside in Summer- we may be tempted to feel shame.

We'll now consider some specific issues which we're likely to meet at some time in our ministry to people, both the baptized and unbaptized.

### **Inter-Personal Conflict**

This is probably the most common reason why people leave churches or become merely passive members. The church is a calling together of "all men"- different nationalities, personality types etc.

For them all to be together in one entity is really asking for a sociological disaster to happen. And because of human weakness, such disasters do indeed happen, and people end up belonging to a church which suits *them*, where there are people sufficiently like them for them to feel comfortable-rather than accepting the challenge of putting truth first, and fellowshipping with those who are truly “in Christ” regardless of whatever personality type or background the others have. Severed from the Christ vine, we can do nothing. Those who leave the church altogether because of personality issues typically wither and die spiritually, even though they will not admit this. The basic human social needs, for wantedness, being needed, love, involvement in a group, having a role and part to play, meaningfulness etc. are ideally met in the body of Christ. To refuse a believer a part in it in practice is to therefore sin deeply against them, but likewise to walk out of the body ourselves is to deny ourselves what we are in psychological need for.

On a more personal level, we as preachers and pastoral figures will also find that we instinctively are attracted to some, and suffer distinct dislike for others. We can easily feel guilty that this is the case, but there's a degree to which this is just normal psychological and sociological process [which, incidentally, the Lord Jesus would've likewise experienced, being a man of our nature]. Pavlov wrote much about the ‘conditioning’ of human beings, beginning his work through observing how dogs begin to salivate at the sight or sound of their keeper coming with food. He went further, to demonstrate that we will instinctively dislike someone who restimulates memories of someone who harmed us, and naturally like someone who appears like another who was good to us.

### **Dealing with the Past**

Inter-personal conflict is related to conflicts within persons. Many of these hinge around lack of resolution of issues in the past. God doesn't obliterate memory cells, granting amnesia in response to our requests. He Himself doesn't ‘forget’ the past in this sense, because the Bible is in one sense a history of human sin. The following are some steps in dealing with the past:

- 1) Thank God for His gifts given. When Joseph told his brothers about how far God had advanced him in Egypt (Gen. 45), this wasn't bragging, but rather a deep gratitude which had helped him deal with his past. Some are so focused on the damage done to them that they need our assistance in perceiving God's gifts / grace to them.
- 2) Recognize that sometimes God doesn't heal us. Other times, as with Joseph remaining in prison for another two years after he had interpreted the cupbearer's dream, God delays the time of healing. He knows best.
- 3) Share the memory with God. This involves returning to the memory of the original event causing the problem. This will arouse the emotions, and they need to surface for them to be healed. Encourage the person to speak and write about the original memory.
- 4) Replace the hurt with love by forgiving those involved in the painful memory. This forgiveness has to be given unconditionally and irrespective of repentance. The focus then ceases to be on the hurt, but on change and growth.

5) Become thankful for the memory, believing that truly “all things work together for good”. Look for the “good” in the situation. Joseph clearly did this when he comforted his brothers that “You meant it for evil, but God intended it to save lives” (Gen. 50). In this way we can do as Paul said and modelled in 1 Thess. 5: “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”.

### **Suicide**

There are many myths about suicide, and the following quotation from another writer should help debunk them:

- “• People who talk about suicide never do it—they just want attention. False. Not everyone who talks about suicide actually does it, but most people who commit suicide do tell someone before doing so—as a cry for help. Any serious statement about suicide is a real danger signal and should not be ignored.
- Adolescents are much more likely to commit suicide than adults. False. The adolescent suicide rate is about the same as adult rates. The people most at risk for suicide are older males, someone such as the retiring teacher.
- People are more likely to commit suicide around the Christmas holidays, not in the spring of the year (when the school year is ending). False. The holidays have one of the lowest suicide rates, and spring has the highest.
- One should not mention suicide when talking to depressed people because it may give them ideas. False. Such people often have such thoughts already and should be encouraged to express them. In fact, talking about it may discourage people from doing it”.

Sadly many religious groups teach that suicide is sin. But the Bible never explicitly states this, despite having much to say about what constitutes sinful behaviour. That silence is significant. The Biblical examples of suicide (e.g. Judas) are mainly of people who did so as a result of unresolved sin. And that is true in some cases of suicide today- e.g. the immoral Christian businessman who can’t face the shame of his exposure. By teaching and reinforcing that baptism is a washing, a cleansing of the conscience (Heb. 10:22), that we are really saved by grace, we can deal ahead of time with some of the deeper seated reasons as to why some people take their own lives. But we need to accept that suicide can also be part of a wider spectrum of psychological illness, often undiagnosed and carefully hidden from view, both consciously and unconsciously. Job was clearly suicidal, as was Jeremiah, but there is no word of condemnation from God for their suicidal words; indeed, Job clearly has God’s utmost sympathy and acceptance all through his depression. Our view of human nature comes into play in this difficult question; those who are convinced that we are lumps of sin walking around on two legs will likely be more inclined to suicide than those who have been persuaded that we are made in the image of God, with so much spiritual possibility.

The common advice is to “get professional help” for the suicidal; and this is correct. But let us not assume that we have no part to play, and very often in our work there is no professional help available. We have to make a response, no matter how inadequate and unqualified we may be. For some reason, God put us in that person’s path. “Get professional help” can be an excuse for personal inaction in an awkward and demanding situation. On hearing that a person wishes to commit suicide, be careful not to act shocked. It’s important not to swear to secrecy. Be non-judgmental, talk plainly and directly about their suggested suicide, talk about how guilt has been

removed in Christ, and how there really are alternatives. Pray with them, and maybe read Bible passages if that's appropriate and you don't come over as preaching at them.

The next step is to ask the person how they are going to do it, talk in as much detail as possible about the practicalities. We become fully conscious of our intentions only when we are explaining them to others. And one study claims that people who attempted unsuccessful suicides often report that at the last moment, as they plunged downwards or swallowed the tablets, there was the strong sense that "this is not a good idea". Maybe share that fact with them. If they still appear set on their plan, then play for time, and try to make some kind of agreement with the person. You may think this is all just not worth the effort- but apart from your duty to follow God's call to help the person, even from a more human motivation, realize that if the person *does* commit suicide, you will likely struggle with guilt issues if you've not done all you can for them. Remember that people harm themselves in ways other than suicide; if you manage to talk them out of it, it's likely they may well engage in other self-damaging behaviours. They need help, and you have a part to play in providing it.

So try to get at the minimum a verbal commitment not to harm themselves; try to get them to see that their life is valuable to you, as well as to God. Ideally, try to get them to sign an agreement with you that they will not do it. After this, try to practically ensure that they aren't left alone- and keep in contact. Even long afterwards, remember that whilst they haven't committed suicide, they are likely to be involved in other forms of self-harm. Nothing happens by chance in our lives, no meeting, no encounter with any situation. You were there for a reason.

### **Bereavement**

If you truly get involved with caring for people, sooner or later you will encounter people struggling with the loss of loved ones. There seem to be various stages to the bereavement process, and problems occur when a person gets caught up on one of the stages, even for years. The grieving process is wonderfully natural, and clearly designed by God- as natural as young single people falling in love and getting married. The problem is when that natural process isn't followed by us, for whatever reason. The approximate stages of the process are as follows:

- Initial shock
- A period of anger and the need for support from others.
- A more intense period of grieving, often involving despair, withdrawal and disorganization.
- A period of recovery leading to the resumption of normal life.

When there is no support network- perhaps from physical isolation or the loss of family and friends due to conversion to Christ or other reasons- then the anger can remain, for years. At this point we ought to be able to provide at least a shoulder to cry on, perhaps over a period of time until this phase is finished. If there is aggression rather than support- e.g. "she died because she left the faith"- then the anger may continue. The anger isn't simply because of hard words which were said- it's the anger of the "anger" stage of grieving which hasn't been passed through. Whilst Paul urges

us not to grieve with the same grief as those who have no hope of resurrection (1 Thess. 4:13), this doesn't mean that we shouldn't grieve. It can be that grief is felt to be a lack of faith; this is wrong. That belief can make the grieving process dysfunctional, and long term anger and withdrawal are the result. Our role for others is to try to ensure that the grieving process functions, and progressions are made between the stages; and where possible to try to arrange someone to keep an eye on the bereaved person if we are unable to. It may also need to be noted that grief is natural and there's nothing wrong with it- Jesus Himself wept over the death of Lazarus, and there are many Biblical examples of grieving. Suppressing the grief emotion, maybe from pride or pressure from others, is unnatural and likely to cause major harm.

### **Bereavement and the Unbaptized**

This is also a situation you're likely to encounter, sooner or later. Because we have a heart for people and want to say the kindest thing, the temptation is to tell the grieving what they want to hear- that all will be eternally well for the unbaptized loved one whom they have lost. The same desire leads some churchmen to assure the grieving that the lost is now in Heaven in bliss- an idea totally foreign to the Scriptures. We are not the Saviour, and it's not for us to say who outside of Christ may be saved. Salvation is "in Christ", hence the connection between baptism and salvation. There are many things which we may wish God would do differently. Why did David and Bathsheba's first child die, why... so many things. The fact God is God and we are mere men means that we will not ever get answers to these questions, nor should we have the arrogance to assume that we are on His level, and therefore could possibly understand. We are to live by faith, and faith involves faith in God's ultimate rightness even if we do not perceive it. As the grieving process works through, the bereaved may well become angry that you tried to comfort them with a hope which isn't Biblical. Admittedly each of us must come to our own understanding of the reference in 1 Cor. 7:14 to the children of believers being "holy" in the same way as an unbelieving partner is "holy"; but whatever it means, it can't mean that some people get to salvation simply by reason of having the right partner or parent. The context appears to be talking about the nature of the relationship, rather than future salvation.

It's better to admit to the bereaved in these cases that you struggle with God over it, you don't have the answers, His ways are past finding out- and that you realize that you're not coming out with any great words of comfort in the sense of a future hope. But our efforts at comfort are directed really at the feelings of the bereaved, seeing we cannot resurrect the dead; and sometimes simply demonstrating that you are feeling for them in the early stages of grief, maybe buying a simple present for them, and saying few words, is what's most effective. More rational discussion about God's ethics and possibilities is more appropriate for later in the grieving process.

### **Depression**

About 1 in 5 women and 1 in 10 men experience clinical depression at some time in their lives. Clearly David, Job, Elijah and Jeremiah were seriously depressive people whom we meet in the Bible. Depression isn't a sin, it's a common feature of human life. Many of the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries to Africa and Asia were depressive. There is often the feeling amongst Christians that counselling is unnecessary and we should be able to get direct help from God if we believed strongly enough. But the Bible talks a lot about the need for fellowship, of having many counsellors or close

spiritual friends (Prov. 11:14; 12:15; 13:10; 15:22; 20:18; 24:6). Our need to see counsellors is therefore normal and actually is assumed within Proverbs. It's simply that our modern society has left many so lonely and unattached that they need to select a specific person called a "counsellor" to go visit.

### **Images of God**

"Cognitive therapy" proposes that psychological problems come from faulty learning, drawing incorrect conclusions from too little or wrong information, and not distinguishing adequately between imagination and reality. Disorders can be treated by sharpening discriminations, correcting misconceptions, and learning more adaptive attitude. This very "intellectual" approach has had some success- e.g. in highly consciously focusing upon statements like "I'm afraid of dogs, they always bite me" or "I can no longer drive". People who have "all or none" problems, assuming the house will flood because one tap is slightly leaking into the bath tub, are likely to be helped by this approach. These types ignore good events and focus on bad ones. It's my suggestion that in spiritual terms, we tend to all be in this category. The New Testament on every page impresses upon us the reality of God's grace and the certainty of ultimate salvation for those "in Christ". But we tend to selectively perceive all that encouragement, focusing on the negatives of our present sinful experience rather than those positives. The Bible and the truth, the ultimate truth, of the Gospel surely provide the required "cognitive therapy"- if we allow God's words their due weight.

Many Christians have incorrect images of God, and these lead to a poor relationship with Him. (The same is true for images of Jesus- see "Images of Jesus" in *The Real Christ* ). Some of the false images come from distortions of His attributes, while others are a matter of thinking about God as people think about their parents. This was particularly emphasized by Freud. If the father figure in a family was absent and only indirectly involved with the children, then God tends to be seen the same way; hence many matriarchal families tend to be Roman Catholic, because exactly such a view of God is generally experienced in that religion. Those who see God as keeping a record of wrongs and seeking to punish them heavily will tend to have had father figures like that; the child of an angry father who went into a rage of beating with his children will likely believe in "hell" as a place of torment for sin, rather than simply as the grave. They will also tend to see every negative experience in life as God's punishment, and will earnestly worry what sin they had committed which resulted in that suffering. All this takes time and patience to reprogram, and some people never "get it" emotionally, even if they do in theory.

Father figures who were sometimes absent and unpredictable in behaviour also have a strong influence upon how people perceive God. The most common wrong image seems to be that God is occasionally involved in our lives, but then indifferent; sometimes He doesn't judge sin, other times He as it were lashes out for what seems a minor offence. Others with different parents see God as someone who will not punish any sin, and whom they expect to pamper us- just as their parents never punished them and pampered them. These types often tend to become universalists, believing God will save everyone and that sin is no big deal for Him. The justice of God becomes a minor issue, and thus the message of the cross is devalued.

Others feel that “God” isn’t a personal being, just a force or energy. They have depersonalized God in the same way as perhaps their parents weren’t functional, real persons to them, simply providers of what was required, the “energy” to get through their childhood.

We must ever be aware that we are made in God’s image. Our understanding of Him has implications for our self understanding. If we are truly in His personal image, then we will perceive the value and meaning of persons; not cursing men who are made in God’s image (James 3:9), whether believer or unbeliever. This understanding guards against a tendency in some to despise unbelievers and treat them as less than human.

## **Appendix 8-4: Giving and the Poor**

Our need to respond to “the poor” is one of the Bible’s major themes. But our cash crazy society seems to have persuaded many of us that we fulfil Bible teaching about giving to the poor by giving them money. And if we’re not wealthy- then all the talk about generosity to the poor is irrelevant to us, indeed, we may even be tempted to consider that our wealthier brethren have a duty to give us some cash. I’m aware that the eyes reading these words will include the very rich and the very poor, in material terms. But the theme that I wish to develop is that the poor have very much to give- and they should start doing so.

The early converts of Jesus were materially poor- and yet He told them in His opening manifesto in Matthew 5-7 of their need to give “alms” and to give to the poor. There is the implication that it is the poor for whom the Gospel is intended, and it is they who will respond to it. Mostly the poor responded in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:26); the ecclesiast James wrote to were largely poor (James 2:5); Gospel preaching is characterized by the poor responding to it (Mt. 11:5); it is the poor who are appealed to and compelled to enter the Kingdom (Lk. 14:21). And yet the teaching of Jesus was clearly that those who respond to the Gospel should give to “the poor”. Clearly enough, we must re-examine what He meant by “the poor”.

Imagine for a moment that you are reading the New Testament for the first time. You read of the wonderful offer of salvation, of the future Kingdom of God on earth- and are attracted to it. But then you read that this salvation is only for people who are blind, or who have one leg, or who have green skin. Your spirit falls, you’re very, very disappointed. But then in the small print you read that there may be a few places for other people, who have both legs, who *can* see, or who have your skin colour. But, the places are very very few for them. This is, in fact, what the Bible says- it’s just that the group who will be saved, for the most part, are defined as “the poor”. And there will be a few places for the rich. But not many (1 Cor. 1:26; James 2:5). Whilst He wasn’t unmindful of the materially “poor”, Jesus begins His explanation of the Kingdom life by defining the “poor” as “the poor in spirit” (Mt. 5:3). It’s as if He began His ministry by defining who are “the poor” of whom He would have so much to say; He applied the term to the mentally broken, the spiritually needy. Lk. 4:18 parallels “the poor” with “the brokenhearted... the captives... the bruised”. The whole mission of Jesus was to bring good news to the poor (Is. 61:1,2 cp. Lk. 4:18–21; Mt. 11:5). This doesn’t mean that they material rich are outside the scope of the Gospel. It means that we are all “the poor”. Therefore the huge emphasis on helping the poor applies to the poor themselves- to be generous to the poor in spirit. You don’t need money in your pocket to be generous to “the poor”. Paul could say

that although he was poor, he made many rich (2 Cor. 6:10). In saying this, he clearly perceived his connection with his Lord, who although rich became poor for our sakes (2 Cor. 8:9). Seeing Jesus was never materially rich, we are to understand this as meaning that despite His spiritual riches, the Lord of glory identified with us in our spiritual poverty to the extent that He became as it were “poor”, on the cross He felt as a sinner, although He was not; He felt “forsaken” by God (Mt. 27:46), alluding to the many OT passages which speak of how God will forsake the sinner but never forsake the righteous. For Paul, “riches” were the spiritual blessings in Christ (Rom. 2:4; 9:23; 2 Cor. 8:9; Eph. 1:7,18; 2:4,7)- those without them are therefore the “poor” (Rev. 3:17,18). David during the time of his kingship could describe himself as “poor and needy [because] my heart is wounded within me” (Ps. 40:17; 70:5; 109:22).

The Greek word translated “poor” means literally “the crouchers”- those in desperate need. The common word for “the poor” is that also translated “beggar” (Lk. 16:22). People are in urgent need spiritually- crouched on their haunches, begging for it. Hence Prov. 19:17; 28:8 Heb. speaks of those who “bow down” to the poor [AV “pity the poor”]. We are to come down to their level in seeking to empathize with their position. Note how the opposite of having pity upon the poor is to despise them: “He that despises his neighbour sins; but happy is he that has pity upon the poor” (Prov. 14:21). If you don’t crouch down to their level and identify with them, then you are despising them. And such spiritual elitism and snobbery is reprehensible to the Father and Son who have ‘come down’ to us in our utter desperation. He humbles Himself to behold then things of Heaven and earth, and then goes further and lifts up the poor on this tiny planet (Ps. 113:6,7). The Psalms are full, as our own prayer life should be, of requests for God to “have pity” upon us; we are to respond to those who likewise beg us to “have pity”, not ignoring them nor pretending we didn’t notice. For God didn’t act like that to us. Only insofar as we perceive our own desperation, and God’s very real response to it, will we find strength to respond to “the poor”.

Truly, the poor are always with us in this sense. People are living lives of quiet desperation, and are crouching down begging for our help. The Hebrew word translated “poor” means simply to be in want or need- again, there isn’t the idea that they are financially poor. The unfulfilled, childless woman is in need, the lonely business man, the blind woman... And we are the ones who can come alongside and help. Their need is itself the call for help, even if they don’t verbalize it. Defining “the poor” as ‘those in *need*’ explains why it can be that someone who’s very lacking materially can be happy, never asking anyone for anything, and therefore isn’t particularly in “the poor” category. But there are those who have more, who feel in need- of comfort, of money, of marriage, of better health, of understanding, of children and so forth. Their need is their poverty.

### **Practical Response to the Poor**

One reason why we don’t respond to the poor is because we realize that poverty is in some cases because people have themselves made bad decisions, and they may misuse our assistance. It’s true that often, although not always, poverty is partly due to poor decisions and mismanagement, and any aid given is often misused. And it’s true that the materially poor are partly poor [in many cases] exactly because of that. And yet the Bible teaches generosity to “the poor”. There is no attempt in the Bible teaching about “the poor” to subdivide them into the genuinely poor, and those who are poor because of their own fault or laziness, or who are asking for support when they don’t actually

need it. A person who comes to you claiming need is “the poor”. Thus Israel were not to farm their land in the seventh year, “that the poor of your people may eat” (Ex. 23:11). This immediately raised the issue that all manner of people could eat the fruit which grew naturally on the land that year- but there is no legislation to try to limit who had access to it. Those who had food in their barns might eat what grew- but there was no mechanism within the law which controlled that. The point is, in our spiritual poverty we are just the same. We are in that position partly because of our human situation and other factors over which we have no control; but also partly and largely because we choose to be in it. We cry to God for the riches of His forgiveness- and we waste it, by doing the same sin over and again. Our hold on spiritual things is weak, we don’t respond with the grace and appreciation we ought to. We’re spiritually lazy. We’re no better than those who are materially poor through nothing but their own fault. Our generosity to them is a reflection of our recognition of this. If we stop our ears at the cry of the poor, then *our* cry to God will go unheard (Prov. 21:13); their cry to us and our cry to God are parallel. Even if a family blow their monthly pay cheque in two days and are totally without food for the rest of the month- they are “the poor”. They are in need. And to argue that “I will not assist them because it’s their own fault” is to have no compassion upon the poor. In spiritual terms, you do exactly the same. Every sin is your fault. It was avoidable. But you keep on and on sinning. You were the wounded man, saved by the Samaritan’s grace. Those in need are “the poor”; the issue of the degree to which they are at fault for that need doesn’t declassify their need, their poverty, and our required response. Solomon’s wise judgment of the two prostitutes was surely in conscious fulfilment of how his father had prayed that Solomon would judge and save the poor (Ps. 72:4,12,13). With the full weight of Divine law behind him, Solomon could have condemned those two prostitutes. Instead he perceived their poverty- for whatever reason- and sought justice for them. Solomon seems to have focused upon the fact they were “the poor” without going into all the moral issues which there typically are with many prostitutes.

Dt. 15:7 foresaw that when confronted by the poor, there would be a tendency to “harden your heart and close your hand to your poor brother”; there was no mechanism suggested for determining his genuineness, but rather a command to respond. Indeed Israel were warned not to have “a thought in your wicked heart” and devise how not to be generous to the poor (Dt. 15:9); they were to “open your hand wide” to the poor who approached them (Dt. 15:11). Lest we think this was merely for Old Testament times- these verses are applied to us, by way of allusion, in 1 Jn. 3:17: “But whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and *closes his heart* against him, how does the love of God abide in him?”. In Hebrew thought, “the hand” referred to power and ability. No matter how materially poor, we each have a “hand”- even if it’s not a financial one. And we are to “open” it- the Hebrew word carrying the idea of unloosing, as in untying a sack. It’s as if we’re all tied and twisted up inside ourselves, and it’s this which stops us responding. The most extrovert of persons is like this too- for to reach out to assist another’s poverty involves our opening of ourselves and releasing the potential to help which we’ve each been given. And that is totally independent of our personality type. We are all Christ’s servants, and we’ve each been given talents to trade. It’s one of capitalism’s worst myths that if you have no money, you’re no use to anyone.

The same word is used of how God opens unto us His hand, opens up “His good treasure, the heaven to give rain...” (Dt. 28:12). The cycles of the natural world aren’t running on mindless clockwork; God sends His rain, and so many blessings. He is in this sense “open” and not selfish; His eyes are “open”

in responding to our requests in prayer (1 Kings 8:58). He loves being generous- and we too are to love showing mercy (Mic. 6:8). He delights in forgiveness- and the poorest person has people who need their forgiveness too. Each record of the Lord's feeding miracles mentions how there was a super-abundance [the Greek word used means just that] of provision- baskets full were taken up of the crumbs that were "over" (AV)- that 'super-abounded'. We see here an essay in His love of being generous, almost for the sake of it. God not only loves being generous, but He also identifies Himself with the poor. Therefore "He who is gracious to a poor man lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his good deed" (Prov. 19:17); "He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, but he who is gracious to the needy honours Him" (Prov. 14:31). The Lord taught the same: "To the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me" (Mt. 25:46). Considering that the poor are often poor partly through their own fault, this identity of God with "the poor" is a deep insight into His grace. Indeed, despite this, God appears to be on the side of the poor; His word warns insistently that the possession of wealth, whilst not sinful in itself, is likely to lead us away from salvation, whereas it is "the poor" who will comprise the majority of the redeemed (Mk. 4:19; 10:17-30; Lk. 12:21,33,34; 14:13,21).

If we are truly influenced by the fact that God came into our lives and sought to save us, working extensively through providence to bring us to His Son, our generosity will not simply be to those "poor" who come to our attention. Job could say that he was not only a father to the poor, but "the cause which I knew not I searched out" (Job 29:16). Further, Job wept for him that was in trouble, and grieved for the poor (Job 30:25), seeking to attain real empathy with them. Each of us are to think how we might be generous to the poor- to take initiative. This is a step beyond putting coins in a beggar's hand. When was the last time you actively thought out how you might be generous to the poor, searching out the real need behind that begging hand? "The righteous consider the cause of the poor; but the wicked don't want to understand it" (Prov. 29:7). We are to try to *understand* "the poor", when our natural reaction is to walk away from those whom we consider to be in a hole partly because they dug it, or to quickly respond to their need with a few coins or words- without engaging with them. God's response to our need wasn't tokenistic- it was the very deep engagement with human need which climaxed in the death of His Son on the cross.

### **The Last Days**

The parable of the great supper suggests that in our last days, it is largely "the poor", both economically and spiritually, who will be called to respond (Lk. 14:21). The fact many congregations aren't comprised of these categories suggests the members are there because of a [commendable] following the faith of their fathers, and that those congregations aren't comprised of fresh converts to Christ. A latter day congregation of new converts will typically be "the poor"- the divorced, abused, asylum seekers, HIV positive, hopelessly indebted, smokers, illegal immigrants, one time whores and busted gamblers, inhabitants of the night shelters, the irritating, the mixed up... the types no respectable Protestant church can really cope with.

Yet if we don't help "the poor", we become yet more self-absorbed. It was because Sodom was arrogant, wealthy and unmoved by the poor and needy that "*thus* they committed abominations before Me" (Ez. 16:49). Homosexuality is an outcome of self-obsession, and thus in Sodom's case it was traced back to a mindset which refused to consider others' need. We're living in a self-obsessed

world, where it seems increasingly difficult to truly ‘open our hand’ and be generous to “the poor”; because the tendency is to be caught up in ourselves. And yet therefore and thereby, this is a world increasingly full of “the poor in spirit”. “The poor” are there, on the internet, on the street, in the ecclesiastical bodies, in the workplace... and their very existence is to test whether we have really perceived *our* poverty and cried to God in it, and known His gracious, saving hand.

## **Appendix 8-5: Giving Your First Bible Talk**

### **The Need is the Call**

It’s quite common worldwide that someone learns the Gospel and is baptized, and yet initially they find themselves in isolation, for whatever reason. They share the Gospel with others, and they too are baptized. And then... problems can start to arise. The new believers meet together, and there’s an awkward silence, indeed often everything is so awkward that sometimes they just don’t meet; because nobody feels qualified to lead the meeting. We may feel adequate to share the basic truths of the Gospel with others, but to effectively pastor a small group may seem quite beyond our adequacy and simply not the thing we are good at. But if someone doesn’t do the job, the group will break up, and true Christianity isn’t intended to be lived in isolation. One simple way around the problem is to simply read or listen to recordings of teaching material. But in the end, groups of new converts are intended to grow towards autonomy and spiritual self-sufficiency, rather than depending upon those in other areas who first taught them the Gospel. Someone has to rise up to the challenge. The feeling of inadequacy is in fact our greatest qualification to do the job successfully. For it is the humble who come to God’s word and the work of leading His people with trembling, who are the most qualified and effective in God’s service. Pray for strength and wisdom, as Solomon asked for wisdom in order to benefit God’s people. Whilst we are given talents which we are to use in God’s service, we are also asked to carry a cross- which may involve going right against the grain of our nature, rising up reluctantly to do a job which others aren’t doing, and our very inadequacy becomes the vital quality which God will use. As God told an inadequate Gideon, “go in this your strength”.

### **Consider your Audience**

Choose your Bible passage, and read through it with prayer several times. Consider your audience. What do they need to hear, what warning, what comfort? Choose the issues you are going to address, and recognize that some issues are worth leaving for the time being- just as Jesus ‘left’ the demon issue. In considering your audience, remember that those men and women who sit there before you wearing normal clothes, talking politely and acting in a very normal manner, have all had awful experiences and traumas in their lives. We know that, because the Gospel goes to the broken, imprisoned and tearful. Women have had secret abortions, men have had secret affairs, people have felt guilt and experienced abuse so awful that they often take their stories with them to their graves, untold to anyone. Don’t underestimate that, even though you don’t know the details. Confess your own inadequacy; you are a shepherd who is also a sheep. In considering your audience, ask yourself what you all have in common. You may all be black, or white, or Russian, or people who all lived under a former regime which has been toppled; you may all have in common that you have rejected trinitarianism, belief in a personal Satan etc. Play on that fact, so that the group gels; once the group are all nodding their heads in agreement with what you’ve said, you can better move on to teach them things about which perhaps not all of you will agree. And whilst teaching new things, be sure to reinforce what you have already taught or what you have all

already learnt about basic doctrinal truths of the Gospel. In all you say and teach, be Christ focussed; for supremely it is He whom we have in common.

### **Teaching Style**

The key verse is perhaps Mark 4:33: Jesus taught the word to the people as they were able to hear it. Not as He was able to expound it, but according to their ability to hear. There's little point in talking about the meaning of Greek words and the need to avoid error about the atonement to a brother in the final stages of cancer. You need to read and re-read your chosen section of Scripture many times, asking yourself questions about every phrase- why, when, where, how. Teachers typically teach at a level about 90% below what they know. Thus lecturers teaching undergraduates typically have a PhD; schoolteachers teaching chemistry have a degree in chemistry. If you're teaching people all you know about a subject, you'll find it hard to engage usefully with their questions or discussion about it. Your reading and research on your chosen passage of Scripture will only have a small part of it reflected in what you teach publically. Public teaching isn't the same as writing a book or article about the verses you're considering. Your audience will only remember a few things from all you say; after a few weeks, they may remember only a few percent of all you said. Teach like God and Jesus do- by repeating the basic bullet points you're making. You might even like to write them out. You always have a wide range of experience and ability before you when teaching the Bible- some have been Bible reading believers for many years; for others, this may be one of the first times they've ever read the verses you are commenting upon. But however mature your audience, all need reminding of basic truths. Therefore make your comments practical, and don't get involved in exposition for the sake of exposition. That sort of thing can be better expressed in written form. Remember too that the overall strength which believers take away from a meeting is only partially due to the words of the speaker; it's in conversation and sharing of experience that people find practical encouragement. Think how the ambience of the meeting you're setting up can be improved; don't overestimate the significance of you as a speaker. This will also help you feel better about any criticism you receive for what you say. People are inspired by people rather than abstract ideas; and remember this when choosing which Bible passages to expound. Character studies of David, Ruth, Samson etc. will engage attention far easier than an exposition of Romans.

In researching your verses, you'll run into commentary which seeks to extract significance from the original Hebrew and Greek words. I'd suggest you don't make any points based around the meaning of the original; not only are you likely unqualified to have an opinion about the meaning of the original, but your audience likewise will tend to get lost at this point. Likewise, try not to make your bullet points depend upon any specific translation; exposition and teaching on this level should easily commend itself to the listeners and not depend upon re-translation of the Bible text they have in front of them. Decide what you want to impart to your listeners, and get the message over in simple bullet points. Don't use long sentences. Don't quote too many Bible verses to prove your point- three is quite enough. Whilst personal anecdotes can support the point you're making, don't overuse them; for we preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ. People want to understand the Bible; they don't come to meeting to hear about your personal experiences. And what for you may be very significant in terms of personal anecdote they may or may not find impressive. If your aim is to get bullet points over, then you won't allow questions until you have said your basic message. Not until you are an experienced speaker will you be able to handle interruptions and questions presented during your presentation. Make your presentation, and only then

open it up to discussion. One of the common mistakes I saw in training secular teachers was that they would walk into a classroom and immediately open up a discussion about something, e.g. nuclear disarmament. The pupils discussed, but they were all over the place. They needed to be taught some facts first, and only then be asked to discuss them.

### **To the Glory of God**

Be prepared for criticism, directly and indirectly. Anyone who stands up in a group and teaches is asking for criticism. The focus of attention is on you for that 30 minutes. You can try to break this by getting members of the group to read out the Bible verses you quote, and by being as visual as possible in order to take the focus away from you. But in the end, serving God's people has never been easy, and is often a thankless task- as so much Bible history reminds us. Don't expect great response; when you don't get it, you won't feel deflated. We're only sowing seeds, the seeds of God's word, one or two of which will hopefully take root and glorify God. Pray before and after your presentations that this will happen, knowing that people will remember and reflect upon at least something, however small, of what you have said- that's why you need to quietly pray for your work *after* your presentation. Be self-critical and seek to assess your work; if at all possible, record your talk and play it back. You'll see how you tend to use certain phrases, which helps you get more in touch with yourself and to see yourself from outside of yourself. Reconsider your bullet points, and ponder to what extent you got them over. Think back on the Bible talks you have listened to, and ask yourself what you remember, and why. It's typically throw away comments, asides, rather than the main thrust of exposition, which we remember. Analyze *your* asides very carefully. And always, always, consciously seek the glory of God in what you are doing.