

# The Disciples and the Early Church

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## 15. The disciples

15-1 Introduction: Jesus And The Disciples

15-2 The Training Of The Twelve Disciples

15-3 The Weakness Of The Twelve

15-4 The Disciples' Immaturity

15-5 The Disciples And Judaism

15-6 The Twelve Disciples As Children

15-7 The Disciples And Imputed Righteousness

15-8 The Preaching of The Twelve

15-9 The Spiritual Growth of the Disciples

15-10 Jesus and Judas

15-11 John The Baptist

## 16. The early church

16-1 A Taste Of The First Century: The Positive

16-1-1 " With one accord"

16-1-2 The Early Church Our Example

16-1-3 Prayer Meetings

16-1-4 Christ-centredness

16-1-5 Radical Preaching

16-1-6 Women In The Early Church

16-1-7 The Joy Of Faith

16-2 A Taste Of The First Century: The Negative

16-2-1 Division In The Church

16-2-2 Politics In The Church

16-3 Unity And Division In The First Century

16-3-1 Unity And Division In The First Century Church

16-3-2 Oikonomia And Household Fellowships

16-3-3 Rich And Poor In The First Century

16-3-4 Unity In The Church

16-3-5 The First Century Mediterranean Understanding Of Society

16-4 The Obstacles

16-4-1 The Obstacles To The Growth Of Christianity

16-4-2 The offence of the cross

16-4-3 The rejection of Caesar

16-4-4 Women And Slaves In The First Century

16-4-5 The Roman Empire And Christianity

16-4-6 The Attraction Of Judaism

16-4-7 Other First Century Objections To Christianity

16-5 How They Succeeded

16-5-1 Why Christianity Spread In The First Century

16-5-2 The Example Of The Community

16-5-3 House Meetings In The First Century

16-5-4 Witness In The Workplace

- 16-5-5 The Witness Of Christian Unity In The First Century
- 16-5-6 The Role Of Women In The First Century
- 16-5-7 Style Of Preaching In The First Century
- 16-5-8 Christian Ethics In The First Century
- 16-5-9 The Exclusivity Of Christianity
- 16-5-9-1 The Openness Of Early Christianity
- 16-5-10 Early Christian Doctrine
- 16-6 Where Things Went Wrong
- 16-6-1 Doctrinal Apostasy
- 16-6-2 The Rise Of Traditions
- 16-6-3 Legalism In The Church
- 16-6-4 Social Tensions In The Church
- 16-6-5 Wealth In The Church
- 16-6-6 Worldliness In The Church
- 16-6-7 Lost Emphasis Upon Grace
- 16-6-8 Loss Of Faith In The Church
- 16-6-9 Poor Church Leadership
- 16-6-10 Dogmatism And Legalism

## Chapter 15: The Disciples

### 15.1 Introduction: Jesus And The Disciples

The Lord Jesus without doubt focused upon the twelve disciples; they were His special love, His predominant concern. And when they came to write up their records of their experience of this amazing Master, they bring this out very much. He clearly chose them in order to impress His character upon them, and then left them to continue the witness to Him. Even in high society, surrounded by the elitist Pharisees, He spoke parables which were to them- even though the others heard (Lk. 16:1,14; 20:45). There is a repeated feature, in Luke particularly, of the Lord teaching the twelve in front of a multitude- as if the huge crowds were there just listening to what the Lord was speaking specifically to the twelve. When one of the crowd interrupts, the Lord quickly returns His focus to the twelve (Lk. 6:19,20 cp. 7:1; 12:1,13,22). For Jesus, the disciples were His focus and priority.

Those twelve men who walked around Palestine with their Lord are symbols of us all. There is a continuity in Luke-Acts between “the disciples” who followed the Lord, and “the disciples” as a title for all the Christian believers. We are their continuation. A study of them is therefore especially important for us. 2 Jn. 6 speaks of the commandment which we readers received " from the beginning" . But " the beginning" in John frequently if not always refers to the 'beginning' or [Gk.] 'first association' which the twelve disciples had with the Lord Jesus. Again, we are spoken of as if we are them, and their experiences were ours.

### Jesus And The Disciples: Identifying Himself With Them

The Lord’s basic understanding of us is that we are to become brethren *in Him*. He ever sought to teach the disciples to not only worship and respect Him, but to rise up to emulate His example, and to act and feel as part of Him. When He saw Nathanael under the fig tree, He commented that here was a man who had the good side of Jacob, an Israelite indeed, in whom was no guile. But the Lord then goes on to liken *Himself* to Jacob, saying that Angels would ascend and descend upon Him as they had upon Jacob (Jn. 1:47,51). What He was

basically trying to say to His new disciple was that ‘You’re like Jacob! But, I’m like Jacob too. And you will powerfully realize the significance of this a bit later on’. He was seeking always to build up an identity between Himself and His followers. This is so different to admiring a man as one admires a picture, and assenting to him as a leader. This is about a unique and intimate relationship, bonding and identity with Him. Nathanael no doubt puzzled over the Lord’s enigmatic words, as we likely have also done. His enigmatic style was to provoke just such reflection, to lead Nathanael to realize the force of the identification with Him which the Lord was inviting.

## 15.2 The Training Of The Twelve Disciples

### Progressive Teaching

It seems to me that all the Lord's servants are taught by increments, progressively, being given tests as to the degree to which they have grasped what the Lord has sought to teach them previously. Take Saul. At the beginning of his intended ministry, he was told by Samuel to wait for his coming, when he would offer sacrifices (1 Sam. 10:8). Saul obediently obeyed; yet when he was tested on this very point in this very way at a later stage, he failed. It is for this reason that, as we have observed in our study of Samson, circumstances repeat so strangely in the lives of God's people.

And the Lord Jesus used a similar structured approach with the training of the twelve disciples. When the Lord commented “Have you not yet faith?” (Mk. 4:40 RV) it becomes immediately apparent that He was working with the twelve according to some programme of spiritual development, and He was frustrated with their lack of response to it and slow progress. He surely has a similar programme in place, and makes similar patient efforts, with each one of us. Like any good teacher, the Lord repeated His lessons. The disciples heard His commendation of the Centurion, who believed that just as he had men under his control, so Jesus had the whole cosmos under His control (Lk. 7:8-10); and they learnt that lesson again as they sat awestruck in the boat soon afterwards: "What manner of man is this! For he commands even the winds and water, and they obey him" (Lk. 8:25).

Time and again, it becomes apparent that the Lord especially designed incidents in His men’s experience which they would learn from, and later be able to put to use when similar experiences occurred after He had ascended. This was essential to the training of the twelve disciples.

- Thus He made *them* distribute the food to the multitude (Jn. 6:11); yet after His ascension, we meet the same Greek word in Acts 4:35, describing how they were to distribute welfare to the multitude of the Lord’s followers.

- Jesus seems to have purposefully not gone to Lazarus immediately, knowing that the longer he remained dead, the greater would be the impression made upon the disciples when they saw the miracle He planned to do (Jn. 11:15). He was even glad that Lazarus died- even though He wept over the loss of His friend. Thus His joy, which He invites us to share, is not mere personal joy- it was the joy for the sake of others’ spiritual growth.

- The disciples observed as Jesus made a lame man *arise*, take up his bed, and follow Him (Lk. 5:25). But in Acts 9:34, we find Peter doing just the same to Aeneas, even taking him by

the hand as he had seen Jesus do to Jairus' daughter. What Peter had seen and learnt of the Lord Jesus, he was now called to do. Not for nothing did he tell Aeneas that "Jesus Christ maketh thee whole", thereby recognizing the connection between him and his Lord.

- Likewise when Peter resurrects Dorcas, he asked the weeping crowd to depart before he raised her (Acts 9:39,40)- exactly repeating the Lord's procedure when He raised Jairus' daughter. Note how she is laid in a chamber, she is spoken to by Peter, she opens her eyes and sits up, and Peter presents her alive and asks for her to be given food. All this was evidently parallel to what Peter had been especially invited by Jesus to come and witness when He raised the girl during His ministry. The events Peter had been witnessed had been especially arranged so that when they repeated themselves in his future life, he was able to see the similarities and act as a true follower and mimicker of his Lord.

In broad terms, it is possible to see a parallel between our present lives, and the disciples' lives whilst Jesus was with them. We too are going through the same training of the twelve, being prepared today for things we shall be called upon to do in God's Kingdom tomorrow. How deeply and fundamentally we learn the lessons will perhaps determine the extent and nature in which the Lord can again use us in that time.

### 15-3 The Weakness Of The Disciples

The disciples' persistent failure to grasp our Lord's teaching must have been a great source of trial and frustration for Him. Despite His warnings about His coming sufferings, the disciples failed to comprehend this; perhaps partly due to Jesus Himself fluctuating between talking of his death in both literal and then figurative terms. In His time of greatest need of encouragement He found them sadly lacking in any real degree of spirituality beyond a fanatic allegiance to Him. And yet He graciously thanked them for continuing with Him in His temptations, even though they fell asleep (Lk. 22:28). We can under-estimate how sensitive He is to our feeble spirituality, and how even the basic will to be loyal, no matter how much we fail in practice, means so much to Him. Yet their lack of comprehension must have been especially tragic, since one of the reasons for the gift of the disciples was to help Jesus through the pain of His ministry, and this was to culminate in the cross. After the Jews' first council of war against Christ, He prayed for strength and was answered by being given the twelve (Lk. 6:11-13). No doubt He found the soldiers' mocking him because of Peter's weeping and weakness (Lk. 22:62,63) especially hard to take (Mk. 14:69 implies the courtyard conversation was also about the disciples). Likewise their angry "Carest thou not that we perish?" (Mk. 4:38). His whole life and death were because He *did* so care that they would not perish (Jn. 3:16). It's so reminiscent of a child's total, if temporary, misunderstanding and lack of appreciation of the parent's love and self-sacrifice.

The Lord's goodbye address in Jn. 14-16 has many connections with those of Moses and Joshua, in which they expressed fear that after their death there would be a mass falling away within Israel, and their guise of spirituality would give way due to their lack of a real word-based faith. This further indicates the weakness of the disciples. Our Lord's speech was shot through with doubt of the twelve and recognition of the weakness of the disciples, which needs tabulating to show its full force:

- " If I go...I will come again" - using logic to answer their implied doubt.
- :5 " We know not whither Thou goest"
- :7 " If ye had known me"
- :9 " Have I been so long with you, and yet hast thou not known me?"
- :10,11 " Believest thou?...believe me"
- :14 " If ye shall ask..."
- :15 " If ye love me...if ye loved me, ye would rejoice...if a man love me" (v.28,23)
- 15 :4 " Abide in me...no more can ye, except ye abide in me...without me ye can do nothing...if ye abide in me"
- :9,14,15 " Continue ye...ye are my friends, if ye...I have called you friends" - implying 'But you've got to live up to it'.
- :17 " These things I command you" - emphatic, desperate warning
- :20 " Remember the word"
- 16 :1 " That ye should not be offended"
- :5 " None of you asketh me, Whither goest Thou?" - implying Jesus was disappointed that they hadn't. " Sorrow hath filled your heart" (v.6) seems a similar rebuke.
- :24 " Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name; ask..."
- :31 " Do ye now believe? (said almost sarcastically)...ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone" - cp. Joshua and Moses questioning Israel whether their commitment was really what they claimed, and warning that

after their death they would soon fall away.

### Limited Faith And Understanding

On their own admission in the Gospel records, the understanding of the disciples was pitiful. Not only did they not really listen to the Lord's words, the words of the Only Begotten Son of God, but they retained many misconceptions from the world around them which did not accept Him. Here are a few brief examples:

- They failed to see after two miracles relating to bread, that literal bread was not so significant to the Lord (Mk. 8:19-21)
- Twice they wanted to turn away those who wished to come to Jesus, and whom He wished to accept (Mt. 14:15; 15:23). As with the two miracles of bread, the second incident was giving them the opportunity to learn the lesson from the first incident- and yet they failed. Likewise they "forbad" John's disciples just as they wrongly "forbad" the little children to come to Him (Lk. 9:50).
- When we read that "there cometh one from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying to him, Thy daughter is dead, trouble not the Master" (Lk. 8:49), we naturally ask: *who* was this "one" who came with this message? In the Gospels, it is often the disciples who term Jesus "the Master". The implication is that it was they who thought that Jesus wouldn't have the power to raise the dead, perhaps connecting with their own studied lack of faith in His resurrection later.
- They tried to do miracles without even praying about it (Mk. 9:29)
- They knew not what manner of spirit the Lord had given them (Lk. 9:55)
- Jn. 1:38 records how the disciples were asked: "What seek ye?", and they reply: "Where dwellest thou?". Remember that this is John, one of them, recording their response. It's as if he's pointing out how inappropriate was their response to Jesus; rather like the record of Peter wanting to build a tent for Jesus, Moses and Elijah so they stay a bit longer. *They* had responded inappropriately- and yet they urged their hearers and readers to respond appropriately.
- When the Lord taught them about His death, they always seem to have started arguing amongst themselves; the tremendous significance of what He was saying was evidently lost on them (Mk. 9:31-34; 10:34-38).
- They were amazed that it was hard for rich people to enter the Kingdom (Mk. 10:24)
- Mk. 11:14,21,22 imply that Peter was amazed that something the Lord had predicted about the fig tree had actually come true.
- After their failure of faith on the lake, they describe themselves as the men who were in the ship- as if they felt unworthy to call themselves disciples of the Lord (Mt. 14:33). Yet

remember that these records were written or spoken *by them* in their preaching of the Gospel, and recounting their own experiences.

- "Your unbelief" (Mt. 17:20). "Ye of little faith" (Lk. 12:22,28); they had "no faith" (Mk. 4:40). "Where is your faith?" (Lk. 8:25). They asked for their faith to be increased (Lk. 17:5). Luke records that the Centurion had more faith than the disciples (Lk. 7:9).

- The disciples were told to sell what they had (Lk. 12:22,32,33); but it seems they kept their fishing business. After having asked them this, the Lord again had to speak to them about forsaking all that they had (Lk. 14:33). Their claim to have left literally all and followed Him (Lk. 18:28) appears somewhat exaggerated. To follow Him meant taking up a cross (Lk. 14:27).

- Lk. 10:20 implies that their elation at being able to pull off miracles was wrong, or at best immature; rather should they have rejoiced that their names were written in Heaven.

- Mt. 19:9,10 records how they thought that the Lord's policy of no divorce except for "fornication" meant that marriage was "not good". And yet the Genesis record clearly states that it was "not good" for a man to be unmarried. Matthew in his own [over-ruled] word choice seems to be commenting how they were out of step with the spirit of Genesis.

- They so often feared (Lk. 8:25; 9:34,45; Mk. 4:40; 6:50; 10:32); despite the Lord repeatedly telling them not to be afraid (Lk. 12:4,32; Jn. 14:27).

- They were preaching the words of the Gospels in response to their Lord's command to go preach. Yet Jn. 4:35,38 records them recognizing that they didn't appreciate how great the harvest was, and indeed the harvest was spoilt because of the weakness of the disciples.

- Their records bring out their own fickleness. After having been awed by the Lord's stilling of the storm, they are soon almost mocking Him for asking who had touched Him, when hundreds of the jostling crowd had touched Him (Lk. 8:25 cp. 45).

- They ask the Lord to send the multitude away (Mk. 6:36), whereas Jesus had taught by word and example, that whoever came to Him He would not turn away (Jn. 6:37), and had just shown that He did not 'send away' the demons from the sick man, because the man had asked for them not to be sent [far] away (Mk. 5:10).

- Jn. 6:15-17 implies they got tired of waiting for the Lord Jesus to return from prayer, and so they pushed off home to Capernaum, leaving Him alone. Yet by grace He came after them on the lake, to their salvation.

- They interrupted a parable, clearly not understanding it (Lk. 19:25). Yet the Lord said that His parables were only not understood by the unbelieving Jewish world.

- Even much of the spirituality and understanding which they appeared to have was in fact only of a surface level. He complains that none of them ask Him "Whither goest thou?" (Jn. 16:5)- even though they had just asked Him those very words (Jn. 13:36). They said the words, but not from a heart of true understanding. It's an epitome of the weakness of the disciples.

- It was the disciples who called Jesus 'Master'. When we read that "there cometh one from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying to him, Thy daughter is dead: trouble not the Master" (Lk. 8:49), we are presumably intended by Luke to understand this messenger as actually a disciple. Again, the record is emphasizing how limited was the disciples' vision and faith in Jesus.

- The Lord had to tell the disciples after the resurrection to "Break your fast" (Jn. 21:12 RV). Despite the Lord having appeared to them as recorded in John 20, they were fasting for the dead. No wonder the Lord urged them to break that fast. But the point is made, by John himself, as to how terribly slow they were to believe in His resurrection.

- Luke records that the Lord sent out 72 preachers (Lk. 10:1)<sup>(1)</sup>. The Jews understood that there were 72 nations in the world, based on the LXX of Gen. 10. Surely Luke's point is that they went only to the Jews, thus highlighting the gap between the disciples' understanding at the time, and the Lord's further reaching intention of a mission to the Gentiles.

- When you think about it, the record in Mt. 19:9 is not at all to the disciples' credit. They state that if you can't divorce, it's better not to marry. But Matthew records the Lord explaining that the standard for God's people is the one man: one woman for life which we find in Genesis. And yet Matthew also records how the disciples totally failed to appreciate that at the time, by making the comment that marriage was a bad idea if there could be no divorce.

- It's easy to misinterpret Jn. 16:16: "A little while and ye behold me no more... ye shall see me". Elsewhere in John, beholding or seeing the Son doesn't refer to physically seeing Him, but rather to understanding and believing in Him (Jn. 1:14,29,36,50; 6:40; 12:21; 14:9,19; 17:24 etc.). The Lord surely meant: 'Soon, you will no longer see / understand / believe me... but, in the end, you *will* understand / believe in me'. And John, the author or speaker of this Gospel record, was one of those being referred to. So he, and all the disciples, would've been appealing to people to see / understand / believe in Jesus, whilst openly telling them that they themselves had once lost that understanding / belief which they once had, even though they regained it later.

- The crowds that followed the Lord didn't understand His parables; in fact, He spoke in parables so that they wouldn't understand, as He intended His teaching only to be grasped by the disciples (Mk. 7:17,18). Therefore, in that very context, it is significant to read of the Lord's frustration and disappointment when the disciples likewise didn't understand the parables. And the record goes on to show that in fact it was a regular occurrence, that they like the crowds didn't understand the parables, and the Lord had to explain to them later. So the disciples, contrary to the Lord's high hopes of them, were no better than the crowds. They too 'didn't get it'; and Mark's [i.e. Peter's] record of the Gospel therefore brings out the point that they too, the ones now preaching to the crowds, only got the understanding they did of the Lord by an undeserved grace. This is the kind of humility we need in our teaching of others, especially when it involves correcting their lack of understanding on a point.

It was popular in the first century for religions to 're-publish' the teachings of their leader in story form, along with some pious biography of the founder and his initial followers. To this was added a condensation of the teacher's sayings into some fixed code that was binding upon the religion<sup>(2)</sup>. The



Gospels are in that sense in a similar genre- but they are radically different, because they show the initial followers to be so human, and hardly pious; and they present no fixed moral code distilled from the Lord's teachings. Rather they present simply a Man, a personality, which is to be the pattern for His followers.

Both Matthew and Mark record how the people mocked Jesus over His comment that if the temple were destroyed, He would rebuild it in three days (Mt. 27:40; Mk. 15:29). This had also been an issue at the Lord's trial (Mt. 26:60). Yet John records that when the Lord actually said those words, the disciples didn't believe those words and actually forgot them until the time of the resurrection (Jn. 2:22). The implications of that are tragic. The Lord's critics remembered His words more than His disciples did. And as He stood there in the awful loneliness of His trial, and hung there in the desolation of crucifixion, and heard those taunts based around His earlier words... He would've known that His own men had forgotten those words and likewise disbelieved them. No wonder after the resurrection He raised the matter with them. My point in this context is that John's comment in Jn. 2:22 about the fact the disciples forgot those words until after the resurrection... is actually a conscious recognition by the disciples of their own tragic weakness in understanding and support of their Lord. And it is within their own preaching of the Gospel that they make this point.

## Notes

(1) 72 rather than 70 appears to be the best reading of the texts here. For justification of it, see K. Aland, M. Black, B.M. Metzger, A. Wikgren eds., *The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983).

(2) M. Hadas & M. Smith, *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies In Antiquity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); C.W. Votaw, *The Gospels And Contemporary Biographies* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

## 15-4 The Disciples' Immaturity

The Lord pointed out to the disciples how the extreme generosity of the widow, giving the two pennies of her business capital, her "living", to the Lord, was worth far more than the ostentatious giving of the wealthy Jewish leadership (Mk. 12:44); but the next incident recorded by Mark is the disciples marvelling at the ostentatious buildings of the temple, and the Lord explaining that all this needed to be thrown down (Mk. 13:1,2). Even after the acted parable of the feet washing, there was still a strife amongst them about who should be greatest. They'd clearly not grasped the Lord's teaching and example about not worrying about what place we take at a dinner (Lk. 22:24). Indeed, their mental block in understanding His clear prophecies about His death is almost incredible. Here above all we see the disciples' immaturity. Peter even smites Malchus in order to stop the Lord having to drink the cup of suffering; Peter was willing to die so that the Lord didn't have to die... (Jn. 18:10,11). It appears there was a total haze over their memory at times. Jn. 12:16 says that they only remembered [not even 'understood'] the triumphal entry after the resurrection- as if they were so insensitive and imperceptive that these things were all just a haze to them (Jn. 16:4). This lack of understanding about His death was all the more tragic when we realize that the crucified Jesus was the essence of Jesus. To know Him crucified was and is to know Him.

When men asked “We would see Jesus”, He responded by giving a prophecy of His death (Jn. 12:21)- just as the broken bread *is* Him; His death is the essence of Him. He continues by saying that if a man lost his life for Him, then that man would be with Jesus where He is. Those who want to know where Jesus is, to see Him, have to die His death (Jn. 12:25,26). The fact they did *not* appreciate His death meant, therefore, that they didn’t really appreciate *Him*. And they so openly stress this in their Gospels. If, as we have discussed elsewhere, Mark is really Peter’s Gospel, it is surely significant that Mark especially emphasizes how Peter especially didn’t understand the need for Jesus to suffer crucifixion (Mk. 8:17-21,27-33; 9:6,32; 14:37). Showing the chinks in our own armour is surely the way to be a credible warrior for the Gospel.

The disciples’ immaturity and disbelief in the news of the resurrection is maybe the clearest and most tragic example. Their unbelief is so stressed. Even earlier, they had failed to understand His comment that Lazarus ‘slept’ (Jn. 11:12,13). They failed to see that the Lord was implying a resurrection; their minds were too much on the literal and immediate. The news of His resurrection was treated by them as the “idle tales” of a mentally deranged woman (Lk. 24:11). Lk. 24:17,21-24 shows how they were depressed because the Lord’s body was missing, and the women had this crazy idea that He’d risen; and worst of all, it was now the third day since His death, when the body would have clearly decomposed. The very third day that He had predicted His resurrection should have been the time of their highest hopes! And yet it was the nadir of their faith in Him! Note also that it was a shameful thing for a Jew not to believe the Old Testament prophecies. Yet Jn. 2:22 records plainly that they, as Jews, didn’t believe neither the Old Testament prophecies of resurrection nor the Lord’s own predictions. They shared the general Jewish blindness to their own scriptures (Jn. 2:20).

The Lord “upbraided” the disciples for their immaturity and unbelief concerning His cross and resurrection (Mk. 16:14). The Greek word is always used in a very severe context of ‘reviling’ (Mt. 5:11; 11:20; 27:44; Rom. 15:3; 1 Tim. 4:10); it’s a tough and abusive word. It appears out of place when applied to the Lord. Yet what it indicates is that the Lord was so angry with them for not believing the witness of the women. Discounting people’s experience of Jesus merely on account of their gender or background was *so* angering to the Lord. And He’s the same today.

*We could sum all this up by saying that almost every time the disciples are mentioned- i.e. when they mention themselves in the Gospel records they wrote- it is in a negative context*

Even John the Baptist, whose teaching had prepared most of the twelve to accept Jesus, seems to have not been altogether clear about what we might consider fundamental things. He speaks of Jesus as “the one to come”, a commonly understood description of the Elijah prophet, based on the phrase being used about him in Mal. 3:1- and not of Messiah Himself. Thus John the Baptist anticipated that this “one to come”, his cousin Jesus, would be a refining fire (Mt. 3:12)- which is exactly Malachi’s language about the Elijah prophet (Mal. 3:2; 4:1). This would explain why John the Baptist had apparent ‘doubts’ whilst in prison as to whether Jesus really was the Messiah. And it would also explain why the disciples expected Jesus to act like Elijah in Lk. 9:52-56. It was not until the baptism of Jesus that John the Baptist came to understand Jesus as the “one to come”; so the preparatory work which he had done with the disciples must have had what we would call a flimsy doctrinal basis. When Jesus called them to follow Him, and they so quickly obeyed, it is often assumed that John the Baptist had prepared them for this. But that preparation must at best have been very shallow and incomplete, given John’s own admission that he did not recognize Jesus for who

He was until His baptism. Why, however, was John's misunderstanding recorded in the Gospel records? Or the misunderstanding of his father Zacharias, that John was in fact the promised Messiah, "the prophet", the one would bring forgiveness of sins and freedom from the Romans (Lk. 1:71-79)? Perhaps for the same reason as the language of demons is used, especially to describe the miracles at the beginning of the Lord's ministry. He didn't correct this. But over time it became evident that the sheer power of the Son of God meant that in practice, demons didn't exist. Likewise, as the ministry of Jesus unfolds to us in the Gospel records, it becomes apparent that He was Son of God, the Messiah- and not merely an Elijah prophet.

The disciples' immaturity and slowness to understand was evidently frustrating for the Lord. He used them to perform the miracle of feeding the 5,000, and followed this with the wonderful discourse recorded in Jn. 6 about the bread of life. He then led them into a situation where again they had to feed a multitude of 4,000, presumably to see if they had learnt the lessons of the previous miracle- and they made the same basic mistakes and lack of faith and perception. He then followed this up with a comment about being ware of the leaven of the Pharisees- and again they failed the test, assuming He was talking about literal yeast, and perhaps worrying that they had one load of leavened bread with them in the boat. They totally failed to grasp the basic point- that the Lord's miracles were of such a magnitude that issues to do with physical bread were insignificant. He lamented the fact that their eyes were closed to His real meaning; and then sought to demonstrate their position by healing a blind man in two stages. Firstly, he was given partial sight, he saw men like trees. And then the Lord gave him full sight, and told him to tell nobody. He then draws a parallel between this man and the disciples, by telling them to tell nobody that He was the Christ. He wanted them to realize that they too were partially sighted in spiritual terms, seeing things in a blurred and grotesquely physical way, as the partially healed man saw men as trees. And then He goes on to tell them that although they were only physically, externally following Him- for He turned and spoke to them, telling Peter to *truly* walk behind Him and take up his cross. They did not really understand that to follow Him was to pick up a cross and voluntarily embark upon the 'last walk' of the crucified, as a way of life. This is how the record of Mk. 8 brings out His dealings with the twelve. Yet the parallel record in Mt. 16 records Him praising Peter for understanding that He was indeed the Christ, the Son of God. He was so enthusiastic about what little they *did* grasp. He revealed the fullness of the Father to them- and yet they didn't understand even basic predictions and teachings which He gave them. And so that proposition becomes all the more awesome: He was so enthusiastic about what little they *did* grasp.

In this context the Lord asks them how many baskets they had gathered up on the two occasions; and then asks them why they still don't "understand" that issues to do with leaven and such physical, earthly rules are of no real moment. He doesn't say 'Remember how I fed all those people, on two occasions?'. No, He asks them whether they remember how many baskets of waste food they gathered up. It must have taken them several hours on each occasion to clear up after several thousand people had gorged themselves on the Lord's bread, leaving crusts and half eaten loaves all over the place. Why were those people fed? Yes, because the Lord had compassion upon their basic human need. But more essentially, the incident occurred so that the disciples would have to go round clearing up the mess of the excess bread, and thereby reflect and *understand*. We learn from this that things can happen which affect the lives of thousands of people, all for the sake of twelve men and some women *understanding* and learning what God intends. All things truly are for our sakes. Political change can happen in nations purely for the sake of a handful of believers there, who may

need to learn something. The Angels make huge things happen in geopolitics *for our sakes*. Yet we too can be so slow to learn.

The Lord had repeatedly implied that He would be the greatest in the Kingdom, because He humbled Himself the most. When the disciples asked Him “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom?” (Mt. 18:1), they therefore reflected a complete lack of appreciation of His greatness. The disciples' immaturity and squabbling amongst themselves had led them to forget the superlative greatness of the One who stood and sat and walked amongst them. And conversely, they had failed to allow His surpassing greatness to make all discussion about which of them was the greatest absolutely irrelevant. Thus their perception of His greatness, the extent of it, and the nature of it, only grew *after* His death.

## 15.5 The Disciples And Judaism

The disciples were evidently still under the influence of Judaism and the religious world around them, and this background died hard for them. “Why say the scribes...?”, they reasoned (Mk. 9:11), implying that their view was of at least equal if not greater weight when compared with that of the Lord Jesus [as they also did in Mt. 17:9,10]. He had to specifically warn them against the Scribes in Lk. 20:45,46; He had to specifically tell them not to address the Rabbis as ‘father’ (Mt. 23:8,9), implying they had too much respect for them. Although the disciples marvelled at His miracles at the time He did them, they seem to have doubted at times whether He was really that super-human. When He said “Let us go up to Judaea again”, they respond like He is crazy: “Goest *thou* [you singular] there again?”, they respond. They feared the Jews would kill Him, even though they had seen Him walk through the Nazareth crowd who tried to throw Him over a cliff (Jn. 11:7,8). The Lord encouraged them that the teaching which He was giving them would enable them to be like the Scribes, but bringing out great treasures from the riches of their understanding (Mt. 13:51,52). This was a great challenge of course to illiterate men, who had been groomed in a worldview of respecting your religious elders. Equality let alone superiority to them was a shocking and radical concept. “Let them alone...” was a hard thing for them to hear (Mt. 15:14). They were amazed at His teaching that a rich man could hardly enter His Kingdom (Mt. 19:25- all three synoptic records have this incident)- presumably because they were under the impression that the rich were rich because they were blessed by God and were righteous. They were worried that the Pharisees were not happy with the Lord’s teaching (Mt. 15:12). He had to warn them *above all* of the danger of the influence [yeast] of the Pharisees (Lk. 12:1). And yet they still misunderstood Him- they thought He was talking about literal bread (Mk. 8:15,16). The message of Christ crucified was “hid” from them (Lk. 9:45; 18:34)- and Paul surely alludes to this when he says that this message is hid by the veil of Judaism from those who are lost (2 Cor. 4:3). The way the disciples speak of the Scribes as if they have such a valid theological position reflects their upbringing and respect for the ruling elite of the synagogue (Mt. 17:10), with whom the Lord was at such total variance. They were concerned that the Pharisees had been offended by the Lord’s words (Mt. 15:12). The disciples repeat the Pharisees’ question about when the end will come- in almost the same words. They were clearly influenced by them (Lk. 17:20 cp. Mk. 13:4).

The Lord rebuked the disciples for 'forbidding' John's disciples and the little ones to come to Him (Mt. 19:14; Mk. 9:38); and yet He uses the same word to describe how the lawyers hindered [s.w. 'forbad'] people to enter the Kingdom. There's a very clear parallel here between the disciples and their Jewish teachers who had so influenced their thinking. But they finally got there- for Peter insisted that Gentiles should not be forbidden [s.w. 'hinder'] baptism (Acts 10:47); and he uses the same word again when he says that now, he will not "withstand [s.w. 'hinder'] God in hindering people to come to Him (Acts 11:17). The awfulness of the disciples' attitude is brought out by the use of the word in 1 Thess. 2:16, where Paul says that the way the Jews 'forbad' or hindered the preaching of the Gospel was cause for the wrath of God to come upon them "to the uppermost". And the disciples initially followed their Jewish elders in this kind of behaviour. In passing, there is a sober warning here to those who would likewise 'forbid' baptism to those who sincerely seek it.

When Jesus returned from the Mount of Transfiguration, He found that the disciples had failed to do a cure because of their lack of faith. He describes them as [part of] a “faithless generation” (Lk. 9:40,41), again indicating how the disciples were all too influenced by

Judaism, the “generation” or world around them. The disciples and Judaism / the Jewish world are paralleled in Jn. 7:3,4: “Let your disciples see your work...shew yourself to the world”.

The Lord Jesus has to say the same words to the Jews as He does to the disciples:

<i>Phrase</i>	<i>To the Jews</i>	<i>To the disciples</i>
“I am to be with you only a little longer”	Jn. 7:33	Jn. 13:33
“You will look for me”	Jn. 7:34; 8:21	Jn. 13:33
“Where I am going, you cannot come”	Jn. 7:34; 8:21	Jn. 13:33

And there are parables which one Gospel describes as spoken to the Jews, and another Gospel states were spoken to the disciples. Just as the Lord's synagogue-influenced brothers wanted Him to show Himself openly to the world (Jn. 7:4), so did the disciples (Jn. 14:22). There was that hankering for Him to openly display Himself as the Messiah which Judaism had created within its own mind. The Lord recognized the influence of the synagogue upon them when He said that He spoke to them in parables, and would later speak to them plainly (Jn. 16:25)- when He had earlier spoken to the Jewish world in parables rather than plainly, because they did not understand (Mk. 4:34). And yet they got there in the end. He spoke to them in the end " plain words" (*parresia*), and this word is the watchword of the disciples' own witness to the world (Acts 2:29; 4:13,29,31; 28:31). They spoke " plainly" (*parresia*) to the world, without parables, because they reflected to the world the nature of their understanding of their Lord. However, during His ministry, it would appear that the Lord treated them as if they were still in the Jewish world. When they asked Him why He spoke to *the people* in parables, He replies by explaining why He spoke *to them* in parables; and He drives the point home that it is to those “outside” that He speaks in parables (Mk. 4:11).

The twelve evidently saw Jesus of Nazareth as a Rabbi, their special, lovable, somewhat mystic teacher at whose feet they sat. But the disciples saw Jesus within the frames of Judaism. " What does this mean? He tells us..." (Jn. 16:17) is similar to a familiar Rabbinic formula. But of course Jesus was far more than a Rabbi, and He laboured to change their perceptions. For example, He stresses many times that *He* chose *them* to be His disciples (especially Jn. 15:16-19)- whereas in Judaism, it was always disciples who chose a Rabbi: "Jesus chose the disciples, but the students of the rabbis almost always chose a teacher" (1). The words of the Lord Jesus were the words which He had 'heard' from the Father. But this doesn't mean that He was a mere fax machine, relaying literal words which the Father whispered in His ear to a listening world. When the disciples finally grasped something of the real measure of Jesus, they gasped: " You do not even need that a person ask you questions!" (Jn. 16:30). They had previously treated Jesus as a Rabbi, of whom questions were asked by his disciples and then cleverly answered by him. They finally perceived that here was more than a Jewish Rabbi. They came to that conclusion, they imply, not by asking Him questions comprised of words and hearing the cleverly ordered words that comprised His answers. The words He spoke and manifested were of an altogether higher quality and nature. Here was

none other than the Son of God, the Word made flesh.

And yet although the twelve called Jesus 'Rabbi', they didn't respect Him initially as the *only* Rabbi. Because the disciples were too influenced by Judaism. The Lord has to remind the disciples to call no man their rabbi or 'father' on earth, i.e. in the land, of Israel (Mt. 23:8,9). 'Father' was a common title for the rabbis, who referred to their disciples as their 'sons'. The disciples clearly respected the apostate rabbis far more than He wanted them to.

When the disciples first encounter Jesus, they heap upon Him the Messianic titles of Judaism: Rabbi, Messiah, the one described in the Law and prophets, Son of God, King of Israel (Jn. 1:35-51). And yet the other Gospels bring out how Peter's confession that Jesus is the Son of God is in fact due to a special revelation from the Father, and was somehow a seminal point of faith and comprehension which Peter had reached (Mt. 16:16,17). Surely the point of the apparent contradiction is to show that over time, the disciples started to put meaning into words; the Jewish terms and titles which they had once so effortlessly used, they came to use with real appreciation. We have shown elsewhere that a mature appreciation of the name and titles of the Father and Son is indeed a mark of spiritual maturity.

The record of the disciples' murmuring in John 6 reflects how influenced they were by the Jews around them. "The Jews then murmured at him", and the Lord rebukes them: "Murmur not among yourselves". But then we read of how "Jesus knew in himself that his disciples were murmuring" (Jn. 6:40,43,61). And again, remember that these gospel records were written by the repentant disciples, and they were using the example of their own weakness in order to appeal to others. The disciples appeared to share Judaism's idea that Moses never sinned. When the Lord challenges them to find food for the crowd in the desert, they quote Moses' hasty words: "Whence shall I have flesh to give unto all this people?"; and note Moses almost mocks God by saying that all the fish of the sea wouldn't be enough to feed the people (Num. 11:13,22). Faced with the same need for bread and fish, the disciples justified their lack of faith by quoting Moses, apparently unwilling to accept that Moses' words at that time were not of faith. The way everything worked out, they doubtless learnt that Moses, like them, was of imperfect faith and spirituality.

### **The Disciples And John The Baptist**

The disciples wanted to bring fire down as Elijah had done, to consume their opponents. The Lord replies that His spirit is different; they didn't know His Spirit, without which, Paul says, "we are none of his". And yet still He patiently bore with them. However, He also says that He has come to send fire on the earth at the last day (Lk. 12:49)- an evident reference to Elijah. We could read the Lord's treatment of the disciples' request as saying 'The time to act like Elijah will come- but it's not now'. Likewise His comment that He came to bring division rather than peace: "Think ye that I am come to give peace in the earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division" (Lk. 12:51). Elijah was renowned as the prophet who would turn the fathers to the children and bring peace in the land (Mal. 4:6; Eccclus. 48:10). The Lord may be saying: 'You think, like some of the Jews, that I am a re-incarnation of John the Baptist, the Elijah prophet. I'm not. I'm the Messiah Himself. My spirit is different'. In that very context, the Lord stressed that He had a baptism to undergo, rather than to dispense to others as had John (Lk. 12:50). Perhaps the immaturity of the disciples was so great that they, former disciples of John, somehow believed that Jesus had turned into a re-incarnation of John. In this case, they would have been caught up in the surrounding world's view of Jesus- for there was much speculation that Jesus was John the Baptist *redivivus*. The way John in his gospel



labours the point that John the Baptist “was not that light”, i.e. Messiah (Jn. 1:8), perhaps is John’s recognition that finally, they got it right. You can imagine him preaching in those early days: ‘After John’s death we thought at times that Jesus was some sort of reincarnation of John. But Peter got it right, and now, I’m just making it clear also what the truth was. He wasn’t John the Baptist *redivivus* as so many thought. We were caught up a bit in that thinking; but we were wrong’.

## Notes

(1) J.H. Charlesworth, *Jesus Within Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) p. 16.

## 15-6 The Twelve Disciples As Children

Yet the Lord was so positive about those dear men. A nice picture of the Lord's perception of the disciples is found in the way He said that the little boy who came to Him, responding to His call (Mt. 18:2) represented the " little ones" who believed in Him (Mt. 18:6). 'Little ones' is a title of the disciples in Zech. 13:7; Mt. 18:3; Jn. 21:5; and it is disciples not literal children who have Angels in Heaven (Mt. 18:10). The context in Mt. 18:11,12 speaks of the spiritually weak, implying the 'little ones' were spiritually little as well. Christ's talking to them while he knew they were asleep in Gethsemane and the gentle " sleep on now" , spoken to them whilst they were asleep (Mk. 14:41,42), sounds as if He was consciously treating them as children- especially fitting, given their spiritually low state then. His father-like care for them is seen also in His promise in Jn. 14:18 RVmg. that He would not leave them “orphans”, but He would come to them. The disciples were not orphans- because they had a true and real Father-figure, in the Lord Jesus. But the disciples were the Lord's children. John records in his Gospel only once how Jesus described His disciples at the Passover meal as “My little children” (Jn. 13:33). The Lord Jesus was acting as the father of the family, instructing his children as to meaning of the Passover. But the same phrase occurs seven times in 1 John. He had dwelt upon that phrase of the Lord’s, and it clearly came to mean so much to him. Our child-father relationship with the Lord Jesus likewise needs sustained meditation. In this sense, the Lord Jesus was manifesting the Father, and thus leading the disciples to the Father through Him.

Yet despite this discouragement, our Lord overcame by the totality of His personal dedication to the goal ahead of Him. His commitment ultimately did not depend upon the inspiration of His fellows, and His endurance of the loneliness of the cross is the supreme example to us in this.

The infinite encouragement to us in our weakness is that Christ derived such comfort and strength from men of such limited spiritual perception. His fondness for them is indicated by the tears of Mary moving him to weep too (Jn. 11:33). And an essay in unquestioning loyalty to the Lord and Master is found in Lk. 22:49: " When they which were about him saw what would follow (i.e. arrest and attack), they said unto him, Lord, shall we smite with the sword?" . That grim faced band of men standing in a protective circle around their Lord knew that they had no chance of victory against the mob with Judas, armed to the teeth as they were. Yet they were willing, to a man, to heroically sacrifice their lives- the inevitable result of starting a fight- as a token of loyalty to a man who humanly speaking was a lost cause, and whose demise seemed so unexpected to them compared to their hopes of a glorious Kingdom being established there and then.



Christ's love for us, His Father's spiritual house, was typified by His being likened to the poor slave under the Law who perpetually dedicated himself to serve his master's house. An extension of this idea is revealed by a connection between the Lord saying "Ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always" (Mt. 26:11) and Dt. 15:11 "For the poor shall never cease out of the land". Thus Jesus is associating himself with the "poor man...of thy brethren" of Dt. 15:7. Note how Jesus calls himself a "poor man", especially on the cross: Ps. 34:6; 35:10; 37:14; 40:17; 69:29,33; 70:5; 86:1; 109:22; 113:7 cp. 2 Cor. 8:9- an impressive list. Christ exercised the rights of the poor to glean in the cornfield on the Sabbath (Lk. 6:1); Dt. 15:7 warned the Israelites not to be hard hearted and refuse help to such a poor brother. Christ is alluding to this passage by saying that the disciples should not be hard hearted by stopping Mary give her rich ointment to Him, the poor. The following Dt. 15:12-17 is also concerning Jesus. Thus Jesus was spiritually poor and hungry, and was so grateful for Mary's encouragement. The command to "open thine hand wide" unto the poor brother (Dt. 15:8) is possibly picked up in Mt. 25:35-37, where Jesus tells the unworthy that when He was poor, hungry and naked they did not feed Him. Apart from referring to His manifestation in his poor brethren, it is quite likely that he was referring to a sense of spiritual poverty / need in His life, which apparently needed His followers to help. If He could derive help from the disciples with all their limitations, surely He can see the travail of His soul in us and be satisfied, or encouraged (Is. 53:11,12).

### The Lord's Patience

The Lord's patience with the disciples as children, His awareness of their limitations, His gentleness, His changing of His expectations of them according to their weaknesses, all provides powerful comfort to the latter day disciple. So many times He didn't correct their evidently wrong ideas, as one doesn't with children, but patiently worked with them to bring them to truth. His approach to demons is the most common single example. When He had them go with Him unto Lazarus, they mistakenly thought He meant 'let us go and die too' (Jn. 11:12-16)- and yet He graciously didn't correct them, but let events take their course. And we can take a lesson from this, in how we relate to others we may see to be 'in error'. It's not really about direct confrontation, which ends up proving us right and them wrong, without actually bringing them to a personal conviction of the truth in question.

Put together the following passages:

- The disciples' return to Galilee after the resurrection was a result of their lack of faith (Jn. 16:31,32)

- But the Lord went before them, as a shepherd goes before His sheep, into Galilee (Mt. 28:7). Even in their weakness of faith, He was still their shepherd, they were still His sheep, and He led them even then.

- The Lord told them to go to Galilee (Mt. 28:10). He accepted their lower level of faith. And He worked through that and led them through it.

The return to Galilee is seen in an even worse light once we reflect on the circumstances surrounding the first calling of the disciples, nearly four years earlier. John's Gospel implies that they were called at Bethany; whereas the other Gospels say they were called whilst fishing at the sea of Galilee. This is usually, and correctly, harmonized by concluding that they were called as John says in Bethany, but they then returned to their fishing in Galilee,

and the Lord went there to call them again. So returning to their fishing in Galilee had already been shown to them as being a running away from the call of their Lord. And yet still they did it. And yet John's inspired record is so positive; he speaks as if the disciples were called at Bethany and unwaveringly responded immediately. The point that they actually lost their intensity and returned home is gently omitted from specific mention. And even then, He saw them as more 'converted' than they were. He had asked them earlier to be converted and become as children (Mt. 18:3); but there by the lakeside, where they were still not believing nor understanding properly, He calls out to them with the very same Greek word: "Children, have ye any meat?" (Jn. 21:5). Considering that they were not literally children, this was a strange and purposeful form of address to them. Although they still hadn't fully converted, the Lord counted them as if they had. And likewise He counts us as more spiritually developed than we are; and bids us do the same in our relations with His brethren. Indeed it seems to me that when John in his letters addresses the believers as "little children" (1 Jn. 2:13,18), he may not necessarily have in mind young people or immature believers, but may simply be using the form of address which he had recorded Jesus using- for all believers.

The disciples are described as sleeping for sorrow, not believing for joy (Lk. 24:41). Both their unbelief and their sorrow and failure to support the Lord in His time of need are not really excusable by either sorrow nor joy. And yet the Lord generously imputes these excuses to His men, such is His love for them. They are described as being "glad" when they saw the risen Lord (Jn. 20:20). Yet actually they didn't believe at that time- for Lk. 24:41 generously says that they "believed not for joy". And they assumed that Jesus was a phantom, not the actual, concrete, bodily Jesus. Placing the records together doesn't give a very positive image of the disciples at this time. And yet the record is so positive about them. The confused women are commended by the Angels for 'seeking the Lord' (Mt. 28:5)- even though that seeking was deep in their subconscious. Yet the record notices that even incipient faith and understanding in those women, and counts it to them. Would that we would be so generous in our perception of others. Indeed, the generosity of the Father and Son to humanity is awesome- so eager are they for our repentance. God so pleads for Israel to return to Him in Hosea and Isaiah that He almost takes the blame onto Himself, cooing over His people as having been tossed and afflicted- when it was His own judgment of them that caused it. And I think this explains the difficulty of Acts 3:17-19, where Peter appeals to the Jews to repent, because they had murdered the Lord Jesus "in ignorance". The Lord's own parables explained that they did what they did with open eyes- "this is the heir, come let us kill him!". Yet in God's passionate desire for their repentance, He appears to view their awful sin in the most gracious possible light.

## 15.7 The Disciples And Imputed Righteousness

Although the Lord was very hard in some ways upon the twelve, accusing them of "no faith" etc, whenever He spoke about them to others or to His Father, He was so positive about them. This is a valuable window onto His current mediation for us.

The disciples were ordinary Jews who weren't such righteous men; they didn't wash before a meal, and the Pharisees criticized them. The Lord explained why this wasn't so important; but the disciples still didn't understand. And yet He justifies them to the Pharisees as if they *did* understand, and as if their non-observance of ritual washing was because of their great spiritual perception (Mt. 15:2,15,16). Surely the Lord imputed a righteousness to them which was not their own. Jesus had asked the disciples to be obedient to every jot and tittle of the teaching of the Scribes, because they "sit in Moses' seat". And yet when they are criticized

for not doing what He'd asked them to do, for not washing hands before a meal, the Lord Jesus vigorously defends them by criticizing their critics as hypocrites (Mk. 7:2-8). Indeed, the Lord's passion and anger with the critics comes out very clearly in the subsequent record of the incident; and it is the essence of that passion which He has for us in mediating for us.

The Lord defended the non-observant Judaism of the twelve as being due to their joy that He, the bridegroom, was with them (Lk. 5:33,34). When they 'ground corn' on the Sabbath, the Lord defended them to their critics by saying that they were like David's men eating the shewbread. Those guys were just walking through a cornfield rubbing ears together as their manner was, as they had done on many a sabbath day, but not realizing that this time there was some Scribe out with his binocular vision scrutinizing them. They surely weren't doing it because their minds were on the incident of David's men eating the shewbread. The Lord had asked them to obey the Scribes, who sat in Moses' seat, over this kind of trivia. But He doesn't rebuke them. Rather, He defends them to others, imputing far more spiritual perception to them than they had (Lk. 6:1-4).

### **A Positive View**

The Lord took a very positive view of his struggling, stuttering followers, especially in the run up to His death. His teaching had throughout emphasized the importance of the heart, and how thought and action are linked. Yet He appears to have made a temporary exception when He generously excused His disciples' sleeping in Gethsemane: "The spirit [mind] truly is ready, but the flesh is weak" (Mk. 14:38). The theoretical willingness of the mind does not usually excuse fleshly weakness, according to the Lord's teaching. It seems to me that this statement of His, which for me gets harder to interpret the more one ponders it, is simply the Lord's generous, justifying impulse towards His weak followers. And He was feeling like this towards them at the very time when, in symbol and in essence, they had condemned themselves. For He 'comes' to them, finds them asleep, like the sleepy virgins in His recent parable, they were dumbfounded and unable to answer Him, just as the rejected will be at judgment day, and then they fled, as the rejected likewise will (Mk. 14:40,41,51). If these were His generous feelings for them, then...what comfort it is to know we follow the same Lord.

The world would not perceive (Mk. 4:12); but they did, or so the Lord told them. And hence His distress that they did *not* perceive (Mk. 7:18; 8:17); and yet He said that blessed were their ears and minds, because they understood what had been hidden from so many.

He taught that unless a man was willing to carry his cross and forsake all that he had, he couldn't be His disciple (Lk. 14:27). And He called them His disciples, even though they clearly didn't perceive the real nature of the cross, nor did they actually leave all that they had but retained some things. The disciples were told to sell what they had (Lk. 12:22,32,33); but it seems they kept their fishing business<sup>(1)</sup>. After having asked them this, the Lord again had to speak to them about forsaking all that they had (Lk. 14:33). Their claim to have left literally all (Lk. 18:28) appears somewhat exaggerated. Indeed, the parable of the unjust steward being specifically directed at the disciples (Lk. 15:1 cp. 16:1,9), it could appear that they had a special problem with lower-middle-class petty materialism (Lk. 16:9). Likewise Lk. 6 is spoken specially to the disciples, and it has much to say about materialism.

The Lord's grace to His men is reflected in Mark's record of how the twelve were confused by the Lord's parables. He responds that He speaks in parables so that "them that are

without” would not understand; but His followers would, He implies, “know the mystery of the Kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables”. And yet it’s immediately apparent that the disciples were equally confused by the parables. We sense the Lord’s frustration with this: “Know ye not this parable? How then will ye know all parables?”- i.e. ‘If you don’t understand this parable, it means you won’t understand any of them, which makes you equal with the crowd of those outside of Me, whom I’m seeking to leave confused’. And we note how straight away Mark notes, perhaps in sadness and yet marvel at the Lord’s grace: “But without a parable spake he not unto them [the disciples]: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples” (Mk. 4:10-13,34). Mark, or Peter writing through Mark, could look back in wonder. They the supposed disciples, learners, of the Lord Jesus had been as dumb as the crowd; but by grace alone the Lord had privately explained the parables to them. And our understanding of true Bible teaching is likewise a gift of grace, when we are every bit as obtuse as the people in darkness who surround us.

The very human perspective of the disciples is almost predictably brought out by their response to the Lord’s question to them about where to get bread to feed the hungry crowd. “Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient” was Philip’s response (Jn. 6:7). Andrew’s comment that they had five loaves and two fishes surely carried the undertone that ‘...and that’s not even enough for us, let alone them- we’re starving too, you know!’. The disciples wanted the crowd sent away, to those who sold food, so that they might buy for themselves (Mt. 14:15). As the Lord’s extended commentary upon their reactions throughout John 6 indicates, these responses were human and selfish. And yet- and here is a fine insight into His grace and positive thinking about His men- He puts their very words and attitudes into the mouth of the wise virgins at the very moment of their acceptance at the day of judgment: “The wise answered [the foolish virgins] saying, Not so, lest there be not enough [s.w. “not sufficient”, Jn. 6:7] for us and you; but got ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves” (Mt. 25:9). Clearly the Lord framed that parable in the very words, terms and attitudes of His selfish disciples. He counted even their weakness as positive, and thus showed His desire to accept them in the last day in spite of it. Another reading of the connection would be that the Lord foresaw how even in the final moment of acceptance into His Kingdom, right on the very eve of judgment day, His people would still be as hopelessly limited in outlook and spiritually self-centred as the disciples were that day with the multitude. Whatever way we want to read this undoubted connection of ideas, we have a window into a grace so amazing it almost literally takes our breath away.

### **The Upper Room Discourse**

The closer one gets to the crucifixion, the more the Gospels seem to record the Lord imputing righteousness to the disciples- as if He sensed the wonderful imputation of righteousness to us which He was going to achieve there:

- When they put their clothes on the colt and started mistakenly proclaiming Jesus as the triumphal Messiah entering Jerusalem to begin His political Kingdom, the Lord doesn’t rebuke their misunderstanding. Instead, He defends them to the critical Pharisees (Lk. 19:35-37,40).

- The Lord’s teaching about the cross was “hid from them” (Lk. 9:45), much to the Lord’s distress. And yet in prayer to the Father, He rejoices that these things are not hid from them (Lk. 10:21,23). This is a picture of the Lord’s present mediation for us in prayer.

- He told them that His Father cleansed every branch which bore fruit, so that it might bear yet more fruit. And "Already ye are clean[sed]" (Jn. 15:2,3 RV). He perceived them as having borne fruit already, when in many ways it might seem that they hadn't even started.

- He told Pilate: "If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews" (Jn. 18:36). But His servants just *had* tried to fight, to this very end!

- Consider Jn. 16:27,30-32:

Jesus: "You...have believed that I came out from God"

Disciples: "[Yes], we believe that thou camest forth from God"

Jesus: "Do ye now believe? Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, when ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone".

Although they didn't really believe, He said that they did. He wasn't so in love with them that He was blind to their failures. But He was all the same so positive about their practically non-existent faith. And what's more, He goes on to tell the Father His positive perspective on their faith: "They...have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me" (Jn. 17:8). But the Lord had only just been telling the disciples that they *didn't* really believe that He had come out from God...! Yet He counted them as if they did, and reflected this to the Father in prayer. And this is surely how the Lord intercedes for us today.

- The Lord's High Priestly prayer of intercession in John 17 [so called because of the way He speaks of 'sanctifying Himself'] reveals how positive He felt about the disciples- even though He knew and foretold that they were about to betray Him, deny Him and leave Him alone in His hour of greatest human need. His grace towards them here is quite profound. He describes them to His Father as those who "have kept your word" (Jn. 17:6)- referring to His own parable of the good ground, those who keep the word and bring forth fruit with patience (Lk. 8:15). Again, He tells His Father about them: "They have believed that You did send me" (Jn. 17:8). But He had just upbraided them for their *unbelief* in Him (Jn. 16:31), and would do so again in a few days time (Mk. 16:14). Yet He presents His weak followers to the Father as so much better than they really were; and this is the same Lord who mediates for us today. Likewise, the Lord assures the Father that they were not "of the [Jewish] world" (Jn. 17:14,16), even though as we have shown in these studies, they were deeply influenced by the Jewish world around them. Perhaps the Lord looked ahead to the day when they would be spiritually stronger, and yet He presents the immature disciples to the Father from the perspective of how He hoped they would one day be. Thus He says that He has already "sent them into the world" (Jn. 17:18)- but this was only done by Him in its fullness *after* His resurrection. He speaks of how He was glorified in them before the [Jewish] world (Jn. 17:10)- when He knew Peter was about to deny Him and shame His whole cause and mission. But surely the Lord looked ahead to the hope He had in Peter and all of them, that they would go out into the world and glorify Him. Indeed, the whole prayer of Jn. 17 reveals how the Lord presented them to the Father as men who in many ways they simply were not. When they say "We believe...that thou camest forth from God", He comments: "Do ye now believe?" and predicts their scattering. Yet in prayer to the Father, He says that they did believe "Surely...that I came out from thee" (Jn. 17:8,25). Their faith was anything but

“sure”. Likewise, we have shown above that they failed to really perceive His death, and thus failed to perceive the essence of *Him*. In the face of this tragedy, this frustration and pain, the Lord could calmly tell the Father: “I am glorified *in them*” (Jn. 17:10)- in they who understood so little, indeed who refused to understand. Even worse, the Lord had just been telling them that they didn’t really love Him fully (Jn. 14:15,23,28). And yet He speaks to the Father of them as if they are *so* committed to Him.

- Likewise with their understanding; the Lord imputed more to them than they really had. The Last Supper discourse showed clearly enough that they didn't understand or " know" (Jn. 14:7,9; 16:5,18). Yet in the Lord's prayer of Jn. 17, He uses the perfect tense of the verb 'to know' when He says " Now they have come to know..." . It's almost as if He increasingly imputed things to them which were not yet so, as increasingly He faced up to the reality and implications of His death for them.

- Another example of positivism in the last discourse is to be found in Jn. 15:15, where the Lord says He no longer calls them servants with Him as their Lord, but rather does He see them as friends. He has just reminded them that they call Him Lord, and rightly so, and therefore His washing of their feet was what they must do (Jn. 13:13). Earlier, He had rebuked them for calling Him “Lord” but not *doing* what He said (Lk. 6:46- this is in a speech directed at the disciples- Lk. 6:20,27.40). And yet He told others that His disciples *did* His word (Lk. 8:21). He was so positive about them to others, even though they did not *do* the consequences of calling Him Lord [e.g. washing each others’ feet- instead, they argued who was to be the greatest]. Perhaps when the Lord says that He will no longer relate to them as a Lord, with them as His servants, but rather simply as their friend, He is tacitly recognizing their failure, and preparing Himself to die for them as their friend rather than as their Master. And yet, as the Divine economy worked it all out, it was exactly through that death that they exalted Him as Lord and Master as they should have done previously.

The Lord’s comment to the disciples that if they loved him, then they would ‘keep his word’ (Jn. 14:15,21,23) implies their love was at best imperfect. Their keeping of His word and loving Him was certainly under question in Jn. 15:10. And yet He confidently represents them to the Father as those who had kept His word (Jn. 17:6). His comment that “I am glorified in them” (Jn. 17:10) was evidently said in hope and faith that they would glorify Him- for before His death He “was not yet glorified” (Jn. 7:39). Indeed, Jn. 12:16 suggests that the disciples only “glorified” Him after the resurrection, once they remembered and understood His words and actions properly. It was through “bearing much fruit” that the disciples would glorify Him (Jn. 15:8)- and they evidently hadn’t started doing that. Indeed, when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, the Father was indeed glorified in Jesus- but not through the disciples, who ran away in denial of their Lord (Jn. 12:28; 13:31). And yet the Lord Jesus confidently asserts to His Father, to God Almighty, that He was glorified in the disciples (Jn. 17:10). Repeatedly, the Lord made the point that His men were “not of the world” (Jn. 17:16). But He Himself made the point that if His Kingdom- i.e. the people under His Kingship- were of this world, then they would fight for Him (Jn. 18:36). And that is exactly what they tried to do in Gethsemane! They acted then as if they were indeed “of this world” by trying to fight for Jesus physically. And yet the Lord saw through to their inner spirit, and presented this to the Father as being actually not of this world. The disciples didn’t “know” the things the Lord spoke to them about His origin and purpose- they only “knew” them after the resurrection (Lk. 18:34; Jn. 10:6; 12:16; 13:7). Jn. 14:7,9 is plain: “If you had known me...yet have you not known me”, He tells the disciples. And yet He uses just that same Greek word in telling the Father that His men did “know” Him and His word (Jn.

17:7,8,25). He had faith and hope in their future maturity- they didn't then "know", but they did in the future (Jn. 12:16; 13:7). The Lord had hope that "In that day you shall know" (Jn. 14:20). For there was no absolute guarantee that the eleven would come to "know" Him and His word, seeing they had freewill- Jesus had faith they would, and He expressed that faith and Hope to the Father so positively.

The discourse in the upper room was intended by the Lord " to prevent your faith from being shaken" or, literally, 'scandalized' (Jn. 16:1). And yet He uses the same word to predict how " This night you will all be scandalized because of me" (Mt. 26:31). He knew they would stumble, or be 'scandalized'. Yet He hoped against hoped that they would not be; so positive was His hope of them. And exactly because He was like this, the pain of their desertion and stumbling would have been so much the greater. And the Lord who is the same today as yesterday goes through just the same with us, hour by hour.

The Lord's exalted view of the disciples is reflected in how He washed their feet. To wash the feet of guests was more menial than we might imagine. It was normal to provide water for the guest to wash his own feet. The Midrash Mekilta on Ex. 21:2 taught that a Jewish slave should never be required to wash his Master's feet. But as a sign of extreme devotion and respect, some disciples of the most respected rabbis would wash their feet. Yet the Lord Jesus, having reminded them that He was indeed their Lord and Master, does this to them. And according to Lk. 12:37, He will do this again to us in His Kingdom, in that He will then tie a cloth around Him and come forth and serve us. It would seem the Lord was referring back to this prophecy when He tied a cloth around Him and washed the disciples' feet. This was how highly He thought of them; and that incident was an enacted prophecy of the attitude He will have to *us*, whom the 12 symbolize, even in the glory of His Kingdom. He surely totally redefined the nature of Lordship and respect.

Indeed, the whole of the Lord's last discourse to the twelve reflects His positive view of them- at the very time when their commitment to Him was in some ways at its lowest ebb. For they all forsook Him in His hour of need. He comments that they are filled with sorrow because of their misunderstanding about His departure from them. But He goes on to liken this sorrow to the sorrow of a woman in labour, who forgets that sorrow as soon as her child is born (Jn. 16:6, 20-22). In the analogy, the travailing woman is the disciples, and the new born child is the resurrected Jesus. For "then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord". Their 'sorrow' was thereby interpreted by the Lord as their longing and striving towards His resurrection. But this is a very positive way of interpreting their sorrow. Their sorrow was based on their misunderstanding (Jn. 16:6). Yet the Lord saw that deep underneath that sorrow, even though they didn't perceive it themselves, they were actually yearning for His resurrection. This was partly due to His penetration of their psychology, but it also reflects the simple fact that He certainly counted them as more spiritual than they actually were. He tells them to "ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full", having just defined their future joy as the joy of seeing Him risen from the dead (Jn. 16:24,22). But did they ask to see His resurrection? Not as far as we know; for He upbraids them with their slowness to believe His predictions of resurrection. But despite all that, He said that they *would* have that joy which would come from asking to see Him risen from the dead. They didn't ask for this, but they would still have the joy. Why? Because He perceived them to have 'asked' for what they didn't actually ask for in so many words. He read their basic inner yearning for Him as a prayer for His resurrection, even though they were far from understanding that He would ever rise again once dead. It's rather like God saying that the righteous remnant in Jerusalem had shaken their head at the Assyrian invaders and laughed at



them in faith- when this was certainly not the case on the surface (Is. 37:22). And this Lord is our Lord today, interpreting our innermost, unarticulated desires as prayers to the Father (Rom. 8:26,27).

The Lord seems to have imputed their future maturity to them at a time when they still didn't have it. 'You know where I go', He told them (Jn. 14:4,5)- when, as they themselves responded, they didn't. He said that they knew the Spirit of Truth, whereas the Jewish world didn't (Jn. 14:17)- because "in that day ye shall know..." (Jn. 14:20). And this approach will help us with our immature and frustrating brethren; we need to impute to them that spiritual maturity to which we must believe they will rise.

Most clearly of all perhaps, they slept in Gethsemane, despite being asked to stay awake and encourage the Lord in His hour of need (Lk. 22:45). Yet He thanks them for being those who continued with them in His temptations (Lk. 22:27). When the Jews agreed at a council to kill Him, the Lord went to be alone with the twelve (Jn. 11:53,54). He took such comfort from them even though they did not or would not understand the reality of His upcoming death. He, like us, could only take such comfort from His brethren if He viewed them positively.

It is significant that the Lord's positivism about the disciples grew as He came nearer to the cross- and as they increasingly failed to perceive the clear prophecies which He had given about it. His increasing positivism was not, therefore, because they were developing spiritually. Indeed, the discourse in the upper room seems to indicate how tragically little they understood, and how their faith basically collapsed with the crucifixion. The source of the Lord's positivism was therefore *His* growing appreciation of what the cross would achieve. He perceived, as Paul later was to explain so clearly, that through His death, His righteousness would be imputed to all His stumbling people.

*Reflect on a Gospel parallel to see the huge importance of being a disciple of Jesus. In Mt. 10:38 the Lord says that whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow after Him, "is not worthy of me". In Lk. 14:27 we have the same words, but concluded with "... the same cannot be my disciple". To be a disciple of the Lord is to be worthy of Him. To seek to walk as He walked, to follow behind Him, is to be worthy of Him. The important thing is to follow, for all our stumblings, but at least to be in the way behind Him.*

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## Notes

(1) Not all the disciples were dirt poor. Their fishing business employed hired servants. The parable about "one of you" having a servant ploughing and preparing his food was spoken to the twelve (Lk. 17:1,7).

## 15.8 The Preaching of The Twelve

In the very context of the Lord upbraiding them for their slowness to believe the Gospel of His death and resurrection, they were asked to go and teach others that he who didn't believe this same message would be damned (Mk. 16:15,16). Their witness, as it is recorded in the Gospel records, is therefore shot through with recognition of their own weakness. They record how Peter their leader was described by the Lord as a "satan" (Mk. 8:33). They were good fishermen- yet their records show that never do they record themselves as catching a



fish without their Lord's help. In this they set a model for our witness; it must be shot through with a full recognition of our weakness, our own struggles to believe that which we invite others to believe. And the more real, the more credible. Not only did the Gospel writers portray their own weakness and slowness to believe; they write in such a way as to minimize their own personalities and presence. They don't continually harp on about the fact they were really present. There are many incidents where evidently the disciples were with Jesus, yet the focus of the record is entirely upon Him, so awed were they by the magnitude of His personality, and so selfless were they (Lk. 8:27; 10:38-41; Jn. 11:15,20-57). They are appealing for others to believe on the basis that they are recounting the story of how they heard Jesus, and eventually, very slowly and falteringly, had also come to believe. Luke records how Peter, James, John and the parents of the dead girl entered the house where she was *alone* ; and then "they" laughed Jesus to scorn when He proclaimed she was merely asleep (Lk. 8:51,53). It's psychologically unlikely that the distraught, desparately hopeful parents would've ridiculed Jesus like this at that time. The reference is surely to the three disciples doing this. This is a profound recognition of the disciples' weakness- there, alone with Jesus and the distraught parents, they mocked Jesus' ability to resurrect the girl. And they have the profound humility to tell the world about that in their record of the Gospel.

### **The Conclusion Of The Gospels**

The Gospel writers each conclude their message with some reference to their own incredible slowness to believe the very Gospel which they were now preaching to others. Between them, the preaching of the twelve makes it clear that they saw the risen Lord in Jerusalem, at least twice, were commissioned as preachers of that good news...and yet returned to Galilee in disbelief and resumed their previous occupations. And of course they recall their Lord's rebuke of them for their slowness and blindness. Truly they were appealing to their hearers on the basis of their own humanity and weakness of faith. They weren't painting themselves as immaculate, never doubting believers. They were so strongly portraying their humanity, knowing that they were appealing to men and women who were equally human and frail of faith.

John perhaps especially brings out their blindness at this time. He describes how they were fishing on the lake, having given up, it seems, their faith in Jesus, despite His appearances to them. Yet John describes that incident in language which evidently alludes to the account in Luke 5 of the Lord's first call to them by the same lake, whilst they were fishing. Consider the similarities:

- They have fished all night but caught nothing
- The Lord tells them to cast their nets
- They obey and catch many fish
- The effect on the nets is mentioned
- Peter reacts emotionally, and in both records is called 'Simon Peter'
- The presence of "the sons of Zebedee" is mentioned both times (Jn. 21:2; Lk. 5:10)
- Jesus is called 'Lord'

- The same Greek words are used for climbing aboard, landing, the nets etc.

The point being that John is saying: ‘Durr! We were so dumb, not to realize the similarities more quickly! *Of course it was Jesus!* But we were so, so pathetically slow to accept it. After the encounter by the lake in Lk. 5, Jesus made us fishers of men. But we refused to be, initially. So He had to re-commission us yet again after this second incident’. John uses the verb *helkein* to describe how they ‘drew’ the nets to land- the same word used elsewhere by him for people being ‘drawn’ to Jesus (Jn. 6:44; 12:32). He is recognizing that they had had to be re-taught the call to be fishers of men, because they had pushed off to Galilee in disbelief and disobedience to the great commission to go and catch men. Perhaps John records Peter being asked the same question “Lovest thou me?” three times, in order to show how terribly slow they all were to accept the teachings of the Lord which now they were asking others to accept.

Jn. 20:27 records the Lord’s challenge to Thomas: “Do not persist in your disbelief, but become a believer” (Gk.). And then He pronounces to Thomas: “You have [now] believed” (Jn. 20:29, Syriac text). It’s as if John is challenging his hearers and readers in the same way, and setting up his buddy ‘doubting Thomas’ as their pattern. John makes the point that Thomas didn’t initially believe the ‘preaching’ of the Gospel of the resurrection by the other disciples. When John records Thomas as saying “If I do not see...and put my finger...I will never believe” (Jn. 20:25), he is connecting back to the Lord’s very similar words: “Unless you see signs and wonders, you will never believe” (Jn. 4:48). It’s as if John is bringing out the weakness of faith in his friend Thomas, the struggle there was to believe, knowing it would elicit a chord in his hearers, thus building a bridge between the hearers and the preacher. And John goes on to record that there is a greater blessing for those who believe, not having seen the Lord, than there is for preachers like himself, who had believed because they had seen and touched the Lord (Jn. 20:29). It’s as if John shows the utmost humility before his audience, imputing to them greater faith than he had. And Peter does likewise, alluding here when he says that his readers love the Lord, although they [unlike he] had never seen Him (1 Pet. 1:8).

Each of the Gospel writers brings out this sense of inadequacy about themselves or the disciples, this self-criticism, in different ways. The preaching of the twelve disciples is really an admission of their own weaknesses. For example, John mentions that when he and Peter arrived at the tomb, he [John] “did not go in”, but Peter did, and therefore believed before he did (Jn. 20:5). We see here John’s gentle humility, and reflection in his own preaching of how he esteemed others better than himself, and of stronger faith. John says that “he saw and believed”, but goes straight on to say that he at that time did not understand that Jesus must rise from the dead (Jn. 20:8,9). He surely means that he *later* believed, but not right then. Luke’s account of the rich man in the parable of Lk. 16 has several consciously-inserted connections with how he later describes the disciples:

*Lk. 16*

Disbelief in the face of meeting the resurrected man (Lk. 16:31)

Double mention of Moses and the

*Lk. 24*

“They did not believe...slow of heart to believe” (Lk. 24:11,25,41)

Ditto in Lk. 24:27,44

prophets as proofs of resurrection  
(Lk. 16:29,31)

“Should rise from the dead” (Lk.  
16:31)

“They will repent” (Lk. 16:30)

“Should rise from the dead” (Lk.  
24:46)

Forgiveness of sins was to be  
preached because of Christ’s  
resurrection, as Luke brings out in  
Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 17:30; 26:20.

Thus the tragedy and foolishness of the rich man in the parable is seen by Luke as applying to the disciples in their disbelief of the resurrection. And yet the purpose of Luke’s Gospel, as all the Gospels, was to proclaim the need for belief in the resurrection.

The Lord had to comment that the harvest was great, but the labourers [i.e. the disciples] were few or weak [Lk. 10:2 Gk.]. And yet He delegated so much to them- authority, the power of miracles, the Gospel itself (Lk. 9:1-6), despite their weakness, and despite the fact much harvest was spoilt or not harvested by their weakness. They were His representatives to the world (Lk. 10:16)- and yet they still didn’t know how to pray (Lk. 11:1). We marvel at the way the Lord used them, and yet we end up realizing with a similar amazement that the same Lord has entrusted His Gospel to us, with all our weakness and dysfunction.

The Gospels are transcripts of the twelve disciples’ own preaching and obedience to the Lord’s commission for them to go into all the world and tell the news of what they had seen and heard of Him. Yet there is a theme in the Gospels, consciously included by the writers and speakers, of men being disobedient to the preaching commission which the Lord gave them. When some were told to say nothing, they went and told many others (Mk. 7:36). And as Acts makes clear, the disciples themselves were disobedient, initially, to the commission to go tell the Gentiles the good news of their salvation. Legion’s disobedience is especially instructive for us:

*Mk. 5:19*

Go to thy *house*

unto thy *friends*

*tell* them [Lk. 8:39 “*show* them”- by  
personal demonstration to  
individuals]

how great things

the *Lord* [*i.e. God*] hath done for  
thee

and how he had mercy on thee.

*Mk. 5:20*

He goes to the *ten cities*  
[Decapolis]

He goes to *strangers*

He “*publishes*”

how great things

*Jesus* had done for him

[ignored]

The record of the commission given him and his obedience to it are clearly intended to be compared. The man went to strange cities, indeed he organized a whole preaching tour of ten cities- rather than going home and telling his immediate friends / family. And how true this is of us. It's so much easier to embark upon a campaign to strangers, to do 'mission work', to 'publish' the Gospel loudly, rather than *tell* and *show* it to our immediate personal contacts. And we notice too how he omits to tell others of the Lord's merciful grace to him personally. Rather does he speak only of the material, the literality of the healing. And he tells others what Jesus had done for him, rather than take the Lord Jesus' invitation to perceive the bigger picture in all this- that this was the hand of God. One wonders whether the disciples were commenting upon their own sense of inadequacy in their initial personal witness.

"From whence shall we get bread here in the wilderness?" is how Peter / Mark recorded their question to the Lord (Mk. 8:4). But the wording is so very similar to the LXX of Ex. 16:3, where a faithless Israel asked the same of Moses; and Moses responded, as did the Lord, in providing bread from Heaven. Did the disciples actually say those words? Would they really have said the very words which Israel did in one of their lowest ebbs of faith and understanding? My suggestion is that they did indeed say something similar in essence, but Mark / Peter purposefully recorded it in terms which highlight the similarity with unbelieving Israel- to as it were emphasize how weak the disciples were at that point.

### The Case Of Peter

The failure of Peter is effectively emphasized by the very structure of the Gospel accounts. John frames the interrogation of the Lord against the interrogation of Peter. The Lord peerlessly and bravely witnesses to the Truth, and is condemned to death for it; whilst Peter flunks the issue time and again to save his own skin. Whilst the Lord unflinchingly declares His identity before the High Priest, Peter is presented as doing anything to deny his identity as a disciple. Peter's denials are presented by the records as if in slow motion, for the reader to gaze upon in detail. Peter's denial " I am not" is placed by John in purposeful juxtaposition to the Lord's brave self-identification in Gethsemane: *ego eimi*, " I am" (Jn. 18:5,17). And yet this 'setting up' of the leader of the early church as a failure was done *by* the early church writers, ultimately inspired as they were! They were *glorifying* in their weakness and their Lord's supremacy. They were standing up for their unity with Him by grace, but openly and pointedly proclaiming the vast mismatch between them and Him.

### 15-9 The Spiritual Growth of the Disciples

The Lord's conscious attempt to develop the twelve appears to have paid off to some extent, even during His ministry. For there was evidently some spiritual growth of the disciples even during the ministry. There are indications that even before the Lord's death, the disciples did indeed progressively grasp at least some things about Him. John's Gospel is divided into what has been called 'The book of signs' (Jn. 1:19-12:50) and 'the book of glory' (Jn. 13:1 and following). In the book of signs, the disciples always refer to the Lord as "rabbi" or "teacher"; whereas in the book of glory, they call him "Lord". We have seen in other character studies how spiritual maturity is reflected in some ways by a growth in appreciation of the titles used of God. Although Jesus was not God Himself, so it seems was the case in how the disciples increasingly came to respect and perceive the Lordship of Jesus.

Philip was the one who commented that "two hundred pennyworth of bread is not *sufficient*" for the crowd to eat and be filled. Yet he uses the same, relatively uncommon, Greek word

some time later, when he says that if he could see the Father, it would 'suffice' him (Jn. 6:7; 14:8). Perhaps John intended to bring out the growth in Philip; he now perceived that the bread created by the Lord for the crowd was indeed representative of the bread of life, the Lord Jesus who was the manifestation of the Father. The Lord had taught in Jn. 6:35 that He was the bread, and He bade His followers 'see' Him; and Philip had absorbed the point, even though, as the Lord makes clear, Philip still did not 'see' Him as he ought.

Peter's proclamation of Jesus as Messiah half way through Mark's record of the Gospel (Mk. 8:29) is presented by him as a climax of understanding. And yet according to Jn. 1:41, Andrew and Peter had known this right from the start. The implication is surely that they, as simple working men, probably illiterate, had merely repeated in awe words and phrases like "Messiah" and "Son of God" with no real sense of their import. Yet again, the Lord gently bore with their misunderstandings, and Peter of his own initiative, 18 months later, came to gleefully blurt out the same basic ideas but with now far deeper insight- although he still incorrectly perceived the Messiah as one who would not suffer but provide instant glorification. Thus the spiritual growth of the disciples is revealed.

### 15.10 Jesus and Judas

The Lord's relationship with Judas is one of the clearest indications of his humanity, as well as his method of reasoning from the Scriptures and his limited knowledge. There is evidence to indicate that Judas was one of the most spiritual of the disciples, and as such among those closest to Jesus. He was " Mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted" (Ps. 41:9); and the Hebrew for " trusted" means 'a place of going for refuge', as if he sought Judas' company in times of pressure. Of few men would Jesus say " A man mine equal, my guide, and mine acquaintance" (Ps. 55:13). " Acquaintance" implies a close friend through sharing of knowledge, showing their relationship was based around spiritual things. The LXX renders "guide" as "a man of my own mind" , and seeing Christ's mind was like God's (Phil. 2:5-7) this was quite a statement. The Hebrew for "guide" means a leader (Prov. 2:17; 16:28; Jer. 3:4; 61 times out of 70 it implies a superior), indicating that our Lord was influenced by men and was prepared to listen and learn from them <sup>(1)</sup>. Here we see His humanity and yet also His need for strengthening. "We took sweet counsel together" (Ps. 55:14) implies an assembly or sitting down on conference (the same word is in Prov. 15:22; Ps. 83:3; Jer. 15:17 with this usage), suggesting that our Lord sat down in discussion with Judas, as David used to with Ahithophel. They " walked unto the house of God in company" (Ps. 55:14), giving the picture of the two of them slightly apart from the twelve as they journeyed to keep the feasts, deep in stimulating spiritual conversation. Judas, the one who rose the highest, had the furthest to fall.

This verse is almost repeated in Ps. 42:4: "When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday" . What was true of Judas was thus also true of Israel in general; in the same way as the pronouns used about Judas merge from singular into plural in Ps. 55:13-15 ("a man mine equal... let death seize upon them"), as also in Ps. 109:3 cp. v.8. Similarly the condemnation of Jewry for crucifying Christ in Ps. 69:25 ("let their habitation be desolate") is quoted in the singular about Judas in Acts 1:20. I have given more examples of Judas being the embodiment of the Jews in *In Search Of Satan* Appendix 1. Thus the description of our Lord going up in joyful fellowship to keep the feasts with the Jews in Ps. 42:4 is parallel to him doing so with Judas in Ps. 55:14. This would imply that Christ thought almost over positively of the Jews in the same way as he did of Judas, and this was a great source of depression for him when he fully realized in the garden



that His hopefulness for them had come to nothing ("My soul is cast down within me", Ps. 42:6 cp.v.4). This depression is elaborated in Is. 49:4-6 as being due to Christ's failure to lead Israel to repentance. Jesus therefore appears to have hopefully over-estimated the Jews' spirituality, as well as that of Judas- whilst at the same time realistically seeing them for who they were (this paradox is commented upon in some detail in Samson). This was how Paul treated Corinth, and it must be how we too view our brethren- strongly hopefully and positively, and yet realistically.

For Judas to do what he did his previous spirituality must have been a guise to some degree, although the Psalms previously quoted indicate that our Lord accepted the genuine part of Judas and was inspired by him. But we can understand his deep depression when finally faced with the reality that " the words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords" (Ps. 55:21). Both butter and oil are symbolic of the word; thus Jesus is here recognizing that Judas' word-based conversation had been a sham, albeit pleasant to hear at the time. A sombre warning against using a familiarity with the word to present a spiritual facade is here sounded<sup>(2)</sup>. The humble, raw, basic faith and loyalty of the eleven is so vital. The Lord's lack of total knowledge could explain this apparent lack of total realization concerning Judas, but I prefer to see it as a positive approach taken to a sinful man, hoping against hope for his repentance. It has been suggested that " That thou doest, do quickly" is a reference to Judas' repentance, which the Lord was hoping for. The impression of a close spiritual relationship and subsequent shock on appreciating that Judas was a traitor that we see expressed in the psalms is hard to reconcile with our Lord knowing Judas' motives from the beginning. Jesus knew from the beginning that some would betray him: " There are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him...Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto me of my Father" (Jn. 6:64,65). Our Lord knew that not all were called by God to be able to come to Him- He knew who would not believe. And yet He suppressed this knowledge in his love and hope for Judas- just as it could be that God limits His omnipotence and omniscience in His dealings with us [hence His sense of hurt, shock and genuine disappointment with human behaviour]. If this passage does imply Christ's knowledge of Judas' intentions (as Jn. 6:70 seems to), these words were spoken in the final year of the Lord's ministry, when Christ's sensitive spirit would have noticed the tell tale signs in Judas. [Or is " He spake of Judas...that should betray him" (Jn. 6:70) a comment added by John, which would mean that Jesus was not necessarily thinking of Judas when he said " One of you is a devil" ?].

The record in Jn. 13:18-21 implies that the full recognition about Judas came home to Christ at the last supper: " I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen (now): but (note the broken sentence structure, showing the pressure) that the Scripture may be fulfilled, He that eateth bread with me (a sign of fellowship- shown by Judas joining hands with Jesus in the dish, Mt. 26:23; Lk. 22:21) hath lifted up his heel against me<sup>(3)</sup>. Now I tell you (implying he hadn't been so specific previously about the betrayer) before it come , that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am he (a reference to Is. 41:23 etc. about Yahweh being God because he foretells the future; the power of this prophecy made by Christ lay in the fact that it seemed so unlikely for Judas to be a traitor)...when Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily (as if to say 'now this really is true')...one of you shall betray me" . Thus sudden acceptance of the situation explains Christ's fear of Judas as described in the Messianic Is. 51:12,13: "I, even I, am He that comforteth you (a reference to Christ's Comforter Angel?): who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die (Judas)... and forgettest the Lord thy maker?" , which Christ was tempted to do by his fear

of Judas. The shock of David at Ahithophel's unexpected defection (which forms the primary basis of the Psalms about Judas) must have its parallel in the Jesus/ Judas relationship.

Micah 7 is a highly detailed prophecy of the Lord's death and sufferings. Verses 5 and 6 have telling reference to Judas: " Trust ye (Jesus) not in a friend (" Mine own familiar friend in whom I trusted), put ye not confidence in a guide: keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom (cp. Samson and Delilah). For the son dishonoureth the father, the daughter riseth up against her mother, the daughter in law against her mother in law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house" . This implies there was a woman associated with Judas whom Jesus had to guard himself against. If Mary Magdalene was Judas' sister then this fits into place. The description of family divisions would then refer to the wrangles in the Judas/ Mary/ Simon/ Lazarus family , with the likely implication that Judas and Mary were in Christ's natural (extended) family, as indeed many of the disciples probably were. This would explain his connections with the family at Bethany from early days.

The Old Testament prophecies also give insight into the actual process of the betrayal. The Hebrew for "equal" in " a man mine equal" (Ps. 55:13) is invariably translated elsewhere as 'price' or 'estimation'; possibly implying that the Jews had set the same price on Judas' head (in the sense of a bribe offered to them) at one stage as they had on Jesus. The Jewish satan seeking Peter and the other disciples ("Simon, Satan hath desired to have you", plural, Lk. 22:31) implies an organized attempt to subvert each of the twelve, perhaps by offering a financial reward for becoming a secret agent for the Jews. Judas having an equal price in the Jews' eyes as Jesus indicates how highly he was seen to rank among the disciples in the public eye- as important to the Jews as Jesus himself. This further strengthens the impression that Judas was highly esteemed by both Christ and the other disciples. It would appear that the love of this money was a significant factor in Judas' downfall; in the same way as Joseph's brethren were blinded by a money motive in betraying him rather than being interested in his death for its own sake. In addition, Judas' motives seem to have also been from being influenced by the thinking of the Jewish satan, offering the chance of an immediate Kingdom. He is alluded to in 1 Jn. 2:19 (cp. Jn. 13:30) as the prototype of all who left the true faith to be influenced by Judaist doctrine.

Ps. 109:8 is quoted in Acts 1:20 concerning Judas, suggesting that the preceding v.6 reveals Christ's thoughts about him: " Set Thou a wicked man over him: and let satan stand at his right hand" , implying that Jesus prayed for the Jewish satan to help or co-operate with Judas (which is how the idiom of standing at the right hand is used in Ps. 109:31). This is tantamount to not praying that Judas would overcome the advances of the Jews which the Lord would have been aware they were making. But he could encourage Peter that he had prayed for him to resist these advances (Lk. 22:32). The whole of Ps. 109 is a prayer requesting the punishment of Judas, asking God to confirm him in his supreme apostasy: " Let his prayer become sin" (Ps. 109:7). The last section of the Psalm (109:22-29) describes Christ's sufferings on the cross in language that has many connections with Ps.22 and 69; and as with them there is a sudden breakthrough at the end into looking forward to praising God " among the multitude" (Ps. 109:30), as there is in Ps. 22:22. This may mean that it was on the cross that the enormity of Judas' sin was fully realized by Christ, although he had previously recognized it to some degree before the cross (Jn. 19:11; Mt. 26:24).

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## Notes

(1) Compare this with Christ's respect of John, and asking the Pharisees questions in the temple.

(2) Does this mean that Christ did not have access to the Spirit gift of discerning of spirits (minds) with regard to Judas (cp. Peter's knowledge of Ananias). Or did He, and yet He ignored it in His hoping for the best and loving the positive side of Judas?

(3) This implies that Judas had a heel to crush Christ with, as if Judas was the seed of the woman and Christ the seed of the serpent due to Christ's close association with sin and sinners. However, it has also been pointed out that "To show the bottom of one's foot to someone in the Near East is a mark of contempt"- E.F. Bishop, *Evangelical Times* Vol. 70 p. 331.

# CHAPTER 16: The Early Church

## 16.1 A Taste Of The First Century: The Positive

As we read through the New Testament, we can so easily get the sense that they were there, and we are here; they lived then, and we live now; they were as they were, but life forces us to be only as we are. We can see them as historical characters, and forget that they were truly our brethren and sisters, just as surely as we are brethren and sisters of each other. The body of Christ is one; and that body is united not only over space but also over time. We are but an extension of who they were. We can't hive off the first century in our minds, as it were; we believe the same things, follow the same Lord, struggle against the same flesh, hope for the same Hope, know the same grace. This leads us to examine the degree to which we as individuals and as a community live up to "first century Christianity". My analysis finds that in a few areas we are better; in many ways we need to urgently bring ourselves into line with their example.

### 16-1-1 " With one accord"

There are a number of words and phrases which keep cropping up in Acts, especially in the early chapters, which are kind of hallmarks of that early ecclesia. "With one accord" is one such. We begin in Acts 1:14: " These all continued with *one accord* in prayer" . Then 2:1: " When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all *with one accord* in *one place*" . Now over to v.46: " Continuing daily *with one accord*...breaking bread...with...*singleness of heart*" . And on to 4:24: " They lifted up their voice to God *with one accord*" . Now to 5:12: " They were all *with one accord* in Solomon's porch" . There is another example in 15:25 too. So it's quite obvious, then, that the fact the early ecclesia was " with one accord" in those early, heady days is stamped as a hallmark over this record. But this phrase " with one accord" is also used in Acts about the united hatred of the world against those early brethren and sisters. The Jews ran upon Stephen " with one accord" (7:52), those of Tyre and Sidon were " with one accord" (12:20), " The Jews made insurrection against Paul with one accord" in Corinth (18:12), and at Ephesus the mob " rushed with one accord" against Paul (19:29). The same Greek word is used in all these cases (and it scarcely occurs outside Acts). It's quite obvious that we are intended to visualise that early ecclesia as being " with one accord" . But we are also supposed to imagine the world around them " with one accord" being against them. The difference between them and the world was vast. The world was actively united against them, and thereby they came to be strongly united with each other.



We must ask: are we “of one accord” as they were? There was a time when they broke bread daily in each others’ homes, and of their own volition (so it seems) sold what they had so as to distribute to their poorer brethren. Poor believers in Corinth and Philippi collected money for the even poorer brethren in Jerusalem. Is this happening amongst us? Are [say] Indian or Russian brethren seeking to send a few dollars to help our refugee brethren in Mozambique, who escaped the Congo war with scarcely the shirt on their back? Are Western brethren donating as they could to the poverty of (e.g.) Moldova? Do we have a sense of *concern* even? Does the thought arise, that we could send even *something*? Perhaps it is because we don’t sense the massive gap which there is between us and this world, that we don’t sense the intensity of unity between us as believers which has been created “in Christ”. We don’t sense enough, perhaps, that this world is not just passively disinterested in God. All outside of Christ are active enemies towards Him, subjects of God’s wrath (Eph. 2:3,15). This isn’t how we tend to see the world around us. But to the first century believer, it was clearly so. The greatness of the gulf that divides was clearly felt. Our world is (overall) more tolerant than it has ever been; but let’s not forget that the ruling powers are ‘satan’, an embodiment of the flesh. All around is subtly articulated enmity against true spirituality and the cause of Christ. The more we see that, the more we will realise how close we are to each other who are the other side of the great divide, “in Christ” along with us. What differences of emphasis and personality there may be between us we will more naturally overlook.

The incredible and radical generosity of God in giving His only Son to die for us, we who as a race rejected Him... the lengths to which God went to reconcile with us... all this lays the basis for an extraordinary unity within Christian communities. And it was seen in the first century church. We read of Priscilla and Aquilla ‘risking their necks’ for Paul’s life (Rom. 16:4). According to Deissmann, this Greek term refers to the possibility of being murdered in the place of someone condemned to death (1). Likewise 1 Clement 55 speaks of Christians serving prison terms for each other: “We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others”.

The early believers were initially members of the synagogues, and Paul always visited the synagogue services in his travels. Peter and John went up to pray in the temple at the ninth hour along with everyone else (Acts 3:1). Early ecclesial meetings were based upon the synagogue system (James 2:2). The Lord didn’t tell them to leave because they might catch some ‘guilt by association’. He knew that if they forthrightly preached the Truth, they would be excommunicated: “the time will come when they will expel you from their synagogues”, He had foretold; as if He expected them to stay there until they were chased away. Those who reject the Lord Jesus will treat us likewise (Jn. 15:18-21- which says something about the way many Trinitarians are so abusive towards us non-trinitarians. The trinity is not merely a matter of interpretation, therefore). However, it must be said that the Lord was perhaps making some concession to the weakness of His new people by allowing them to remain members of the synagogue system, and keep parts of the Law. As the New Testament period progressed, the Holy Spirit through Paul increasingly urged upon the believers the need to cast out the bondwoman of Judaism, to trust completely in grace not law. Consider, too, Paul’s command in 1 Cor. 11 that brethren do *not* wear head coverings in ecclesial meetings. Assuming this to have been a universal principle which he intended to be followed in all ecclesias [and the reasons he gives are based upon universal principles], this was really signalling an exit from the synagogues, where men *had* to attend with covered head. Now they could no longer go on attending the synagogues to fulfil their Christian worship; they had to realize the extent of the implications of the Lordship and Headship of Christ, as the

image and glory of God. Yet sadly, as we will explore later, the brethren increasingly returned to the synagogues rather than separated from them.

One of the things which has damaged our being “of one accord” has been a preoccupation with ‘fellowship’; which believers we will fellowship, and which ones we won’t. The Lord’s attitude seems to have been that we should teach the Truth, and those who are not of the Truth will in the end cease association with us. Many readers will have found this; once they started preaching against the trinity in their former ecclesias, they were excluded. No paid up Trinitarian wants to fellowship with the likes of us. So the question of whether to leave or not is taken out of our hands, if we forthrightly teach the Truth. And so in the more delicate matter of our relations with other brethren. If we create in our ecclesias an environment that loves and teaches the Truth from Scripture, those not of the Truth will leave themselves. But let us get on more with being of “one accord” with our brethren, rather than seeking for reasons not to be. The essential demarcation 2000 years ago was between the believer and the world, not believer and believer. Peter even appealed to people to save themselves from the surrounding generation by being baptized (Acts 2:40). Paul explained baptism as a leaving Egypt (1 Cor. 10; Heb. 3,4). Martin Luther King used to say (quoting Billy Graham) that Sundays at 11:00 a.m. was America’s most segregated hour; and sadly it could be that it is ours too. This really should not be... Our unity can convert the world. But unity isn’t uniformity, and neither is diversity, division.

One of the impressive things about the early church was the way the formal preaching expeditions were comprised of people from such diverse backgrounds, who each in their own contexts had left behind the things of the world. Think of the four man team who evangelized Macedonia: Paul the ex-Pharisee from Tarsus, Silas the new Hellenistic recruit from Jerusalem, Luke the Gentile doctor; and half-Jewish, half-Gentile Timothy (Acts 16:6-10). Likewise small groups of similar diverse composition have made a huge impact in their missionary work. When small groups comprised of Poles, British, Lithuanians and Canadians started taking the Gospel to remote parts of Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the obvious question we met was: “How ever did you come to be together, living in that van, coming here with your message?”. Our unity is indeed a witness as it was in the first century, even moreso. The importance of unity is reflected in the way Luke structured the book of Acts. Structurally, the key position in the book, bang in the middle of it, is the account of the reconciliation achieved at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. I think that reflects how Luke was *so* impressed that reconciliation between two opposing parties in the brotherhood was achieved (even though the unity achieved there doesn’t seem to have lasted long, according to Paul’s letters). For Luke, that achievement of unity was the king-pin of Christian missionary achievement; he saw unity as *so* central and crucial to the growth of the church which he was historically recording.

## Notes

(1) Adolf Deissmann, *Light From The Ancient East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978 ed.) pp. 94 ff.

### 16-1-2 The Early Church Our Example

The early church are held up as our example in Phil. 1:27: " Stand fast in *one spirit, with one mind* striving together for the faith of the Gospel" . Doesn't that sound just like an allusion to the early ecclesia? Now go on to 2:2: " Be likeminded, having the same love, being *of one*

*accord*, of one mind" . There's that phrase " one accord" again. It's hardly used outside the Acts, so we should read that like a signpost, saying 'Go back to the Acts!'. So Paul is saying: 'You believers must always remember the great spirit of " one accord" in the early ecclesia in Jerusalem. Let the early church be your example!'. And if you look closely, you'll see a number of other allusions back to the early chapters of Acts. For example, v.4: " Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" . Twice we read there in Acts of disregarding our own " things" . Paul definitely has his eye on Acts 4:32: " The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul (just as Paul spoke about in Phil.2:2): neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own (cp. " his own things" in Phil.2:4); but they had all things common" . And then in v.3 Paul warns against doing things " through vainglory" . Doesn't that sound like an allusion to Ananias and Sapphira? Then he warns them in v.14 " Do all things without murmurings and disputings" . It can't be coincidental that in Acts 6:1,9 we read twice about there being murmurings and disputings in the early ecclesia. Phil. 2 describes the exaltation of Christ on his resurrection. It seems no accident that this is then described in the very words which the apostles so often used in their preaching in the early chapters of Acts. Thus in v.9, " God hath highly exalted him" is a reference to Peter's words: " Being by the right hand of God exalted ...him hath God exalted" (Acts 2:33; 5:33). The whole theme in Phil.2 is of Christ suffering on the cross and then being exalted by the Father, and given the mighty Name. The very same language is used so often in Acts (2:9-11=Acts 2:36; 2:10= Acts 4:10; 3:6,16).

We too know this "one accord" exists, even if we allow it to be fractured. That indescribable, *wordless*, feeling of unity as we embrace after a good Bible School; two brethren weeping like women as they say goodbye in an airport somewhere in Africa, that unity we feel together as we walk away from the graveside of a beloved brother. We've all had these kind of experiences. That's a bond, a unity, which the world knows nothing of. And it's the finest and deepest proof that we 'have the Truth'. When Paul exhorts us to hold forth "the word of life" (Phil. 2:16), he surely has his mind on the way the early preachers held forth "the words of this life" in Acts 5:20. We are to follow their spirit.

### 16-1-3 Prayer Meetings

They "continued" in the doctrine, [example of] prayer and fellowship of the apostles (Acts 2:42,46; 8:13). The same word is used of how *we* must "continue" in prayer (Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2), i.e. follow the example of the early ecclesia in prayerfulness. The disciples had "continued" in prayer after the Lord's ascension (Acts 1:14), and now their converts continued in prayer too. Note in passing that we continue in the pattern of those who convert us. Thus to start with, Simon "continued with Philip" (Acts 8:13). This means that who *we* are affects the spiritual quality of others. So important was prayer in the early community that the seven deacons had to make arrangements for the practical running of the ecclesia so that they could give themselves more time for prayer (Acts 6:4); prayerfulness was more important than petty administration. Husbands and wives abstained from sex for short periods so as to more powerfully pray individually (1 Cor. 7:5). Communal prayer was a source of their fellowship, their "one accord": "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42 NKJ). And they were "*instant* in prayer" (Rom. 12:12). They got on their knees straight away. In Acts 12:5 they called a prayer meeting about Peter's imprisonment. 1 Tim. 5:5 shows that the sign of a true widow was that she continued in prayers night and day. She was supported materially so that she could keep up this work of praying for others (abused into the Catholic system of paying for prayers to be said). There was a specific group of "widows" in the early ecclesias, as in Acts

7. Their duty was to pray for others; so important was prayer seen. 1 Pet. 3:7 gives an unexpected reason for appealing for husbands and wives to get along with each other: that your prayers be not hindered. So important was prayer in the thinking of Peter. Comparing ourselves with the first century community, it seems to me that we simply don't give prayer the place of importance which they did. 1 Tim 2:1 reflects *their* balance: "I exhort therefore, that, *first of all* [the Greek implies 'most importantly' rather than just being first in a list], supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men". The scant information which we are given about Lydia and Cornelius before their conversions includes the fact that they were given to prayer; indeed, the implication is that they came to the Gospel as a result of their prayerfulness and the witness of the prayer meetings (Acts 10:31; 16:13,16).

The prayerfulness of the first century prayer meeting movement should shock us into improvement. We can be shy to ask each other to pray, embarrassed to immediately suggest we pray as we sit there together discussing a problem or another brother's misfortune. We have much room for improvement here. But there *are* some good examples within our own ranks. I telephoned a sister recently. Her young daughter answered. I asked, 'Can I speak to mummy please?'. 'Well, err, could you call back?' she replied. 'Well, is mummy at home? I can hold...', I went on. 'Well, you see mummy can't come to the telephone because she's praying. She always does after lunch'. Like a picture worth ten thousand words, so was this to me, as an exhortation to regular and unashamed prayer, in the midst of life's myriad distractions.

And it's worth enquiring *what* the early church prayed for at their prayer meetings. It wasn't just for physical deliverance and for the Gospel to prosper. An analysis of Paul's prayers reveal that they were overwhelmingly for the spiritual development of the new converts. He must have been surrounded by so many more 'material' things to pray for, such as safe keeping, help for the persecuted and those who had lost their homes and families due to persecution, better economic conditions etc. Paul was one of those people who saw to the essence of things very quickly; and the ultimate essence is that people grow spiritually in whatever situation they are in. And he also perceived that personal spiritual growth is what will be the most powerful witness which will spread the Gospel yet further. Thus he prays for his converts to have unity (Rom. 15:5), overflowing hope (Rom. 15:13), abounding love and moral purity (1 Thess. 3:12,13), hearts encouraged (2 Thess. 2:16,17), continual peace (2 Thess. 3:12), perseverance (2 Thess. 3:16).

#### **16-1-4 Christ-centredness In The Early Church**

Why study the early church? I want to outline what, to me, is one of the most significant reasons- that it was Christ-centred. There is what could be termed the visible church, and the invisible church. The 'visible' church would refer to all those who call themselves Christians, attend churches, etc. The 'invisible church' I use as a term referring to the true body of Christ, that group of persons who are truly in Christ and share fellowship with Him. The two 'churches' aren't the same. For argument's sake, let's suppose that, say, only 10% of today's 'visible church' are in fact also in the true church, the invisible "body of Christ". My point is that the percentage of the earliest church who were the invisible, true church of Christ was very much higher. Whatever the figures are, only God knows, but it's my sense that, say, 95% of the very earliest church were in fact the invisible church. There were fewer passengers, very few who got baptized simply because it was the culturally acceptable thing to do, or because those around them were doing it, or because this was the tradition of their

nation or family. The high level of persecution, the social and economic difficulty of accepting Christianity, the way it was so counter-cultural, so radical, such a leap of faith to believe in the resurrection, authority and present existence of the crucified Jesus... all these and other factors made the acceptance of Christianity in the 30s and 40s of the first century something which was only for the very committed. The very early church was therefore the church as Jesus intended, what He gave birth to through His death and resurrection. It's apparent that the 'church' of today, what I'm calling 'the visible church', is far removed from that of the earliest church. Once we've factored out the inevitable issues of history, changed geographical and social environments etc, there still remains a huge gap between the earliest church and that of today. It's this gap, and the components of it, which we need to analyze and strip away, if we are to come to understand and experience the indwelling of Christ as it was in the earliest church.

That earliest church was the continuation of the band of men who followed the Lord Jesus around Galilee. There were of course ecclesias in Galilee comprised of people who had first heard the Lord teaching and seen Him healing. A case can be made that the letter of James was addressed to these Galilean ecclesias (1). They however became prototypical of all future ecclesias; for through the medium of the Gospel records, we too have as it were seen and heard Him in Galilee and have also been converted to Him. "You men of Galilee", 'You Galileans', may in fact not merely be a statement of their geographical origin, but it's been suggested that "The term 'Galilean' seems in early days to have been used to describe the followers of Jesus" (2). Acts 10:37 speaks of how the Gospel began to be preached in Galilee; and we note from this that therefore the content of the Gospel was the same in Galilee as it was throughout the Roman world. The Gospel was what we have in the Gospel records- not so much a list of theological propositions as the actual record of the kindness, the grace, the character, person, deeds and ethical teaching of Jesus the Galilean.

The early church was the continuation and geographical extension of those who in simple faith first heard the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee. It was not an institution. It was a fellowship of persons, who between them comprised the person of Jesus, the body of Christ, and as such were His witness to this world. They were the witness, their transformed lives, their words spoken to other persons. Not their websites, their books, their tracts, their church outreach programs- they were the witness. That group of persons experienced "the fellowship of Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:9), "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:13; Phil. 2:1). They had no "it" or "thing" in common; rather their bond was their common experience of and sharing in a person, Jesus. They were truly "brothers and sisters in Christ". The body of Christ consisted of nothing apart from persons, each with a direct vertical link and relationship with Him, resulting in their special horizontal bond with each other. This is why it's been observed that the true church of Christ "is unintelligible from a purely sociological viewpoint" (3)- for sociology looks at the horizontal bonding between people and groups, and has no understanding of a supernatural link between those persons and the Son of God in Heaven. This is why so many sociological and statistical analyses of the growth and behaviour of the body of Christ- e.g. why some areas respond more than others to the Gospel, why some churches grow and others fold- seem never to yield any firm pattern or conclusion. For the experience we have within the true church / body of Christ is a unique meeting of the horizontal bonds with our brethren and the vertical bonding with our Heavenly Lord. This as such defies human scientific analysis.

### **The Self-Revelation Of Jesus Through The Ecclesia**

The definition of the church / ecclesia which I've suggested here impinges upon the question

of where the early, illiterate believers drew their knowledge of Jesus from. For the level of their commitment to Him as a person seems somehow out of proportion to the relatively small amount of factual information which would've been conveyed to them in teaching sessions, public addresses and the like. I suggest the answer to this lies in the fact that the body of Christ, the ecclesia, is one form of the personal self-revelation of the person of the Lord Jesus. We don't only and solely receive His self-revelation through accepting dogma or doctrine. It comes to us also through the way He mediates His personality to us, His self-revelation, through His body. His fullness is to be found in the church, His body- He fills "all [believers / members of the church] in all" (Eph. 1:22,23). I take this to mean that the fullness of His personal character, person, spirit, truth... is to be found in His body on earth, i.e. the community of believers. Each of them manifest a different aspect of Him. Thus "you may all [not just the elders] be prophets in turn [i.e. not just one 'pastor' doing all the teaching] so that all may get knowledge and comfort" (1 Cor. 14:31 BBE). This is the Biblical "unity of the spirit"- whereby the body of Jesus reveals Him consistently, as a unity, thus binding together all who share that same one spirit of Christ. This is the way to unity- not enforcing intellectual assent to dogmatic propositions. A few things come out of all this in practice. All this means that we should avoid making any distinction between 'office bearers' in a church and the 'flock' (4). We're all in the new priesthood, all ministers (1 Pet. 2:5), all involved in the body building itself up in love, every member of the body has something to contribute to the growth of the rest (Eph. 4:16). All this is why the question of who or what is the body of Christ, what defines it, is so important. In the church of my youth, our perception of who the body of Christ is was limited to a few hundred elderly believers in South East England. When I disabused myself of that view, my experience of the Lord Jesus was so much deeper and richer- because I came to see the aspects of Him which were revealed in the members of a far larger and international community. But of course we can go too far, even as far as seeing 'Christ' in non-Christian religions, and thus giving us a wrong picture of who He actually is. It is where two or three are gathered together in His Name, that the Lord Jesus is somehow there in the midst of them (Mt. 18:20). Perhaps this means that He is especially manifested / revealed in the gathered together groups of believers, in a special and far different way to which an isolated believer reading a Bible may know the presence of Jesus. All this must especially be true of the breaking of bread- the only other time in the New Testament we meet the three Greek words translated "I am in the midst" is in Lk. 22:27, where the Lord comments how He is in the midst of the disciples at the first breaking of bread. Of course, mere church attendance doesn't mean we perceive Christ there, in the midst of us; we perceive Him there insofar as we perceive the spirit of Christ in our brethren.

If the self-revelation of Jesus was solely through dogma, doctrine, the correct interpretation of the Bible etc, then we could merely sit at home alone with our Bibles. And sadly, that's a growing trend. But that is Biblicism and not Christ-based Christianity. The largely illiterate first century ecclesia didn't have that as an option; whereas in our super-literate age, reading the Bible on our laptops, it's a strong temptation to be Biblicists rather than Christians. The Spirit of God is in the word of God, but the spirit and the word aren't one and the same thing. "The Kingdom of God is not in word, but in power [spirit]" (1 Cor. 4:20). The Corinthians were converted "not [so much] through words of wisdom, but through the demonstration of the spirit" (1 Cor. 2:4). The essence of all this is the same today as it was then- the revelation of the person of Jesus isn't solely through Bible reading and getting the interpretation right; it's through a living community, His body. It is there that we will see His Spirit / personality in action. I don't refer to miraculous gifts- but to the spirit / mind / disposition / essence of the Lord, man and saviour Jesus. And that's why the saying is so true, that 'the truth is caught not taught'- the community of believers, collectively and individually, propagates the faith and

cause of Jesus by who they are, by their spirit, far more effectively than by the doctrines they teach. And yet there is a growing trend to follow the path of the Roman Catholic church- to replace live fellowship of persons by an institution, and to replace the faith which works by love by a cold creed. Offices, institutions etc. are of course far easier to manage, far safer for us to relate to; but their inevitable rigidity stands as a barrier to the live movement of the spirit of Christ within a community of persons. The spirit of Christ is an alive, active force, and it leads individuals to do their own thing. If, e.g., the spirit of Christ compels a sister to initiate a project to care for HIV victims, she must be allowed to go where she's led.... whereas creeds, offices, control structures all combine to so often "quench the spirit". The Biblical pattern of house churches is so much more able to be in tune with the Spirit's movement than large institutionalized congregations. The apostasy of the early church was in my view largely connected with the way the 'church' came to be understood as an administrative institution. This has been taken to its ultimate term in Roman Catholic circles, but every Protestant group which teaches submission to an institution rather than to our personal conscience and experience of the Lord Jesus has in essence done the same. The Roman Catholics openly state that "the church of God is administered after the manner of the state"- no longer is it a live body of persons, but an institution. And all the talk of administering Protestant groups after the model of corporate businesses seems to me to be the same. The matter has gone to such an extent that my personal preference is to refer to the 'church' as the 'ecclesia'- a body of persons, not an institution.

## Notes

(1) L.E. Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity* (Chicago: Allenson, 1956).

(2) Elliott-Binns, *op cit.* p. 12.

(3) Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding Of The Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) p. 12.

(4) This is why 'offices' in the ecclesia are roles filled by those spiritually qualified to fill them, i.e. filled with the appropriate aspect of the spirit of Christ in order to do the job; being voted into them, educated for them or seconded to them by some committee isn't a relevant qualification. Paul reminded the Corinthians that submission should be shown to elders who have addicted themselves to serving others (1 Cor. 16:15,16)- i.e. submission arises out of our perception of an elders' spirituality, not from his mere holding of an office. Sadly, Corinth didn't stay with this advice. At the end of the first century, the first letter of Clement to Corinth ordered them to accept bishops as having a perpetual right to their office, and that the church must respect that right. And not so long after that, Cyprian was telling them that "whoever has the office receives the spiritual grace requisite for its fulfillment"- the very opposite of the idea of being spiritually qualified for a job in church! 'We give you the job, and God will give you the spiritual qualifications for it'. That was how quickly the live, dynamic early church became institutionalized; that's how strong is our desire for structure and offices, rather than the more risky way of allowing the spirit of Christ free course. The Biblical evidence is that Corinth was comprised of a group of house churches; and it was again Clement who ordered that the breaking of bread could be conducted only in one central place (1 Clement 40,41). He quenched the spirit, sought to institutionalize and contain the boundless function of the body of Christ.

## The Origin Of The Gospel Message

Reading Luke and Acts through together, it becomes apparent that the author [Luke] saw the acts of the apostles as a continuation of those of the Lord Jesus. This is why he begins Acts



by talking about his “former treatise” of all that Jesus had *begun* to do, implying that He had continued His doings through the doings of the apostles (cp. Heb. 2:3, Jesus “began” to speak the Gospel and we continue His work). The Acts record repeatedly describes the converts as “the multitude of the disciples” (2:6; 4:32; 5:14,16; 6:2,5; 12:1,4; 15:12,30; 17:4; 19:9; 21:22), using the same word to describe the “multitude of the disciples” who followed the Lord during His ministry (Lk. 5:6; 19:37). There is no doubt that Luke intends us to see all converts as essentially continuing the witness of those men who walked around Palestine with the Lord between AD30 and AD33, stumbling and struggling through all their misunderstandings and pettiness, the ease with which they were distracted from the essential... to be workers together with Him. Luke describes the Lord and His followers as ‘passing through’ and teaching as He went (Lk. 2:15; 4:30; 5:15; 8:22; 9:6; 11:24; 17:11; 19:1,4); and employs the same word to describe the preaching of the apostles in Acts (8:4,40; 9:32,38; 10:38; 11:19,22; 12:10; 13:6,14; 14:24; 15:3,41; 16:6; 17:23; 18:23,27; 19:1,21; 20:2,25). He uses the same word translated ‘preach’ in both Luke and the Acts [although the other Gospels use it only once]. In Luke we find the word in 1:19; 2:10; 3:18; 4:18,43; 7:22; 8:1; 9:6; 16:16; 20:1; and in Acts, in 5:42; 8:4,12,25,35,40; 10:36; 11:20; 13:32; 14:7,15,21; 15:35; 16:10; 17:18. Luke clearly saw the early ecclesia as preaching the same message as Jesus and the apostles; they continued what was essentially a shared witness. This means that we too are to see in the Lord and the 12 as they walked around Galilee the basis for our witness; we are continuing their work, with just the same message and range of responses to it. Lk. 24:47 concludes the Gospel with the command to go and preach remission of sins, continuing the work of the Lord Himself, who began His ministry with the proclamation of remission (Lk. 4:18 cp. 1:77). Acts stresses that the believers did just this; they preached remission of sins [s.w.] in Jesus’ Name, whose representatives they were: Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18.

Luke describes the “amazement” at the preaching and person of Jesus (Lk. 2:47,48; 4:36; 5:26; 8:56; 24:22), and then uses the same word to describe the “amazement” at the apostles (Acts 2:7,12; 8:13; 9:21; 10:45; 12:16). This is why the early brethren appropriated prophecies of Jesus personally to themselves as they witnessed to Him (Acts 4:24-30; 13:5,40). The same Greek words are also used in Luke and Acts about the work of Jesus and those of the apostles later; and also, the same original words are used concerning the deeds of the apostles in the ministry of Jesus, and their deeds in Acts. Thus an impression is given that the ecclesia’s witness after the resurrection was and is a continuation of the witness of the 12 men who walked around Galilee with Jesus. He didn’t come to start a formalised religion; as groups of believers grew, the Holy Spirit guided them to have systems of leadership and organization, but the essence is that we too are personally following the Lamb of God as He walked around Galilee, hearing His words, seeing His ways, and following afar off to Golgotha carrying His cross. Luke concludes by recording how the Lord reminded His men that they were “witnesses” (23:48); but throughout Acts, they repeatedly describe themselves as witnesses to Him (Acts 1:8,22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39,41; 13:31; 22:15,20; 26:16). This is quite some emphasis. This Christ-centredness should also fill our self-perception; that we are witnesses to the Lord out of our own personal experience of Him. They were witnesses that Christ *is* on God’s right hand, that He really *is* a Saviour and source of forgiveness (5:32); because they were self-evidently results of that forgiveness and that salvation. They couldn’t be ‘witnesses’ to those things in any legal, concrete way; for apart from them and their very beings, there was no literal evidence. They hadn’t been to Heaven and seen Him; they had no document that said they were forgiven. They were the witnesses in themselves. This even went to the extent of the Acts record saying that converts were both added to the ecclesia, and also added to Christ. He *was* His ecclesia; they were, and we are, His body in this world.



## Preaching Christ

The Gospel records, Mark especially, often paint a broad scene and then zoom in upon the person of Jesus. Mark does this by using a plural verb *without an explicit subject* to paint a picture of the disciples or crowd generally; and then follows this by a singular verb or pronoun referring specifically to Jesus (1). Here are some examples: "They came to the other side... and when He had stepped out of the boat" (Mk. 5:1,2); "when they came from Bethany, he was hungry" (Mk. 8:22); "they went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples..." (Mk. 14:32). The grammatical feature is more evident in Greek than in English. If the writer of Mark had been a cameraman, he'd have taken a broad sweep, and then suddenly hit the zoom to focus right up close upon Jesus Himself. This is what is being done with words, and it reflects the Christ-centredness of the whole narrative and preaching of the Gospel, of which the Gospels are transcripts.

The early believers spoke constantly in their preaching of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:21,23; 3:13-15; 5:30,31). The logical objection to their preaching 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. 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". The spirit of the risen Christ lived out in our lives is the witness of His resurrection. We are Him to this world. The cross too was something which *shone* out of their lives and words. They 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). 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 22:16 they 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. This alone would have convinced the hearers of his genuineness. 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. Reflection upon His cross should elicit in us too an upwelling of pure

gratitude towards Him, a Christ-centredness, an awkwardness as we realise that this Man loved us more than we love Him...and yet within our sense of debt to Him, of ineffable, unpayable debt, of real debt, a debt infinite and never to be forgotten, we will have the basis for personal response to Him as a person, to a knowing of Him and a loving of Him, and a serving of Him in response. If we feel and know this, we cannot but preach the cross of Christ.

This is why those who heard the message wanted baptism immediately; they had been convicted by the preacher of a Christ-centred message, not just intellectually teased (Acts 8:36; 9:18). Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Paul, the Ethiopian eunuch, the crowds at Pentecost...were all baptized immediately. The Lord added *daily* to the church (2:27; 16:5)- they didn't tell candidates for baptism to wait even until the next Sunday, let alone for a few months 'to think it over'. They understood the first principle: baptism is essential for salvation. Believe or perish. They saw the absoluteness of the issues involved in the choice to accept or reject the Son of God. "Beware, therefore..." was their warning to their hearers (Acts 13:40). They made no apologies, they didn't wrap up the message. They taught the need for repentance more than seeking to prove that they were right and others wrong (although there is a place for this in our witness in the right contexts). They made it clear that they were out to convert others, not engage in philosophical debate or the preaching of doubtful interpretations. They spoke with a boldness and freedom (Acts 2:29; 2 Cor. 3:12). They weren't interested in giving good advice, but rather good news. They were pressed in their spirit, that they *had* to appeal to men (13:43; 18:13; 26:28; 28:23; Gal. 1:10). They persuaded men, convinced and confounded the Jews, reasoned, testified and exhorted, disputed and converted (8:25; 18:13,19,28; 2:40). In short, they *so* spoke that multitudes believed (14:1). Paul was not against using persuasion; he didn't just 'preach the truth' and leave it for others to decide. Agrippa commented: "With but a little [more] persuasion thou wouldest fain make me a Christian. And Paul said, I would to God, that whether with little [persuasion] or with much, not only thou but also all that hear me this day, might become such as I am" (Acts 26:28,29 RV). Paul wasn't against using persuasion to bring men unto his Lord, and neither should we be. He realized the methodology we use with people can affect their conversion. And he knew that personal contact was by far the best. "For this cause therefore did I intreat you to *see* AND to speak with me" (Acts 28:20 RV). He called men to have a personal meeting with him, rather than just to hear the theory. Not just to hear him, but to *see* him... for we are the essential witnesses.

## Notes

(1) This grammatical feature is explained at length by C.H. Turner, 'Notes on Marcan usage', in J.K.Elliott, ed., *The Language And Style Of The Gospel Of Mark* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

## The Implications Of Illiteracy

### An Oral Culture

We need to reflect upon the implications of the fact that the vast majority of the early Christians were illiterate. Literacy levels in first century Palestine were only 10% at the highest estimate<sup>(1)</sup>. Some estimate that the literacy level in the Roman empire was a maximum of 10%, and literacy

levels in Palestine were at most 3%<sup>(2)</sup>. Most of the literate people in Palestine would have been either the wealthy or the Jewish scribes. And yet it was to the poor that the Gospel was preached, and even in Corinth there were not many educated or “mighty” in this world within the ecclesia. Notice how the Lord said to the Pharisees: “Have you not *read*?” (Mk. 2:25; Mt. 12:5; 19:4), whilst He says to those who responded to Him: “You have *heard*” (Mt. 5:21,27,33). His followers were largely the illiterate. As the ecclesial world developed, Paul wrote inspired letters to the ecclesias. Those letters would have been *read* to the brethren and sisters. Hence the great importance of ‘teachers’ in the early churches, those who could faithfully read and transmit to others what had been written.

It’s hard for us in this century to understand what it would have meant to live in a largely illiterate society. We inevitably assume that written text, be it printed or electronic, is the only way in which important things can be explained, or significant words recorded and shared with others. When we want to learn about what happened in the past, we think of what we can read about that time. But the early Christians lived in an *oral culture* rather than a literary one. News, theories, history, was passed on by orally recounting it within a group. Some are concerned that there must have been a gap between the actual words of Jesus as He spoke them, and the day they were written down. Our belief in Biblical inspiration means that this isn’t an issue for us; but it’s worth pointing out that several societies have had their folklore analyzed, and the accuracy of transmission of the stories is amazing, over centuries. Albert Lord made his life’s work a research into the folktales and sagas handed down in communities within the former Yugoslavia. He found amazing accuracy of transmission over centuries; very little was ‘lost’ in transmission<sup>(3)</sup>. The same has been found in studies in Africa<sup>(4)</sup>. And yet there was a gap of at the most 50 years [probably far less] between Jesus actually speaking His words and them being written down. So there is no reason to think that somehow the Gospel writers didn’t accurately have the record of the actual words of Jesus.

### **The Origin Of The Gospel Records**

One point that all the referenced studies make is that the stories were passed on in a collective form- it was groups of people and communities who told and re-told the stories, and this was how the transmission was so accurate<sup>(5)</sup>. We can imagine what happened in the first century. The groups of people who believed in Jesus told and re-told the Gospels. It’s likely that each of the Gospel writers wrote their records for a specific group of their converts, who had been telling and re-telling to others the record which under inspiration the writers ‘wrote up’. This is why each Gospel has its own themes and characteristics, based around the same authentic words of Jesus. Hence the Gospels were initially a body of tradition and later documents which were used not only for maintaining and clarifying the beliefs of the earliest ecclesias or groups, but as a vehicle for preaching that Gospel to others. We have mentioned studies in Europe and Africa, but most significant of all is the 30 years work of Kenneth Bailey in exploring the oral culture of village groups in the Middle East<sup>(6)</sup>. He likewise found very little lost in transmission over centuries; but he draws attention to the vital importance of the *haflat samar*, the gathering of the village at the end of the day to re-tell stories and traditions, especially stories of what had happened in the village or to the villagers in the past. It seems likely that in the same kind of gatherings in first century Palestine, those who had believed in Jesus told and re-told the Gospel records. We can imagine that this would especially have happened in the villages where the Lord Jesus had taught and healed. This was how

the earliest ecclesias would've developed, how the Gospel would first have been preached in a systematic way, and here surely is the beginnings of the Gospel records as we have them. Lk. 1:4 mentions that the history of Jesus was something in which a new convert was "instructed" or [Gk.] catechized, as if the Gospel record was learnt by repetition. Luke as a serious historian mentions his sources, describing them as "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word". The Greek *hyperetes* which translates "ministers" is the Greek form of the Hebrew *hazzan*. The word recurs in Lk. 4:20, about the "minister of the synagogue". The task of the minister was to look after the scrolls- "the chest with the books was brought in to the synagogue when required from an adjoining room and brought back there afterwards" (7). Luke's idea is that instead of humping a bunch of scrolls around, the 'ministers' were the eyewitnesses who recited what they had heard of Jesus. But because they would die out, there was a need for people like Luke to compose documents which recorded their testimony.

All this has major implications for our church today. In that oral culture, there was obviously no written statement of faith. The average Christian *heard* and remembered what they heard. Some could probably quote a Gospel and maybe some letters of Paul from memory. But *at the point of conversion* their memory would have been limited. They heard a message and believed it. But it is highly unlikely that they would have been able to answer a detailed set of say 300 questions as some give candidates for baptism today, nor would they have had detailed grasp of an intricate 'statement of faith'. Even today in the mission field, it's evident that illiterate people have a far simpler understanding of doctrine than those who are literate. It's very hard for people to enter into the mindset of the illiterate, like it's so hard for sighted people to enter into the world-views and perceptions of the blind. One thing is clear. The understanding held by an illiterate first century Christian convert was likely far simpler, less detailed and more elastic than that held by many 21<sup>st</sup> century converts to Christ. And yet the basis of the Gospel, the basis of salvation and entry into the body of Christ by valid baptism, has of course not changed. The phenomena of widespread literacy has led us to have a more detailed and even more 'correct' understanding of many things than they would've had then; but we can't insist that therefore there is now a far higher level of knowledge required for baptism than there was then. Many of the finer points of Biblical interpretation over which our community has divided simply wouldn't have been points of division in the first century illiterate church. And they are our example, rather than us pretending that we are their example, and seeking to rewrite our perception of their history so that they had the same level of knowledge of the Gospel as ourselves. For a start, the 'Gospel' which they believed was the good news of the work, teaching, demands, story, death and resurrection of Jesus- the sort of thing we find in the Gospel records.

So we can imagine our brethren *hearing* the Gospels and Paul's letters, and believing what they heard. But we have to ask whether illiterate people would have understood and interpreted that oral material in the same way or to the same detailed extent as we analyze and accept the written word. Christianity in its earliest form therefore was a question of recounting, meditating and reflecting upon the basic message of the Gospel records, the actions and teachings of Jesus. The New Testament letters were to communities formed around these very things (8); but sadly at our

distance from the first century, our Christianity can so easily become about so many other things apart from the essence of the Gospels.

The emphasis in the New Testament upon teachers is understandable- their duty would have been to recite accurately the teachings of Jesus as they are recorded in what we now have as the Gospel records. And there was a Holy Spirit gift available to enable the apostles to remember what Jesus had said and done. All this further explains why the Gospel records are comprised of what have been termed 'blocks of tradition' - parables and accounts of miracles are recounted [especially in Mark] in 'blocks'. This would've had its origin in how the material was recounted by those telling the story in the first place. And we can imagine how it would've been recounted countless evenings in the villages of Palestine, where there were people present who'd actually known Jesus or met Him. The Gospel records, therefore, were initially transcripts of preaching material.

### **Oral Performance Of The Gospels**

It's difficult to enter into the mind of the illiterate first [or twenty first] century Christian. People communicated differently in the first century- just as in our own era, the online generation communicate differently to those who don't have internet access. We are used to mostly silent reading of the Biblical text, involving the eye and brain. But "First-century literary works were almost always heard in a communal setting rather than read silently by individuals... an oral performance involves the ear, the eye, and whole body. The meaning of the Gospel in its original setting would not be found in the text. It would be found in its performance within a community" (9). For most of our generation, the meaning of the Bible is found through our reading of the text; but for the illiterate, that's not the case. Time and again, churches and individual relationships have sundered over a different reading of a few texts [e.g. Paul's words about women and headcoverings]. Division over matters of close textual interpretation are unheard of in illiterate communities. Yet those believers were and are legitimate and valid before God. The basis of their fellowship and relationship with God wasn't on the basis of a text read and dissected in accurate detail; and therefore we shouldn't think that such intellectual exercise is vital to relationship with God and each other. Revelation, Thessalonians and Colossians contain specific statements that the material was to be read out loud to the [illiterate] church members (Rev. 1:3; 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16); but the contents of those books require quite detailed analysis, which we tend to wrongly assume can only be given by reading the text. The processes of occasional listening to a text [employed by most first century believers] and reading a text [employed by many twenty first century believers] are quite different. We can go back to a text, re-read it, re-access it at will. Someone who occasionally hears a passage read, and who maybe only heard parts of the New and Old Testaments read once or twice in their lives, simply relates to the text differently. Further, the nature of the reading of the text, the delivery of the speaker, would've played an important part in the interpretation of it by the illiterate hearer- hence the greater responsibility of teachers in the first century than today. For the illiterate audience, the message was tied up with the messenger to a huge degree. Hence Timothy is told to pay attention to his [public?] reading, preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 4:13). It has been observed that oral performance of texts like e.g. the Gospel of Mark was designed towards producing an emotional impact upon the hearers. We who read the same text and seek [quite rightly] to understand from it doctrine and practical commands for living somehow miss much of this; we inevitably subject the text to intellectual analysis, whereas the first century audience would have felt from their performance an appeal to convert, to accept, to feel something in response towards the Man Jesus who was presented there. Perhaps this is why a reading of

the Gospels produces less response in us than that from a first century group hearing the same Gospels read / performed to them. Thus a first century reciter / listener would have paid special attention to the way Mark indicates the emotional state of Jesus as He said His words- angry (Mk. 3:5), compassionate (Mk. 1:41), snorting like a horse (Mk. 1:43 Gk.), troubled and distressed (Mk. 14:33). Likewise Mark's constant use of the term "immediately..." in his early chapters would've created a sense of urgency, fast flowing narrative, perhaps matched by the reciter speaking quickly. The changes of tense in the Gospel records suggest an eye witness telling the story. Take Mk. 4:37: "And there arises a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the boat, insomuch that the boat was now filling" (RV). But the rest of the account in the surrounding verses is in proper past tenses- e.g. "He arose, and rebuked the wind, and said..." (Mk. 4:39). The impression we have is of the author getting carried away with the memory of the event, and telling it as if it's happening. And this is especially fitting if in fact the Gospels were performed live rather than coldly memorized as prose.

I have made the point elsewhere that the Gospels are transcripts of the preaching of the Gospel by, e.g., Mark or Luke; and that the texts were memorized by the believers. This would be in line with the way that "the ancient Mediterranean cultures valued oral performance... as a result, texts were generally memorized for performance" (10). Oral performances or recitations were done in the Roman world just about everywhere- on street corners, in the baths etc. We are therefore to imagine the texts of the Gospel being recited aloud by Christian preachers and performed before an audience- e.g. when the text says that the Lord spoke with a loud voice or looked around in anger, the preacher would do likewise. And in doing so, he would be a manifestation of Jesus to the world around Him; preaching was and is all about incarnating the Lord Jesus in our own flesh and words and body language. And this process would've required the performer to meditate upon the body language and likely facial expressions of the Lord Jesus in order to accurately render them to the listeners. The unusual thing about Christianity, however, was that those who accepted the message were also expected to memorize and perform / recite / relate the Gospel text to others. Perhaps in all this we have a little recognized partial explanation of why the Gospel spread so powerfully and so quickly amongst the illiterate in the first century.

It's noteworthy that public recitations were something that women were allowed to participate in; hence Paul's advice not to waste time listening to the fables / recitations told by old women (1 Tim. 4:7- cp. wasting our God-given time watching soap operas today). Slave women especially were known to make such recitations to the women of a large household, including the female freewomen. This doubtless laid the basis for the phenomenon [portrayed on some frescoes] of female house churches, with slave women leading the gatherings even when their mistress was present.

### **Mark as the Disciples' Gospel**

Mark repeatedly uses the Greek term "on the way" to describe how the disciples and converts to Jesus followed Him in *His* way (Mk. 8:27; 9:33; 10:32,52), which was to Jerusalem, to death and thereby to glorious resurrection. The account is punctuated by reference to the various stages of the journey, the areas and towns along the Jerusalem road. Like all the Gospel writers, Mark writes in such a way as to carry the readership along with actual involvement with the disciples and the people Jesus is recorded as meeting, so that we too may be the followers of Jesus in our day and context. The Gospels are therefore intended as encouragement to those who have already believed to keep on following; and also an attempt to persuade unbelievers hearing the story for the first time to identify with those who first followed Jesus through the streets and lanes of Palestine so long ago. The tradition that

Mark's Gospel had to be recited by heart by baptismal candidates therefore has the ring of truth about it, as does the suggestion from literary analysis that Mark's Gospel was first intended to be read out loud in public places as a true 'evangelism' of the Gospel. The Gospel opens with a purposefully ambiguous genitive: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ". It could mean 'the Gospel *about* Jesus', or, 'the Gospel [told] *by* Jesus'. In hearing the words of the preacher, performer or reader of Mark's record, the audience were and are hearing Jesus telling His own story.

Mark emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, giving focused in pictures of His body language and facial reactions; and stresses His preference to speak of Himself as "Son of man" rather than "Son of God". Thus Mark records how when asked at His trial if He were the son of God, Jesus replied that He was "Son of man". Mark likewise in his choice of material develops the theme of suffering being an inevitable result of following Jesus. Further, he seems to highlight those who *failed* under pressure- the disciples, the way Mark's Gospel gives more attention to Peter's denials than the other Gospels. We can identify with this, and perhaps Mark's initial audience could likewise. It has been argued that Mark was in passing also addressing an early heresy of Jesus being a *theios aner*, or 'divine man' (11); an idea which would finally come to term in the doctrine of the Trinity. Likewise from early on in the Gospel, Mark brings out how the shadow of the cross was always there for Jesus. Those who have heard the message of Jesus all down the centuries have always been tempted to evade and play down the element of suffering which there has to be in the experience of following Christ. This has been manifest in attempts to make Jesus out to have been so Divine that He wasn't really and genuinely human; for this thereby demands so very much of us who as humans seek to follow the Son of Man. Mark seeks to address this tendency of ours, by presenting Jesus as so human, and yet carrying us along in the narrative to identify with the disciples who followed Him. For this is indeed how even modern writing works- the success of the writing depends upon getting ordinary people to feel able to identify with the characters.

In this case, the characters with whom we are led to identify are the disciples and those who were healed by Jesus; perhaps this is why Mark rarely gives the names of the healed, and uses the ambiguous word *sozein* to describe the healings, meaning as it does both 'to heal' and 'to save'; and he often links the word with the idea of living or coming to life (Mk. 5:23,28,34; 6:56; 10:52). Likewise forgiveness of sin and healing are associated in Mk. 2:1-12, and 'cleansing' both from leprosy and sin in Mk. 1:40-45. Whilst in this dispensation such miracles no longer occur, this is not to be a barrier between us and those healed folks; for we too are cleansed and saved from sin by the same Lord. And yet Mark portrays the followers of Jesus as failing and ungrateful, as weak in behaviour and understanding, and yet their basic loyalty shining through in the end by God's grace. And we can easily identify with this. Note too how Mark makes a point of recording how many events and teachings of Jesus occurred in homes- perhaps because the community for which he was initially writing met in homes. These early house churches were thus invited to see themselves as continuing in the spirit of those who first encountered the Lord in homes.

### **What It Means For Us Today**

The idea that the Gospels are transcripts of the early preaching of the Gospel becomes more obvious when we start to probe how the Gospels would have originated. As accounts and rumours about Jesus and His teaching began to spread around, some would have been sceptical. Those who had met Jesus would have wished to persuade their neighbours and friends that really, what they had



seen and heard was really so. People who had met Jesus would share their impressions together and reflect upon the striking things He had said and done. The beginnings of the Gospels were therefore rooted in preaching the good news about Jesus<sup>(12)</sup>.

The Lord speaks of us abiding in His word (Jn. 8:31) and yet also of His word abiding in us, and us abiding in Him (Jn. 15:7). I suggest this refers in the first instance to the new Christian converts reciting over and over in their minds the Gospel accounts. In all situations they were to have the 'word of Jesus' hovering in their minds. To abide in Christ was and is to have His words abiding in us. Paul's evident familiarity with the Lord's words is an example of how one of our brethren lived this out in practice. We have to ask how frequently in the daily grind the words of the Master come to mind, how close they are to the surface in our subconscious... for this is the essence of Christianity. It's not so much a question of consciously memorizing His words, but so loving Him that quite naturally His words are never far from our consciousness, and frequently come out in our thinking and words. No wonder it seems the early church made new converts memorize the Gospels. Perhaps 1 Jn. 2:24 has this in mind, when we read that what the John's community of converts had heard from the beginning [i.e. the words of the Gospel of John?] was to abide in them, so that they in this manner would abide in Jesus. And perhaps too 1 Jn. 3:9 has similar reference- the seed of God [the Gospel- of John- which the converts had first heard] must abide in the convert, so that he or she doesn't [continue in] sin. The continual meditation upon the Lord's words as we have them in the Gospels will have the same effect upon us. *This* is the real way to overcome sin and to achieve genuine spiritual mindedness, to know the mind of Christ; in this way the Lord Jesus abides in us by His Spirit (1 Jn. 3:24). Abiding in the word of Christ, His words abiding in us, abiding in love, abiding in the Father and Son (1 Jn. 4:16) are all parallel ideas. Jesus Himself 'quickens' or breathes life into us (Jn. 5:21)- but His Spirit does this, in that His words 'are spirit' (Jn. 6:63). Again we see how His personal presence, His life and Spirit, are breathed into us through His words being in us. In the mundane monotony of daily life, doing essentially the same job, travelling to work the same route, the alarm clock going off the same time each morning... there can be breathed into us a unique new life through having His words ever abiding within us. And this 'quickening' in daily life now is the foretaste of the 'quickening' which we will literally experience at the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:22- 'made alive' is the same Greek word translated 'quicken' in Jn. 5:21; 6:63).

We shouldn't be unduly phased by the idea of the early Christians memorizing the Gospels. Even today in the Islamic world, students in religious schools are expected to memorize the entire Koran, which is roughly the same size as the entire New Testament. There are reports of this even being achieved by a seven year old (13). The whole structure of Mark's Gospel seems designed for memorization- the material is arranged in triplets, and the sections have chiasmic structures [e.g. material arranged in the form ABA, ABCBA, ABCDCBA]. Even within the triplets, themes often occur in triplets- e.g, the three experiences in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:32-42), Peter's three denials (Mk. 14:66-72), three wrong answers about the identity of Jesus (Mk. 6:14-16; 8:28). The use of triplets and tripilisms is common in folk stories- to aid memorization. And the actual Greek text in Mark often has a rhythm and rhyme to it created by similar sounding words. Just one example from Mk. 1:1:

*Ar-khay tou you-ang-ge -lee-ou Yay-sou Khrees-tou whee-ou the -ou.*

The 'ou' endings are somehow rhythmical. Especially do we see this rhythmical quality in the phrase used for "Jesus Christ the Son of God" in Mk. 1:1: "*Ieso-u Christo-u huio-u Theo-u*".

If we "keep" in mind the Lord's words, we will never "see death" (Jn. 8:51)- death itself will be perceived differently by us, if our hearts are ever with Him who conquered death, and is the resurrection and the life. If our view of death itself, the unspoken deepest personal fear of all humanity, is different... we will be radically different from our fellows. 'Abiding' is a major theme in John. Several times he records how the Lord Jesus 'abode' in houses or areas during His ministry (Jn. 1:38,39; 2:12; 4:40; 7:9; 10:40; 11:6), culminating in the Lord's words that He was still abiding with them, but would leave them soon (Jn. 14:25). And yet the repeated teaching of the Lord is that actually, He will permanently abide in the heart of whoever believes in Him. And all the stories of Him 'abiding' a night here or there prepare the way for this. Those hearts become like the humble homes of Palestine where He spent odd nights- the difference being that there is now a permanent quality to that 'abiding', "for ever". This is how close and real the Lord can come to us, if His words truly abide in us. So why not try to learn at least part of a Gospel? (14). But above all, to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, affecting our very core values and every aspect of human character, perception and sensitivity.

## Notes

(1) A. Millard, *Reading And Writing In The Time Of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) pp. 223-229.

(2) See C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy In Roman Palestine* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); W.V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

(3) His work is summarized in A.B. Lord, *The Singer Of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978). Note especially in our context chapter 5.

(4) See R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature In Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970); I. Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character and Continuity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

(5) See M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992).

(6) K.E. Bailey, *Poet And Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976). In another book, Bailey makes the significant point that "Although he wrote nothing, Akiba (first and second centuries) is quoted more than 270 times in the Mishnah alone"- K.E. Bailey, *Jacob And The Prodigal* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003) p. 29. This shows how verbal statements were accurately recorded and later produced in written form. It's not therefore too much to believe that the words of Jesus of Nazareth were likewise recorded.

(7) S. Safrai, 'The Synagogue', in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (ed. M. Stern and S. Safrai), (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) Vol. 2, p. 915.

(8) It's worth noting the evidence that the entire New Testament was written before AD70:

- If any of the Gospels were written after AD70, their total silence as to that cataclysmic event is strange. The synoptics all record a prophecy of the events of AD70, and yet there is no reference by any of them to its fulfillment; whereas the Gospel writers aren't slow to comment on the way the Lord's words came true. Mt. 24:20 speaks of those events as being in the future- "Pray that it may not be winter when you have to make your escape". Surely there'd have been some reference to the fulfillment of the Olivet prophecy, if the records were written after AD70? Jn. 5:2 speaks as if Jerusalem and the temple area were still standing when John was written: "Now there *is* at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool". The record of the Jews' proud comment in Jn. 2:20 that Herod's temple had taken 46 years to build includes no hint nor even presentiment that it had now been destroyed.

- Paul on any chronology died before AD70, so his letters were all before that. We need to marvel at the evident growth in spirituality and understanding which is reflected within Paul's letters, and realize that he grew *very* quickly.

- Hebrews speaks of the temple and sacrifice system in the present tense, as if it were still operating (note Heb. 10:2,11,18). The 40 years of Israel's disobedience in the wilderness are held up as a warning to an Israel approaching 40 years of disobedience after the death of Jesus (Heb. 3:7- 4:11). "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Heb. 12:4) sounds like Nero's persecution hadn't started.

- The letters of Peter warn that a huge calamity is to come upon the Jewish churches, couched in terms of the Olivet prophecy. Thus they were written before AD70. 2 Peter also speaks as if Paul is still alive at the time.

- Acts stops at the point where Paul is living in his own house in Rome quite comfortably, and spreading the Gospel (Acts 28:30). And yet we know from 2 Tim. 4 that ultimately he died in Rome, presumably after being released and doing more work for the Lord. The obvious conclusion is that Acts was written before Paul died. Acts also implies that Jews were living at peace with Rome (Acts 24:2; 25:1-5; 15:13- 26:32)- a situation which didn't apply after AD70.

- This leaves James, which is widely regarded as the earliest letter- the Christians are still meeting in a synagogue, there is no reference to any division or false teaching, and there are many allusions to Stephen's speech and martyrdom. A good case can be made that James was written as a follow up to the Council of Jerusalem- there are some marked similarities [James 1:1 = Acts 15:34; James 2:5 = Acts 15:13; James 2:7 = Acts 15:17; James 1:27 = Acts 15:29].

- A pre-AD70 date for Revelation has been well argued by J.A.T. Robinson, H.A. Whittaker and Paul Wryns. John would've been pretty old if it was indeed given in AD96 as claimed by some. The many connections between Revelation and the Olivet prophecy and 2 Peter 3 all suggest that it too is a prophecy of AD70. The historical connections are too great to ignore, and seem of little value if the book is simply alluding at a later date to what happened in AD70. Rev. 17:10 speaks of the leadership of the Roman empire, speaking of "five that are fallen"- clearly referring to:

1. Julius Caesar the first Roman Emperor (44 BC-26 BC).
2. Augustus (27 BC – AD 14).

3. Tiberius (AD 14 – 37).
4. Gaius (AD 37 – 41).
5. Claudius (AD 41 – 51)

The leader who "is" would therefore refer to Nero (AD54-68), and the context of persecution would then be that of his reign.

(9) Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming The Gospel* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2003) p. 1.

(10) Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming The Gospel* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2003) p. 4.

(11) On this see Ernest Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1983), p. 46.

(12) This point is well developed in Gerd Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form* (London: S.C.M., 1987).

(13) See D. Ben-Amos and K.S.Goldstein, eds., *Folklore: Performance and Communication* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975) p. 156. Other examples from the first century are to be found in Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1992) pp. 113-127.

(14) See [http://www.carelinks.net/books/dh/bl/14-6-3-5Memorizing\\_Scripture.htm](http://www.carelinks.net/books/dh/bl/14-6-3-5Memorizing_Scripture.htm).

'Dr. Thomas once remarked that the elementary truths regarding redemption were few and simple and no reason could be given for them beyond "the fact that God wills them". If a candidate for baptism revealed a sound knowledge of these simple truths and of this simple explanation of them, we should not dare to "forbid water".'

Islip Collyer, *Principles And Proverbs*

### 16-1-5 Radical Preaching

And they succeeded, as does that kind of preaching today. Men who began doubting and cynical were pricked in their heart, they realised 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). What does *our* radical preaching amount to? 'Come and study the Bible, you might learn something interesting...'? 'Archaeology proves the Bible true...'? All of which is very interesting, but the essential appeal for conversion, the conviction of desperation within a man's soul...this is

what we need up front. And it is then that we will prick hearts, that friends and contacts will look at us with that abashed look of ‘You touched my heart. OK I know I must do something. What...?’. Now I am not saying we should stage 5 minute conversions. Most I baptise have stumbled through a correspondence course and 380 pages of *Bible Basics* as a bare minimum, often over several years. But what I am saying is that we will never succeed in converting others unless we are out to achieve it, and unless we are up front with the essential message, after the first century pattern.

The success of the radical preaching of our early brethren was phenomenal. Even their enemies admitted that they had turned the world upside down. Twelve men and some women filled Jerusalem with their doctrine (Acts 5:28). And I don’t think the presence of the Holy Spirit gifts was anywhere near as significant in this growth as we might imagine. The brethren were largely uneducated working men, exposing the theology and practice of the professional religious leaders as wrong, and showing the world the Truth of Christ. One can imagine them turning up in a town on the Adriatic, perhaps near where people are being baptized today, and preaching that there was this man called Jesus who was the Son of God, who lived in Palestine... to simple folk who had no conception where ‘Palestine’ was, who had never travelled more than 50 km. from their homes. And this man was perfect, the preachers went on, He was crucified by the Romans and then He resurrected, all as predicted in a book called the Old Testament which is viewable at the local synagogue, and now through baptism you can share in that death and resurrection and gain forgiveness, just as God promised to a man called Abraham, who is at the basis of the Jewish and Christian faith...and then you will be spiritual Jews, even though that race is despised amongst you... They would of course have preached far more than this, but humanly speaking the chances of converting anyone to this message were small. There must have been something about those preachers that convinced men of the reality of their message. Their truth and sincerity shone out of them and converted others. Preaching a crucified Saviour was obnoxious to the Jews and a joke to the Gentiles. But somehow, humanly inexplicable, it succeeded.

### *An Exclusive Message*

The message they preached had an exclusive nature to it- it was radical preaching: ‘this is the truth, and nothing, nothing else on this earth’. Throughout the Roman empire, there was the concept of ‘religio’- the gods were thought to bless the empire if the empire worshipped them, and therefore everyone was expected to participate in the state religion. However, in addition, they were quite free to practice their own religions *as well*. But here, Christianity was intolerant. They preached that there was *no other name* apart from Jesus through which we might be saved (Acts 4:12)- a direct and conscious attack upon the ‘religio’ concept. Christ had to be accepted as Lord in baptism, in contradistinction to ‘Caesar is Lord’. A Christian could only serve one of two possible masters. He had to love one and hate the other. The whole idea of “the Kingdom of God” was revolutionary- there was to be no other Kingdom spoken of apart from Caesar’s. But our brethren preached the Gospel of the Kingdom *of God*. And those who openly accepted these principles were inevitably persecuted- expelled from the trade guilds, not worked with, socially shunned, their children discriminated against. David Bosch observes <sup>(1)</sup>: “Christians confessed Jesus as Lord of all lords- the most revolutionary political demonstration imaginable in the Roman Empire”. Philip Yancey likewise <sup>(2)</sup>: “As the church spread throughout the Roman empire, its followers took up the slogan “Christ is Lord”, a direct affront to Roman authorities who required all citizens to take the oath ‘Caesar [the state] is Lord’”. It hurt, it cost, to recognise Him as Lord. And so it should with us. Men and women died for this; and we likewise give our lives

in response to that very same knowledge. There is a tendency, which the Lord Himself brought to our attention, of calling Him Lord but not doing what He says. To know Him as Lord in truth is axiomatically to be obedient to Him (Lk. 6:46).

It has even been shown that in Nero's time it was forbidden for Christians to use Imperial coinage, with its images of Caesar as Lord <sup>(3)</sup>. It was in this sense impossible to buy or sell unless one was willing to accept the mark of the beast- exactly as in Rev. 13:17. The next verse goes on to identify the number of the beast / man as being 666. And yet this is the sum of the Hebrew letters in 'Neron Caesar'! Whatever other application these verses may be seen to have to Catholic persecution, there can be little doubt that their first century context applies to the persecution of the early converts. Later, Domitian demanded that he be worshipped as Lord and God, " Dominus et deus noster" (Suetonius, *Domitiani Vita*, 13.4). John records how Thomas called the Lord Jesus "my lord and my God", in active opposition to this kind of thinking (although Domitian came after Thomas). One couldn't worship Caesar and the Lord Jesus. The Lord Himself had foreseen this when He warned that His followers couldn't serve two masters. Domitian demanded to be called 'Master', but this was impossible for the Christian. Indeed, much of Revelation seems taken up with this theme of the first century refusal to worship the Caesars and deified Roman empire on pain of persecution (Rev. 13:4; 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20). "Following the Neronian persecution, being a Christian was tantamount to being part of a criminal conspiracy, and Christians (unlike other religious groups) were punished simply for being Christians (Tacitus *Annals* 15.44.5; Pliny *Letters* 10.96.2-3). Their crime was an unwillingness to worship any God but their own, an exclusiveness the Greeks labeled "atheism." The refusal to sacrifice to pagan gods and on behalf of deified emperors was perceived as a threat to the harmonious relationship between people and the gods" (J.L. Mays, Editor, *Harper's Bible Commentary*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). Although in many parts of the 21st century world the tension between the believer and the beast is not articulated so starkly, the essential realities of the conflict remain, and must be felt by us.

And yet despite all this men and women lined up to be baptized in response to this radical preaching, and contemporary historians are united in recording the extraordinary *and inexplicable* spread of Christianity throughout the first century. Why? It seems to me it was simply because of the conviction and insistent power of the preachers; their examples, their very being, meant that God's Truth was more caught than taught. There is no evidence in contemporary nor Biblical history that there was much mass evangelism / conversion apart from that of Paul and Peter early on. The majority of the converts would have been made by the personal witness of believers themselves. And these are our brethren. We have exactly the same Gospel as them. Some in our community are converting many, against all odds, in geographical areas (e.g. Islamic, strongly Capitalist), in life situations (e.g. single mums with five kids and little money) where humanly speaking it's stony ground. But many *aren't* converting, anyone. This ought to worry us. If we reach the end of our race having converted nobody, I for one would be a worried man. What impact has my witness been on this world? What salt have I been in this world, what was the point of my being here? Our light was lit at baptism so that we might give light to others, not flicker out under a bucket. Note that this figure suggests that if we don't witness in some way, our own light will go out. Preaching is therefore for our benefit. We must ask, Are we a light of Christ in this dark world, or just faithful members of a religious group? Because, from the first century pattern, we can't blame our environment, or hide behind 'they're not interested'. Of course they aren't, *until they meet us*- but the brightness of our witness, the startling, conscience pricking nature of who we *are*, will *make* the uninterested desperately interested. Whether or not their hearers

were finally converted, the early preachers pricked the hearts of men with their message (2:37; 5:33; 7:54). Without intending to, they made men sit up and take notice *of them* (4:13).

How often do you and I talk about the cross and resurrection of Christ, either to each other or to people in the world? And are we radical preachers? We'd far rather tell the world about archaeology or Russia or someone invading Israel, than the ugly truth of the cross. We'd far rather tell each other about the bad weather yesterday than share a few meditations about the cross. And all that could indicate that we don't think much ourselves about it. Like the disciples, whenever the subject of the cross comes up, we prefer to change the subject. The breaking of bread should not bring us up against the reality of the cross with a jolt. Reflection upon it should be the basis of our daily thinking. The early brethren had seen and known Jesus, 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, and surely going to return. They spoke this out, because they knew Him. "With great power gave the apostles *their* witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33 RV). And yet through the Gospels and with the eye of faith, we know Him too. And this must be the basis for our witness.

I am convinced that a major reason for the success of the early church was that they weren't paranoid about issues of fellowship and guilt-by-association; they were simply radical preachers. They preached an exclusive message, but they wished to be inclusive rather than exclusive. The Lord Himself taught that the time would come when His followers would be disfellowshipped from the synagogues. But He doesn't teach them to leave the synagogues, even though first century Judaism was both doctrinally and morally corrupt. Acts 26:11 would seem to imply that there were Christians "in every synagogue". Paul was called "brother" even before his baptism, and even after his baptism, he refers to the Jews as his "brethren" (Acts 22:5,13). Of course, he knew all about the higher status and meaning of brotherhood in Christ; but he wasn't so pedantic as to not call the Jews his 'brethren'. He clearly didn't have any of the guilt-by-association paranoia, and the associated standoffishness it brings with it, which have so hamstrung our witness to the world.

### *Paul's Positivism*

Paul makes an 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. He assumed that radical preaching would be going on. 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. His reasoning in 1 Cor. 3:10-12 is likewise that "every man" will make a convert, and he should ensure they are firm in the faith, lest he lose them at judgement day. These assumptions of Paul reflect his positive way of thought, in a brotherhood that abounded in weakness and failure to live up to its potential. Likewise he writes of marriage as if marriage within the faith was and is the only model of marriage which he knows, even though there must have been many failures to live up to this ideal, as there are today. And in Rom. 6 he assumes that all his readers are baptized- he has this way of assuming things. Luke too was a positivist. He uses the word for 'Diaspora' to



describe how the brethren were “scattered abroad” (Acts 8:1,4; 11:19); he saw this persecution as turning them into the new Israel. He records how the converts were repeatedly “multiplied” (6:1,7; 9:31; 12:24), using the very word for the ‘multiplying’ of Abraham’s seed as the stars (7:17; Heb. 6:14; 11:12). Every baptism he saw as the triumphant fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, even though many of those who ‘multiplied’ later turned away.

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### *Notes*

- (1) David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991)
- (2) Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995) p. 246
- (3) John Stott, *The Cross Of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: I.V.P., 1986).

## 16-1-6 Women In The Early Church

The reasons why the early believers witnessed as they did apply to both men and women. As we understand 1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:12 and basic OT precedent, a sister was not to teach brethren in ecclesial gatherings. However, it is evident that women did possess the gift of teaching by 'prophecy'. Because they are forbidden to use it to teach men and in church gatherings, there seem to have been only three possible uses for the gift:

- To teach other women after the pattern of Elizabeth teaching Mary, and Miriam the women of Israel- both by the gift of prophecy (cp. Tit.2:3,4). The reference in 1 Tim. 2:9 to how women should "also" pray publicly in an appropriate way suggests that there was an organised 'sisters class' movement in the early church. It has been observed: "Where women were kept secluded in Greek society, sisters would be the only ones who could teach them. Teaching by brethren would be difficult in such circumstances".
- To teach in 'Sunday Schools' (there is ample Old Testament precedent for women teaching children).
- To teach unbelievers. This clearly occurred in the early church. Euodia and Syntyche had "laboured side by side" with Paul in the work of the Gospel (Phil. 4:2,3 NIV). Priscilla helped Aquila teach Apollos the Gospel (Acts 18:26). At least eight of the sisters mentioned in Romans 16 are described as workers / labourers. Philip's seven daughters were prophetesses- presumably not speaking the word to baptized brethren, but either to the world or to other sisters.

There's even evidence that there was an organized women's missionary movement in the early church. Clement of Alexandria commented: "The Apostles, giving themselves without respite to the work of evangelism... took with them women, not as wives but as sisters, to share in their ministry to women living at home: by their agency the teaching of the Lord reached the women's quarters without raising suspicion" (1).

All these references to women in the early church teaching would have been anathema to many of the surrounding cultures in which the Gospel spread in the first century: "Not only the arm, but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public, and she should feel shame at being heard...she should speak to or through her husband" (Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 31-32). Likewise the encouragement for a woman to "learn in silence" was a frontal attack on the position that a woman's duty was to follow the religion of her husband and concern herself with domestic duties rather than religious learning. The way the Lord commended Mary rather than Martha for her choice to learn and her rejection of domesticity similarly challenged the prevailing gender perception. There is no doubt that a 1st century Christian woman was far more liberated than in any other contemporary religion. In our societies too, our sisters mustn't concern themselves *only* with domestic duties. Some Asian and African cultures demand this, but it is for our sisters to reach out in witness to the world, to strengthen each other, to take responsibility for this and not just rely on 'the brethren'. And it is for sisters living in European and American societies shaped by a Godless feminism to likewise break out of the mould that is pressed upon them by *their* societies.

### Notes

(1) Quoted in Stephen B. Clark, *Man And Woman In Christ* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books,

1980) p. 116.

### 16-1-7 The Joy Of Faith

There are about 70 references to there being joy of faith amongst the early brethren. It was undoubtedly a characteristic of the community, despite the moral and doctrinal failures amongst them, the turning back to the world, the physical hardship of life, and direct persecution from the authorities. There was a joy of faith in conversion and in beholding it (Acts 2:41,46; 3:8; 5:41; 8:8; 13:52; 15:3; 1 Thess. 1:6). Letters to new converts like the Philippians reflect this theme of joy, even though it was written from prison. Paul and Silas could sing in prison. The earlier brethren rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for Jesus' sake (Acts 5:41). Paul rejoiced daily in the fact the Corinthians had been baptized (1 Cor. 15:31). Many a photo taken at baptism reflects this same joy amongst us today. Sower and reaper rejoice together (Jn. 4:36). To hold on to the Truth was described as holding on to the rejoicing of the hope unto the end (Heb. 3:6).

But if we lose joy, we have lost our faith. It was the same with OT Israel. "The vine [of Israel] is withered... for joy is withered"; the people of God were to be a people of joy, and when their joy was no more, they were no longer God's people; for "joy and gladness" were cut off from the house of God (Joel 1:12,16). The experience of joy is the litmus test for a community of God's people. This thought gives rise to some sober self-examination, especially for those who may have come to feel that 'holding the faith' is a matter of glumly trudging onwards through this evil world, grimly gripping hold of our statement of faith as we bemoan the state of those around us. If we are not a community based around reaching out into the world, there will be no joy for us. Those individuals and ecclesias who have effectively given up preaching are markedly lacking in the joy that should characterise the true life in Christ. Joy and praise are not merely emotions of little worth; they are legitimate and powerful motivators to concrete action. For the Macedonians "the abundance of their joy... abounded unto the riches of their liberality" (2 Cor. 8:2). Their joy for what the Lord had done for them, for the "abundance" [s.w.] of His grace and giving to them (Rom. 5:17), led to their giving to the poor.

If we *are* converting others, then the whole community gets into an upward spiral of joy and zeal; for there is always joy over the expansion of a true family. Thus Apollos "helped them much which had believed through grace: *for* he mightily convinced the Jews, showing publicly by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:27,28 RVmg.). He helped / inspired the other believers in that he publicly converted others; thus an upward spiral of converting was initiated. The ecclesia was a growing family; the apostles returned 'to their own' when they came out of court (Acts 4:23 Gk.). Each baptism was and is a birth into *our* family. Visiting brethren were *gladly* received, as one would receive a relative; it was the logical thing to seek out the believers in a town and stay with them (21:7,17; 27:3; 28:14; 3 Jn. 5). Their mental and perceptual geography revolved around the existence of the brethren, rather like I once perceived the vast map of 'Brazil' as just Cuiaba, a town in Amazonia where at that time the only Brazilian Christians lived whom I personally knew. Whole households were converted (Acts 10:2; 16:34; 18:8; Col. 4:15), and the earliest Christian meeting places unearthed were rooms in the homes of rich believers. And with us too, the success of our community depends upon God's Truth first and foremost being the centre of family life, with the joy of faith permeating it.

## 16.2 A Taste Of The First Century: The Negative

### 16-2-1 Division In The Church

Sadly, things went wrong in the early church. And tragically, it was problems from within rather than persecution from without which caused the break up of what once was so wonderful. Alan Eyre in his classic study *The Protesters* concludes just the same; his study of groups who have revived the Gospel at various times over history finds that they too largely broke up for the same reason. And we cannot be so sure the same isn't going to happen to us if the Lord remains away. One of the major themes of Acts is how right from the beginning, there was a struggle within the body of believers. And Paul's letters repeatedly address the problem. The Jewish believers polarised around the Jerusalem ecclesia, and tended towards a keeping of the Law of Moses. They couldn't really accept that Gentiles could be saved, and saw themselves as a sect of Judaism ("the sect of the Nazarenes"). They were called "the circumcision party" (Acts 11:2), and "the sect of the Pharisees-who-believe-in-Jesus" (15:5). The Lord had foretold that His true people would soon be thrown out of the synagogues and persecuted by the Jews, just as they had persecuted Him. But these brethren so accommodated themselves to Jewish thinking that this didn't happen.

On the other extreme, there were Gentiles who were baptized having lived immorally in the world, regularly worshipping idols, getting drunk and using prostitutes at the worship services. Sadly they continued to do these things, thinking that the grace of God enabled them to freely do this. The stage was set for division in the church. They thereby became corrupted by the philosophies of the other religions too. In between these extremes, many other believers were swayed towards one or other of these poles. For the legalists, grace was a dirty word. They proudly stressed their good works, and excluded anyone they thought was weak. The libertines went too far the other way: nothing mattered, because they had been baptized they felt free to just get on and live the life of the world like anyone else.

### *Right, Left And Centre*

It is my observation that these two extremes are to be found in the new Israel and the divisions in the church which she experiences. Our community tends to divide between groups of ecclesias and individuals who tend towards one of these two extremes. Although all of us claim to fellowship each other, there are, e.g., areas where two Bible Schools are organised in the same area- one apparently 'stricter', the other more 'liberal'. I go so far as to say that on balance, each of us tends towards one or other of these two ways of thinking and being, whilst at the same time assuming we are balanced and everyone else is on the extremes. This tension also exists within us as individuals, as well as between us- on some matters, we may judge very liberally (e.g. our attitude to divorce), in others we might show marked intolerance (e.g. to brethren drinking alcohol). And our positions can change over time and according to the company we are in. In small groups of new believers, these differences become very marked. One sister, perhaps, is always talking about disfellowshipping others, and how weak they are, and what we ought to be *doing*. Another brother, cigarette between his fingers, talks of grace and forgiveness and how loving we ought to *be*. They discuss, e.g., the clothes some of the young sisters wear. "We ought to make a law that forbids them to attend church meetings with a short skirt", stomps the sister. "Oh no, it's better to see those sisters than not see them, let's be tolerant and talk quietly to

them, that's grace hey" replies the brother, with no real intention of doing anything about the problem. And in the end, they find it hard to get along with each other. Which is why there are villages in Africa, Europe, Asia, where although there are only two or three believers, they don't meet much together. This is such a widespread reality that I am writing about it. Division in the church is rife. But the same goes for many a town in England, North America and Australia, where two or three *ecclesias* exist and yet have little to do with each other. Our special and inexplicable unity ought to be converting the world; so our Lord mused, as He faced the cross.

The legalists taught that unless believers kept the circumcision laws, "ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). The very same Greek phrase is used by Paul when he calls out in urgency during the storm: "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 27:31). Surely Luke's record is making a connection; the legalists taught that it was time to quit the rest of the community unless they got their way, for the sake of their eternal future; and Paul responds by teaching that our salvation depends upon us pulling together against the desperate situation we find ourselves in. It's as if the salvation of Christ's body depends upon it staying together. As time went on in the first century, the gap between the Jewish and Gentile elements, the right and the left wing, the legalists and the libertines, got ever wider. The tension got stronger. But nobody won. The Jewish element returned to the Law, and forgot all about the saving grace of Jesus. The Gentile element mixed even more with the world and its philosophies, and forgot the Jewish roots of the Christian faith. They ended up formulating blasphemous doctrines like the trinity, which nobody with any awareness of the Jewish foundation of the Father and Son could possibly have entertained. And so the faith was lost, until it was revived again in those groups who again interpreted Christianity in terms of "the hope of Israel". And so with us, those villages which have believers in them who won't reconcile with each other will one day have no believers in them. For love's sake, brethren, for the sake of the Lord and His cross, "be ye reconciled". Give and take from each other. Try to see yourselves from outside yourselves, realise where your tendency is, to the right or to the left. So much of the NT letter writing is designed to gender unity between these different factions. We should approach these letters seeking for counsel for ourselves. We must appreciate and apply our understanding that there is but One Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:5).

## 16-2-2 Dirty Politics In The Church

As in our own community, this tension between right and left manifested itself in many ways. There were dirty politics in the church. The Greek speaking Jews and the Hebrew speaking Jews within the ecclesia started arguing over welfare payments in Acts 6. It was the old tension- the liberals against the orthodox, with the orthodox unwilling to give much of the welfare collection to those they perceived as more liberal. This squabble was tackled by Stephen, and the record then goes on to describe his murder, almost implying that it was Judaist Christians within the synagogues who set him up for this. After all, there was big money involved- Jews were used to paying 10 or 20% of their wealth to the temple, and if this was now going to the ecclesia, with thousands baptized, there could well have arisen a power struggle over who controlled it. It could well be that the division between Paul and John Mark was over this matter; after they had baptized the first Gentile in Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, John Mark went back to the Jerusalem ecclesia (Acts 13:13). Acts 15:38 RV speaks of how he “withdrew from them from Pamphylia”, hinting at spiritual reasons for his withdrawal. It must also be remembered that Christianity was a new, unregistered religion in the Roman empire, increasingly subject to persecution and discrimination. Judaism was registered and tolerated. It was so much easier to remain under the synagogue umbrella, to deny the radical demands of the Lord Jesus, and to accept Him half-heartedly, in Name but not in reality.

The Jerusalem ecclesia played a part in these dirty politics in the church. They thought that they had the right to be the senior ecclesia, because Judaism was Jerusalem-dominated due to the presence of the temple there. They sent their brethren up to Antioch to enquire whatever was going on- Gentiles were being baptized! And they summoned poor Peter before them to explain what he was doing, eating with Gentile Cornelius. Then later they sent more messengers to Antioch to bully the Jewish brethren not to break bread with the Gentile converts. The subverters of Corinth ecclesia came with “letters of commendation” (2 Cor. 3:1 cp. 4:2; 5:12; 6:4; 10:12,18; 12:11), and one wonders whether these letters were not from Jerusalem too; for in the synagogue system upon which the early ecclesia was based, the Jerusalem rabbis issued such letters. Recall how Saul had such letters to authorise him to persecute the Damascus Christians. Their tactics were political and aggressive- they made Peter so scared that he forgot all the lessons the Lord had taught him through the conversion of Cornelius, that from fear of them he refused to break bread with Gentiles when their representatives were present.

James, the leader of the Jerusalem ecclesia, got Peter and John to join him in making Paul to agree to preach only to Gentiles, whilst they would teach the Jews (Gal. 2:9 NIV). This was contrary to what the Lord had told Paul in Acts 9:15- that he had been converted so as to preach to both Jews and Gentiles. And Paul took no notice of the ‘agreement’ they tried to force him into- he always made a priority of preaching first of all in the Jewish synagogues and to the Jews, and only secondarily to Gentiles. He did this right up to the end of the Acts record. Paul got drawn into politics in the church. Although he went along with the Acts 15 decree and even agreed to propagate it, he never mentions it in his writing or speaking, and later he writes about food regulations and the whole question of Gentiles and the Law as if he disagreed with it. Perhaps as he matured, he saw the need to speak out against legalism in the ecclesias rather than go along with it for the sake of peace.

The whole nature of the agreement in Gal. 2:6-10 could be read as smacking of dirty politics-

Paul could continue to convert Gentiles and not force them to be circumcised, but James and Peter would continue their ministry to the Jews, and Paul would get his Gentile converts to donate money to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. It all could be read as having the ring of a 'deal' rather than an agreement strictly guided by spiritual principles. James [not necessarily the same James who wrote the epistle] seems to have acted very 'politically'. He sent his followers to pressurise Peter not to break bread with Gentiles in Antioch (Gal. 2:12). Then there was a conference called at Jerusalem to discuss the matter. There was "much disputing", there wasn't the clear cut acceptance of Gentiles which one would have expected if the words of Jesus had been taken at face value, and then James said 'Nobody ever came from me telling any Gentile they must be circumcised and keep the Law. They are all welcome, just that they must respect some of the Mosaic laws about blood etc., and keep away from fornication'. This contradicts Paul's inspired teaching that the Mosaic Law was totally finished. Gal. 2:12 records that James *had* sent brethren to Antioch trying to enforce the Law upon Gentiles! (1) And then later, the Jerusalem ecclesia boasted of how many thousand members they had, "and they are all zealous of the law". They then asked Paul to make it clear that he supported circumcision and keeping the Law (Acts 21:19-24). In passing, we note how hurtful this must have been, since Paul was bringing funds for their ecclesia which he had collected at the cost of damaging his relationship with the likes of Corinth. He meekly obeyed, perhaps it was playing a part in the politics in the church, although he had written to the Colossians and others that there was no need for any to be circumcised nor keep the Law, indeed these things were a denial of faith in Jesus.

It can even be argued that Paul's extended allegory in Gal. 4:24-31 about "Jerusalem which now is" has some reference to the Jewish Christian elders in Jerusalem who had made the deal with him about making the Gentile converts keep at least some of the Jewish laws. The heavenly Jerusalem which is "free" would then be a reference to the freedom Paul felt for his Gentile converts; and the persecution of those born after the spirit would then be a sideways reference to the trouble he was experiencing from the Jewish-Christian attacks upon him. Paul observes earlier that "I speak after the manner of men: Though it be but a man's covenant, yet when it hath been confirmed, no one maketh it void, or addeth thereto" (Gal. 3:15). His speaking humanly was perhaps because he was tongue in cheek alluding to the human covenant of Acts 15, to which he believed the Jewish Christian elders in Jerusalem had "added" by still demanding that Christian converts lived in a Jewish manner.

It is hard to piece together what was really going on in these dirty politics in the church, because Paul seems to have submitted to their wishes apart from where essential principle was concerned. Luke and Galatians 2 make the record sound so positive- as if the conference in Jerusalem solved all the problems, even though it is clear that it didn't, and the Gentile believers were still classed as second rate. Note too how Paul later wrote: "As touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth" (1 Cor. 8:1). This sounds like an allusion to the agreements hammered out at Jerusalem- 'we all know what was agreed', Paul seems to be saying. There was nothing wrong in itself with the compromises agreed. But it was love that edifies, not a legalistic use of those decrees as 'knowledge'. It all sounds as if there was joy at the conversion of the Gentiles, even though there was "much disputing" about it. And yet it is observable that the whole Acts record doesn't reflect the spirit of controversy and struggle against apostasy which the epistles so insistently reflect. Paul didn't protest being told not to teach Jews by his brethren- but he got on and did so. The Jerusalem ecclesia told Barnabus to go only as far as Antioch; he didn't tell them how wrong they were to boss him around. He went beyond Antioch to Tarsus, took Paul, and then went down to Antioch (Acts 11:22,25). In the end, whilst we



must respect those who deserve it, we are personal servants of the Lord who died for us, and we must follow Him according to our personal conscience. The lesson from this is that we should seek to be as positive as possible in the midst of this tension between right and left—especially in the way we write or speak about the problems. We should seek to move the Gospel forward, whatever unhappy disagreements there are between those already baptized. 1 Cor. 10:25-27 and Rom. 14 certainly do give the impression that Paul either ignored or severely modified the prohibitions agreed upon in Acts 15, especially in relation to eating blood (unless the Acts 15 decrees were only relevant to "Antioch, Syria and Cilicia"). Perhaps with later reflection he realized he had compromised too far; or, more likely, he re-interpreted the decrees and sought to keep the spirit of them, which was that there should be unity between Jewish and Gentile believers.

## Selling Out

Acts 8:1 records that the entire membership of the Jerusalem ecclesia was scattered; the way we read of them numbering thousands by the time of Acts 21:20 suggests that to avoid persecution those who remained reconciled themselves with the temple, becoming a sect of Judaism, presumably with the tithe and temple tax going to the temple rather than to the ecclesia. These “thousands” of Acts 21 were probably largely converted since the persecution that arose after the death of Stephen. The original Jerusalem ecclesia had gone and preached to the Gentiles (Acts 11:19,20), which wasn’t what the later Jerusalem ecclesia supported. Indeed, Acts 11:22 goes straight on to record that the Jerusalem ecclesia sent representatives to find out what was going on. In order to escape further persecution, the Jerusalem ecclesia threw in their lot with the temple and orthodox Judaism. Finally Paul wrote to the Jerusalem ecclesia, as recorded in Hebrews. He sorrows that they fail to see the supremacy of Christ over Moses, and that despite initially enduring such persecution and loss of their goods (during the early persecutions), they had lost their real faith in Christ. The fact they weren’t *then* being persecuted indicates they had reconciled with the temple. They needed to hold on, to keep the joy of faith they once had, rather than become hard hearted, judgmental, works-centred. But they didn’t listen. Likewise Paul warns that the Galatian Jews had suffered so much but in vain, seeing they were returning to the Law (Gal. 3:4). It is no accident that Gal. 4:25 draws the contrast between the two Jerusalems— perhaps a reference to the Jerusalem ecclesia, who had returned to the bondage of the law, and the spiritual Jerusalem. And now Paul goes so far as to say that the Legalists must be cast out of the true ecclesia (Gal. 4:30). Circumcision shielded from persecution in Galatia (Gal. 6:12)<sup>(2)</sup> in that it was the Jews and their “false brethren” who infiltrated the ecclesias (Gal. 2:4), and who were responsible for the deaths of many of the first century apostles and prophets. This suggests that the circumcision party within the ecclesias was linked with the Roman and Jewish authorities, and therefore ‘satan’ is a term used for them all. It got beyond dirty politics in the church. This would explain why Paul uses legal language in describing his conflicts with the Judaizing element in Corinth: “My defence [*apologia*, a technical legal term] to those [in the ecclesia] who examine me [another legal term, *anakrinein*]...” (1 Cor. 9:27). The false teachers were taking the likes of Paul before the civil authorities— they were hand in glove. Rev. 17 and 18 describes ‘Babylon’ as the system which was responsible for these deaths. Whatever other interpretation we may give these chapters (and I would agree there is a strong similarity with the evils of the Roman Catholic church), it cannot be denied that they are full of reference to Old Testament passages concerning Jerusalem, the Jews, and the temple, which became a spiritual Babylon<sup>(3)</sup>. I suggest that it was from within the Jerusalem ecclesia, linked up as it was with the temple system and Roman authorities, that there came much of the persecution of the early church. And this is why ‘Babylon’ in its first century

application refers to these things.

There shouldn't have been these politics in the church, groups within the ecclesia calling themselves "the [believers in] circumcision", "the sect of the Pharisees who believe", or "the sect of the Nazarenes". The Jerusalem ecclesia shouldn't have assumed that their views must be accepted by everyone else. It's easy to see what was wrong. But we can ourselves so easily form into groups of brethren and ecclesias, papering over our differences as happened in Acts 15, adopting a hard line (as Jerusalem ecclesia did in Gal. 2:9 over Gentile believers), then a softer line in order to win political support (as in Acts 15), then back to a hard line (as in Acts 21). We ought to be men and women of principle. We look back at the senior brethren of those days arguing so strongly about whether or not it was right to break bread with Gentile believers, "much disputing" whether or not we should be circumcised...and it all seems to us such an elemental disregard of the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus and so many clear Old Testament implications. But there were background factors which clouded their perceptions, although they themselves didn't realise this at the time. And so it can be with us, if we were to see ourselves from outside our own historical time, place and culture, it would probably be obvious that we are disregarding some most basic teachings of the Word which we know so well. Like them, our blindness is because the environment we live in blinds us to simple Bible truth. We live, for example, in a world where pornography, bad language, lying, accumulating personal wealth, greed for bigger and better everything, unfaithfulness, flirting with another person's partner... are all the norm; and we can get into "much disputing" in our own minds about what our attitude ought to be, when Scripture and the pattern of life we see in the Lord are crystal clear.

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## Notes

(1) It's interesting to observe all the connections between the letter of James and the Acts 15 council. Note some of the more obvious: The salutation (James 1:1 = Acts 15:34); "Listen, my brothers" (James 2:5 = Acts 15:13); "The name which was called upon you" (James 2:7 = Acts 15:17); "Keep unspotted from the world" (James 1:27 = Acts 15:29); and there are at least three Greek words which occur only in James and Acts 15 (James 1:27 = Acts 15:14; James 5:19 = Acts 15:19; James 1:16,19,25 = Acts 15:25). Perhaps the letter of James is in some way his retraction of his wrong attitude, an example of where a man comes to understand what works are really important... or perhaps it was to dissociate himself from those who are called "certain persons who came from James" (Gal. 2:12), as if he was not actually behind them. Perhaps, however, it was that James saw through church politics for what they were, and focused upon the need for real, practical spirituality, the works of faith and spirit rather than mere legalism.

(2) Another complicating factor in the picture of politics in the church is pointed out by Raymond Brown, *The Community Of The Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979) p. 43: "As long as Christians were considered Jews, there was no specific legal reason for the Romans to bother them. But once the synagogues expelled them and it was made clear that they were no longer Jews, their failure to adhere to pagan customs and to participate in emperor worship created legal problems. Second-century Christians accused Jews of betraying them to Roman inquisitors. The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 13:1 says that "the Jews were extremely zealous, *as is their wont*" in preparing material for burning the saint...indirect participation in executions through expulsion from synagogues may have been part of the

background for John’s charges against “the Jews””. I have elsewhere commented how the Jews are described in the NT as a ‘satan’ persecuting the saints.

(3) The following links are taken largely from H.A. Whittaker, *Revelation: A Biblical Approach* (SC, USA: The Honest Truth, 1976).

Double unto her double	Jer. 16:18; Is. 40:2
Sound of the millstone no longer heard...	Jer. 25:10
In her was found the blood of the prophets	Jer. 2:34; Lk. 11:50 [the blood of all the prophets was required of Jerusalem in AD70]
Great whore 17:1	Ez. 16,23; Jer. 2,3; Hos. 1-4
Arrayed in purple and scarlet	Ez. 28:5,6,8- a priest, cp. Jer. 4:30
Precious stones	The High Priest’s breastplate
Golden cup full of abominations	Ez. 23:25, 32-34 cp. Mt. 23:28
Upon her forehead a name written	A parody of ‘Yahweh’ written on the High Priestly mitre
Mother of harlots	Ez. 16:44-52
Drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus	The first century martyrs
Burnt with fire	The punishment for harlotry cp. Ez. 16:37-41
The habitation of demons	Mt. 12:43-45
Come out of her my people	Implies they were already within her, as God’s people. Ref. To Lk. 21:20,21 and the need for the Christians to leave Judaism.
Her plagues...death, mourning and famine	Jer. 18:21
18:12,13 the things traded in	All used in the temple worship cp. 2 Chron. 2:4,7,8.
Rejoice over her thou heaven...for God hath avenged you	Dt. 32:43 LXX re. Israel
A great millstone cast into the sea	As happened to Judaism / the temple mount as a result of faith in Christ (Mt. 21:21; 18:6)
Harpers harping	In the temple
A candle	The menorah
In her was found the blood of the prophets	A prophet didn’t perish outside Jerusalem (Lk. 13:33).
Babylon is “the great city”	Which in Rev. 11:8 is where Jesus was crucified, i.e. Jerusalem.
Babylon divided into three parts for judgement	As Jerusalem was (Ez. 5:1-4; Zech. 14:1-4).

### 16-3 Unity And Division In The First Century Church

### 16-3-1 Unity And Division In The First Century Church

Baptism into the body of the Lord Jesus was only a beginning. Straight away, we find ourselves in the body of Christ not only in that we personally are connected with Him, but in that we are now intimately linked with all those others who comprise His body. And yet we soon find that we are all so different- ethnically, in temperament, colour, personality type, in so many ways... And we can find this so irritating, we can easily chose to fellowship only with those whom we find natural affinity with. Perhaps we don't realise the depth of the challenge we face: we must be one. We must face up to the fact that to a brother and to a sister, we must each accommodate ourselves to all others who are in the one body. If we opt out of realistic mixing with each other, we are effectively resigning from Christ. For He *is* His brothers and sisters. He didn't say 'I am the trunk and you are the branches', He said 'I *am* the vine, and you are the branches'. We *are* Him, His body. Our attitude to our brothers and sisters is our attitude to Him. We cannot claim to love God if we don't love our brother. It's as simple as this.

Frankly, we need a lot of encouragement to take our need for unity more seriously. Unity and division in the church is the most tragic paradox. Our community is divided, far more than it should be. There are exclusive 'fellowships' refusing to break bread with others, from America to Australia through India and Zimbabwe. There are divisions between male and female in some ecclesias which didn't ought to be. There are tensions between rich and poor, both within ecclesias, and within the world-wide brotherhood. There are some deeply felt ethnic dislikes, often not even disguised, amongst us on every continent of this planet. And very evidently, there is an inability for different personality types to come together. And a house divided will fall, even if those expressing these feelings and tensions may appear at this point in time to be 'strong in the Truth'. It's no good thinking that the elders of our community or the community itself ought to do something. *We* personally must grasp the height and depth of the idea of unity, and go out and show it to our brethren; by caring for them, praying for them, visiting them, writing to them, thinking about them... We have been called to overcome the petty barriers which our humanity erects. This is why the Lord calls in the way He does; brethren and sisters from every ethnicity in the Balkans, Albanian, Serb, Croat, Macedonian...rather than just calling, say, 20 Serbs in Belgrade. It's why young and old are called in the same town, why one brother and one sister in the same town rather than two men or two women. It isn't just to make a pretty pattern on a map or in a set of statistics; it's so that His glory can be advanced by them all overcoming their barriers and achieving the unity of the Spirit. The Lord in His death tore down the barriers that existed between men. He died *so that* He might gather together in one all God's scattered children. He died to create a unity between us, so powerful it would convert the world. The cross and our part in it, our salvation through it, must therefore be our guiding and motivating force.

The idea of an international community of believers in the same faith was in itself quite radical in the first century. People from different ethnic groups from throughout the known world were all believing the same religion, the same Saviour. This was far more radical than we may now appreciate- for in the first century "People took for granted that religion was indissolubly linked to a particular city, nation or people" [see Robert Wilken, *The Christians As The Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984)].

### 16-3-2 *Oikonomia* And Household Fellowships

It was for the early believers. The way slave and master, male and female, Jew and Gentile all mixed together in unity has been described as “a sociological impossibility” bearing in mind the social structures that existed at that time. Historians admit that it is almost impossible to explain *why* Christianity grew in the first century as rapidly as it did. Yet we have the Lord’s own explanation the night before His death, in John 17 that because of the unity His death would create, the world would be converted by the inexplicable unity which there would be between His people. It was this unheard of unity between people which arrested the first century world in its tracks. Ephesians 2 and 3 teach that because individuals were being reconciled to God by the Gospel of Jesus, therefore and thereby the walls of partition between the men and women thus reconciled were torn down too. Jesus hints at this when He speaks of how the disciples- raised as they were in strongly ethno-centric Judaism- were to be witnesses to Judaea, Samaria, and the whole world. Why single out Samaria? He wasn’t talking about the wide geographical scope of the mission- for Samaria was part of Biblical Israel. Surely He was saying that their witness was to not only cross boundaries of geography, but also those of culture and prejudice. For the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans.

The first century society was built around the concept of *oikonomia*, household fellowship. The head of the house was the leader, and all the extended family and slaves had to follow his religion and be obedient to him. For slaves, this was on pain of death. However, the call of Christ was to *individuals*; in conscious allusion to the *oikonomia* concept, Paul speaks of how we are the “household-servants” of Christ- not a human master (Rom. 14:4 RVmg.). Individual conversion to a religion was unheard of at the time. Indeed, religion was something for the wealthy to play with, as a hobby. The philosophers only spoke to those they considered to be pure; religion was not a solace to the weary, or a rest to the sin-laden. It was something which you either played with as a hobby, or went along with because your social position demanded you did: just as it is today. Humanly speaking, the message of Christ had no chance of success, just as it hasn’t today; calling *individuals* to faith in Him, at whatever cost, rejecting their human ties of father, brother, master....for Him, and His ecclesia. This was something so different and so demanding. And yet there in the ecclesia they would find the fathers, brothers etc. one hundred fold, to compensate for those they had lost. This meant that the unity between them simply *had* to be; they had lost all, in terms of relationships, and they would desperately have looked to each other. Thus their radical separation from this world led to their closeness to each other. And Paul repeatedly taught that salvation was through being in the body of Christ, i.e. with other believers sharing a common salvation, rather than a totally individual matter. Tertullian [*Apology* 39] and Minucius Felix [*Octavius* 9,2; 31,8] comment how the pagans were irritated by the intimacy of the Christians, and especially reacted against the way they called each other “brother” and “sister”.

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. Unlike other religions, the faith of the followers was not in the leaders- if the



organization and leaders were taken away, would your ecclesia 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].

The conversion and baptism of some whole households is recorded: Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Stephanus (1 Cor. 1:16) and Crispus (Acts 18:8). It is implied in the way the early believers met in each others' houses (Acts 1:13; 2:46; 5:42; 12:12; Rom. 16:4,5,14,15,23; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2) <sup>(1)</sup>. This is why archaeology can find no remains of early Christian buildings; rather is there much evidence that the Christian congregations met in large rooms within wealthy homes. One analysis of such rooms which have been unearthed concludes that the average size of the congregations would have been about 30 people- the size of many ecclesias today. Graydon Snyder concluded an in depth analysis of this issue with the statement that there is virtually no archaeological evidence for dedicated Christian meeting places prior to AD180. Until then, the word was spread by individuals and small house groups <sup>(2)</sup>. The way of the world was that the whole household converted to the religion of the head of the house. And yet the call of Christ was to individuals. Therefore when we read of whole households converting (Acts 16:15, 31-34; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:11,16; 16:15 Rom. 16:10) we must assume that they had resisted the temptation to mass convert, and that Masters had the humility to *not* demand of their slaves and family members that they just blindly follow them. This request would have been axiomatic to their preaching of the Gospel; and yet it would have been a radical departure from how family heads around them behaved. We have the very same issues before us today. It can happen that a small church decides to convert to the Truth. It can be that some are inclined to 'go along' with the change just because it is what the others and their elders are doing. Especially can it be so that wife or children convert to the religion of their husband or parents, and it so happens that this new religion is 'the Truth'. Neither they nor the parents / partner should expect them to make the conversion for their sakes. It *must be* a purely individual choice; and as even in the newly opened mission fields, 3rd and 4th generations of believers appear, we cannot emphasise enough that baptism implies *conversion*. It is not merely following the faith of our fathers as mere religion. Further, religion was generally for men in the first century. The women and the slaves followed along because it was their duty. Indeed, some of the religions adopted by first century household fellowships (e.g. Mithraism) were purely for men. And here again, true Christianity contrasted radically with everything else on the market. Women and slaves had such a high profile that this was one of the things the Christian faith was derided for.

And yet further, it was usual for the head of the household to automatically be the leader of the religion which his household practised. But for the true Christians, this was not necessarily so to be; for the Lord had taught that it was the servant who was to lead, and the least esteemed in the ecclesia were to judge matters (1 Cor. 6:4). Elders of the household fellowships had to be chosen on the basis of their spiritual qualification, Paul taught. The radical nature of these teachings is so easily lost on us. And yet it is urgently relevant to how many of our ecclesias, especially in Africa or Asia, are run. The more wealthy, more articulate, more educated, can so easily be expected *by everyone* to be the leaders, when they may not be qualified to do so. And elsewhere, it can so easily be so that those capable of

standing on their hind legs and saying fair words from a platform become *on that qualification alone* the elders. The challenge to give humility and other spiritual qualifications their true weight is uncomfortably urgent. For it seems to me that we have given too much emphasis to platform speaking in our community.

### *One Lord, One Master*

On the other hand, it is clear from the NT that there were many slaves converted in households which did not believe in Christ, and probably had other religions. Those miserable books of Bible contradictions pick on this as an example of where the Bible cannot be right. It can't be, they say, that slaves held a different religion to their households to which they belonged. But it really *was* so...we just have to have the faith that men and women really were motivated by the power of the Gospel, by the greatness of the Hope of the Kingdom, by the compelling nature of the person of Jesus, to risk all, even death, to be ostracised as betrayers, to give up all human relationships...for the sake of conversion to the one true belief. They would presumably have sought fellowship in those households which had functioning ecclesias within them; for it is our duty to seek out fellowship with each other, whatever the cost. For us, it may be time, inconvenience, travel expenses, the need to get along with those we differ with. For them, it was enduring all the stress that would have gone with a slave leaving the household who had bought him, and spending some time in another household, say one hour / week, often on pain of death if his owner found out. For masters had the right to kill their slaves for any disobedience. And remember, Christianity was and is exclusive. We cannot worship any other Lord or Master or religion. We cannot serve two Masters. The Lord Jesus is our one Master. To recognise Him as Lord therefore cost dearly for the slave converted to Him. But there was a power in the early Christian message that nonetheless converted more and more men and women to the Lord- although this dramatic growth was against all worldly sense and expectation. Many a man and woman were fools for the sake of Christ's imposing and demanding Lordship, and for the sake of fellowship with their dear brethren. We are free to speculate as to how there may have been 'rushed' breakings of bread, where brother Rufus or sister Phoebe dashed in to a believing household fellowship whilst supposedly on an errand for their unbelieving master, and with all the urgent intensity of true fellowship in the Truth, they would have taken the bread and wine in memory of the One True Master for whom they would fain give up all.

### *Notes*

- (1) Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea Of Community* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980) pp. 29,41.
- (2) Graydon Snyder, *Archaeological Evidence Of Church Life* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1985).

### **APPENDIX: The New Testament Basis For House Churches**

The first occurrence of a word in Scripture is often significant. The first reference to a house is in the record of Noah's house / family being saved in the ark. This of course is picked up by Peter and explained as symbolic of the family of the faithful entering into Christ by baptism. From the start, the method, the practical outworking, of God's salvation was through the salvation of small houses / communities.

The record of the body of Christ in the New Testament begins with descriptions of the Lord preaching in houses. The word 'house' occurs a huge number of times in the Gospels, especially in Luke's record. He seems to have been very sensitive to the way the Lord entered



into homes and did things there. We can be sure that these homes became house churches after His resurrection. The establishment of the church began with the believers gathering in the temple, but breaking bread “from house to house” (Acts 2:46). Fellowship in Christ is about this family sense of community. In practice, the early body of Christ was a fellowship of house churches. They preached and worshipped both in the temple and “in every house”, i.e. every house church (Acts 5:42). Note how in Acts 8:3, “the church” is paralleled with “every house” [church]: “Saul laid waste the church, entering into every house”. That’s a very significant parallel. Those house churches in sum were the church of Christ. It may be significant in this context that Paul chooses to use the word *patria* to describe the new “family in heaven and earth” to which we belong in Christ (Eph. 3:15). The word *patria* is defined by Strong as meaning “a group of families” that comprise a nation [s.w. Acts 3:25 “all kindreds of the earth”]. The various family units / house churches comprised the overall body of Christ, the nation of the new Israel.

Household conversions were a major feature of the first century spread of the Gospel (e.g. Lydia- Acts 16:15; Crispus- Acts 18:8; Priscilla and Aquila- Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Nymphas- Col. 4:15; Onesiphorus- 2 Tim. 1:16; 4:19; Philemon- Philemon 2; “the elect lady”, 2 Jn. 10; the home at Troas- Acts 20:6-8). Clearly ‘house’ was used in the first century as a kind of shorthand for ‘house church’. They knew no other pattern of gathering. There was almost an assumption that if a man converted to Christ, his ‘house’ also would. Hence we read that Cornelius would be told words “whereby thou and thy house shalt be saved” (Acts 11:14). The same phrase was repeated to the jailor at Philippi (Acts 16:31). It’s emphasized four times in three verses that the Gospel was preached to his house, and his whole house responded (Acts 16:31-34). The Lord likewise rejoiced in Zacchaeus’ conversion, that salvation had come to that man’s house (Lk. 19:9). He assumed that Zacchaeus would quite naturally persuade his ‘house’. The Lord at least twice stressed to His disciples that they were not to go preaching from house to house, but rather focus upon one house in a village and make that the centre of their work (Lk. 9:4; 10:7). Clearly His intention was that they built up house groups rather than scattered converts. Perhaps this was alluded to by Paul when he criticized sisters who went spreading gossip “from house to house” (1 Tim. 5:13). He surely had house churches in mind.

Eph. 3:15 takes on a new meaning in the light of the house-church nature of early Christianity. God is the *pater* [father- the head of the house] from whom every home [*patria*] in heaven and on earth is named”. We’re invited to see God as a family God, with us as “the household of God” (Eph. 2:19; 3:15). 1 Tim. 3:4,5 lays down that an elder in the house [church] of God must be one who rules his own household well. The implication perhaps is that the ecclesias of which Paul wrote were household churches. The 1st century household was governed by the *paterfamilias*, the head of the house. In terms of the household ecclesias, this person was the ‘elder’; but to govern a household church required that such a person governed their own domestic household well. My point is that there is an implied equation between the ‘church of God’ and the domestic household; understandable, if the early churches were in fact household groups. Where things would’ve got awkward was if the ‘elder’ or leader of the household church was not in fact the *paterfamilias* of that house where the church gathered. We are left to imagine wealthy brother A opening up his home to the house church, in which poorer brother B was the leader of the spiritual house. This is the radical import of Paul’s teaching that eldership in the ecclesia was to be based upon spiritual criteria and not human wealth or social position. No wonder the extraordinary unity and social bonding of the early churches proved so attractive and startling to the world. And we in our day are invited to practice similar sociological impossibilities in our ecclesias. It’s no

wonder that we so often fail; we shouldn't be surprised that providence almost seems to make unity an impossibility, with so many differing personality types and backgrounds called to participate in the ecclesia. All too often we've flunked out of this challenge by subconsciously recruiting as it were only those of our own background and personality type to our ecclesias. But the ideal is clearly laid down for us in the early church's example.

Believers who've only known large formal churches which meet in buildings can easily get the impression that any other method of worship or gathering is somehow second rate or even cult-like. And those who meet in homes may likewise be tempted to ponder whether their Christian experience is the real deal. A survey of the New Testament reveals that early Christianity knew nothing of dedicated meeting places, church halls etc. The early community was a new nation, the Israel of God, comprised of a network of house groups throughout the Roman empire. That was the early body of Christ. The small groups of earnest believers that network together in the 21st century therefore have every reason to feel they are a continuation of the 1st century pattern. It's not that meeting in large church halls is in itself wrong. But it's somewhat removed from the spirit of the first century. My suggestion would be that those large congregations should definitely split into cell groups. Only in this way can there be the personal challenge to us in terms of relationships, love, understanding, service, forgiveness, patience etc. which true Christianity is all about. All too easily we can slip into mere weekly attendance at a large, safe, impersonal gathering, where very little of the radical, uncomfortable, personally direct challenge of Christ comes through to us.

### **The House Churches Of Corinth**

The Jerusalem pattern of gathering collectively in the temple and yet also having home groups was repeated in Corinth. 1 Corinthians is addressed to the singular church in Corinth, which he parallels with "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:2). Those 'places', I submit, referred to the various house churches in the city. He specifically mentions the house churches of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11) and Stephanas (1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15). The exhortation that "you all speak the same thing" (1 Cor. 1:10) would then refer to the need for the various house churches to all "be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment". As we know, there was an issue of fellowship in Corinth, concerning a deeply immoral brother. If he avoided church discipline by simply joining another house church, they were not going to be joined together in "the same judgment", and inevitably division would arise amongst those Corinthian house churches. There was to be peace rather than confusion "in all churches" (1 Cor. 14:33)- i.e. all the house churches in Corinth. Paul's complaint that "every one of you saith, I am of Paul... I of Apollos" (1 Cor. 1:12) surely makes more sense if read with reference to each of the house churches, rather than every individual member. Paul speaks there as if the believers 'came together' 'in ekklesia' (1 Cor. 5:4), i.e. the various home groups occasionally met together. Hence he speaks of when "the whole church be come together into one place" (1 Cor. 14:23), i.e. all the house churches gathered together for a special fellowship meeting. He says that when they 'came together', then they should make a collective decision about disfellowshipping the immoral brother. Paul wrote to the Romans from Corinth, and he describes Gaius as the host of the whole church (Rom. 16:23)- implying that he had premises large enough for all the various house churches to gather together in. The abuses which occurred when the whole church 'came together' presumably therefore occurred on his premises.

All this explains Paul's comment to the Corinthians that he ordained his guidelines to be practiced in all the ecclesias (1 Cor. 7:17)- i.e. the house churches that comprised the body of Christ in Corinth. He gives some guidelines for behaviour that appear to contradict each other

until we perceive the difference between the commands to house groups, and commands about the ‘gathering together’ for special breaking of bread services. The role of women is a classic example. 1 Cor. 14:34 says that women should keep silent ‘in ecclesia’ [AV “churches” is a mistranslation]- i.e. a sister shouldn’t teach at those special breaking of bread meetings when the house churches ‘came together’ (1 Cor. 11:17,18,20). And yet within the house groups, it’s apparent from other New Testament accounts and from what Paul himself writes, that sisters did teach there (1 Cor. 11:5). Thus in the house church of Philip, there were four women who ‘prophesied’, i.e. spoke forth the word of God to others (Acts 21:8,9). This to me is the only way to make sense of Corinthians- otherwise Paul appears to be contradicting himself.

And there’s another enigmatic verse explained by this approach. A woman was to keep silent and ask her husband [Gk. ‘man’] ‘at [a] home’ if she had any questions (1 Cor. 14:35 Gk.). Generations of mystified yet Godly women have read that verse and thought ‘But I don’t have a man at home to ask. I’m not even married’- or ‘But my hubbie doesn’t know a thing about the Bible!’. Read in the context of a house church scenario, it makes perfect sense. The women weren’t to interrupt the combined gatherings with disruptively asked questions from the floor. They were to ask the elders back in their house churches. And that’s why the Greek in 1 Cor. 14:35 strictly makes a distinction, between the woman not speaking / publicly asking questions in the church, but asking the brethren in a house [church].

We can now better understand Paul’s complaint that they were turning the special communal gatherings into a feast which focussed on each group trying to outdo the others with the food and drink they brought. The combined breaking of bread meeting, in Paul’s view, wasn’t the time to indulge in a huge party, with all the emphasis upon eating and drinking your own food and wine, rather than focusing upon that which God had provided in Jesus. Hence he comments: “Have you not houses to eat and to drink in?” (1 Cor. 11:22). Given almost every reference to ‘house’ in Corinthians is to a house church or to the spiritual house of God, it would seem Paul’s idea is: ‘It’s OK to eat and drink and have a collective meal etc. in your house church meetings. But don’t do that when you all meet together for the breaking of bread- it’s getting divisive, because of the social differences between the house groups which are made apparent by the choice of food and drink’. They were to ‘discern the body of the Lord Jesus’ at those gatherings- i.e. recognize that all of them gathered there, the various house churches of Corinth, were in fact the collective body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29). If anyone was hungry and therefore in need of material support, the combined breaking of bread meeting wasn’t the place to raise the issue- he should “eat at home”, i.e. take food and support from his local house church (1 Cor. 11:34). That’s surely a more reasonable reading, for at face value it would seem the hungry brother lacking food is being heartlessly told ‘Well go home and eat!’.

Having spoken of the need to ‘discern the body’ of Jesus at these gatherings, Paul launches off in 1 Cor. 12 into his explanation of how there is only one body of Christ, but to “each” has been given different gifts and emphases. Sadly many English translations confuse the issue, by speaking of how to “each man” is given a Holy Spirit gift (1 Cor. 12:7). But the Greek definitely means ‘to each one’, and I suggest it refers to how each house church was given a specific gift. I say that because there is New Testament evidence that suggests that not every single individual believer in the first century had Holy Spirit gifts. That is hard to square with 1 Cor. 12 teaching that ‘each one’ had such gifts. But remember the context. Paul has been arguing that there is one body of Christ in Corinth, and each house church contributes towards that. The house churches were divided against each other and some

groups shunned others. Paul is saying that each of those house groups played a vital role. We can take a lesson from this. Each ecclesia even today has a somewhat different emphasis, and all too easily, ecclesias can divide from each other. And yet this would be a denial of the one body of Christ; we not only need each other individually, each ecclesia needs each other ecclesia in their area, if they are to fully function as the one body. The warning against “schism in the body” (1 Cor. 12:25) applied in the context to there being schism between local house churches, rather than between individuals.

### **Rome**

Rome may have been another example. Paul writes to them as if there was one church in Rome, and yet he mentions the house groups of Aristobulus and Narcissus (Rom. 16:10,11). Indeed, in Rom. 16:14,15 we have lists of names of brethren, and then the comment “and all the saints which are with them”. It could be that the long list of greetings to named individuals was more like a list of greetings to the various house churches which comprised the larger ‘ecclesia’ in Rome. Robert Banks observes: “Justin in his *First Apology* refers to several distinct house-based meetings in Rome as much as a century after the New Testament” (1).

### **Ephesus**

Perhaps the same was the case in Ephesus- for Paul reminisced how he had taught that ecclesia both publicly, and from house to house (Acts 20:20). Luke used the same phrase “house to house” in Acts 2:46 to describe house churches. Surely Paul was recalling how he had taught the Ephesian church both “publicly”, when they were all gathered together, and also in their house churches. Aquila had a house church in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19), and so did Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 1:16,18; 4:19). Another indication of this structure within the Ephesian church is to be found in considering how Paul wrote to Timothy with advice, whilst Timothy was leading that church. Paul advises him not to permit sisters to wander about “from house [church] to house [church]” carrying ecclesial gossip (1 Tim. 5:13). The existence of house churches within the Ephesus ecclesia would explain the slightly unusual Greek construction in 1 Tim. 3:15, which speaks of behaviour “in a house of God”. Maybe Paul refers to the same distinction between house churches and larger gatherings in Ephesus when he advises that a bishop should rule well his own house and have his children in subjection (1 Tim. 3:4,5). There is a common New Testament understanding of ‘children’ as referring to converts; and the Greek word translated “rule” is only used elsewhere, both in 1 Timothy and in the rest of the New Testament, about ‘ruling’ or ‘providing for’ the church in a pastoral sense (Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 3:14). This interpretation would solve a commonly observed difficulty- that the children of many fine elders aren’t not always believers, they’re not always “in subjection”, and neither were those of many Biblical heroes. And further, seeing even the children of believers ultimately have freewill choice, how can it be that church leaders are held as it were responsible for their children’s choices? If we understand the ‘ruling’ here to mean spiritual provision for those in ones own house church, as a qualification for appointment to being a minister of the larger, joint congregational gatherings- then this difficulty disappears. Quite how else to solve it is presently beyond me! And this idea- of being faithful over a household and then being promoted to greater responsibility- would then be an obvious allusion to the Lord’s parable about the faithful house-manager [AV “steward”] who is then promoted to greater responsibility in the Master’s own household (Lk. 12:42 compared with Mt. 24:45).

### **What The Early House Churches Were Like**

1 Cor. 14:23-25 seems to imply that unbelievers came into house churches and ought to have been so deeply impressed that they declared that “God is in you of a truth”. They were to be the living exemplification of how, as the Lord had prayed in John 17, the witness of Christian unity ought to be enough to convert the world. We need to give His words there their true weight. To see slaves and masters, men and women, Jew and Gentile, all sitting at the same table celebrating their salvation in the same Lord, with offices of leadership and responsibility distributed according to spiritual rather than social qualifications... this would’ve been astounding to the Mediterranean world of the first century. The way men mixed with women and the poor with the rich would’ve been especially startling.

## **Women**

Women were only allowed to be present at meals with men if they were close family members. Houses unearthed in Pompeii feature two dining rooms side by side, for men and for women (2). And yet the Christian breaking of bread featured a “coming together” into one place for the memorial meal. Men and women, slaves and masters, eating together- this was radical stuff. To simply be present at such a meeting as an onlooker would’ve presented an almost irresistible case for Christianity. Significantly, the catacombs around Rome [where many Christians lived and were buried] feature meal scenes which appear to depict breaking of bread meetings. They show men and women sitting or reclining together around the bread and wine (3); whereas contemporary secular art nearly always depicts men and women feasting separately.

The dignity afforded to women by Christianity, the strange bonding between genders, races and social ranks, all combined to make the early house churches attractive, especially to women. Celsus complained that the Christian sect was growing through contacts initially being made in houses, and Christianity spreading amongst slaves and female members of households. House groups then, as now, were the key to the powerful spread of the Gospel. Adolf von Harnack commented that women “played a leading role in the spread of this religion” (4). This fact is understandable once we appreciate how house groups were the key to Christianity’s wildfire spread in the first century.

## **Young People / Children**

In *Against Celsus* 3.55, Origen defends Christianity against the allegation that it requires men to leave the world of men and go mix with women and children in “the washerwoman’s shop”- presumably a house church Celsus knew. Lucian of Samosata even mocked Christianity as being largely comprised of children and “old hags called widows”. Marcus Cornelius Fronto likewise mocked the way “children” [and by that term he would’ve referred to teenagers too] participated in the breaking of bread [*Octavius* 8-9]. The teaching of the Lord Jesus was attractive to children / young people. They like women were treated as of little worth; the Greco-Roman world considered that children had to be taught, and couldn’t teach a man anything. But the Lord Jesus repeatedly set children up as examples of discipleship (Mk. 9:36,37; Lk. 9:47,48; as Heb. 12:5-9). So we can understand the appeal of early Christianity to young people, teenagers, especially girls. O.M. Bakke has written a fascinating study entitled *When Children Became People* (5). The thesis is that the teaching of Christianity gave disenfranchised people an identity and meaning as persons- women and slaves are obvious examples- but this also applied to children / young people. They too were disregarded as people in Mediterranean society; and yet in Christ they were given their value as people. In the house church setting, we can imagine how this happened. Celsus mocks how

teenage boys go to Christian house churches to be taught by women- reflecting how attractive Christianity was for young people.

## Slaves

Slaves, especially female ones, were in a very bad situation. They had no identity outside their family of ownership. Both male and female slaves were used for sexual purposes at will. They were seen as having no honour, no rights, and therefore there was nothing to violate. They were used as objects rather than persons. But enter the call of Christ. Now, the dominated, powerless female slave hears of honour and beauty being ascribed to her if she is “in Christ”. Paul’s description of all those in Christ as a beautiful, chaste virgin must’ve struck chords of wonder with those slave women. For those who had the faith to overcome the ‘Can this all be really true for me?’ syndrome, there was a new life and self-perception- encouraged by the way they saw others like them being transformed as persons. Slaves were sold with their children at times, but there are no records of slaves being sold as married couples. Their place of origin was listed in the records as the place where they had been purchased. They were the “people without history”, seen as having no past and no future. They were outside of normal human society. All this is well summed up in Patterson’s *Slavery And Social Death* (6). One example he gives of how slaves were seen as mere bodies is the way in which female slaves had to wet nurse the children of their mistress. They were called *mamma*- literally meaning, a breast. And from this came the use of that word to mean ‘mother’. But initially, *mamma* meant strictly a breast; that was the name given to wet nursing slave women. Into this darkness and desperation, there burst the light of Christ. We can imagine a group of those women eagerly listening to Paul’s latest letter being read out in the house church. They heard of how they had been bought with the price of Christ’s blood, that now they were slaves of the Father and Son, that their bodies were truly not their own but *His*. And in 1 Cor. 7:21-23 they would’ve heard how Paul advised them not to be like other slaves, always dreaming of somehow getting free, but to be content with their situation in which they had been called, to live for the daily joy of being Christ’s slave. They were no longer part of the ‘household’ of their master. They belonged to house churches, which were part of the *patria* of God (Eph. 3:15). They belonged to another household, a household which they perceived by faith- the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). No wonder Celsus complained that Christianity led its followers into rebellion against the heads of households. Doubtless he was exaggerating, but the idea of having another head of house, another *patria* , was indeed obnoxious to a slave owning society. This is why the language of slavery permeates so much of the New Testament letters; for according to Christianity’s critics, it was largely a slave, female religion to start with. And of course, the unity between slave women and free women in the house churches was amazing; it cut across all accepted social boundaries of separation. The *Martyrdom Of Perpetua And Felicitas* tells the story of how a Christian mistress (Perpetua) and a slave girl (Felicitas) are thrown together into the nets to be devoured by wild animals, standing together as they faced death (7). This was the kind of unity which converted the world.

What does all this mean for us? Firstly, we need to perceive that the apparent freedoms we have aren’t what they appear. We’re so easily enslaved to sin in all its guises. This world is a world in slavery to sin. That’s the telling paradox of Rom. 6- that in baptism, we are changing masters. We’re not giving up freedom, but rather escaping from slavery to sin. Secondly, our appeal needs to be made to those who perceive their slavery to this world, to those who cry out to be recognized as persons rather than treated as slaves. And this applies to just about everyone- children abused by a parent, the high profile corporate manager, the druggies,

alcoholics, the ignored handicapped, the forgotten-about elderly. They're all in need of the amazing affirmation of the human person which there is in Christ; that one lost sheep is worth total effort by Him. But they need telling about it, and to see it in us; for what passes as Christianity has evidently failed to teach them anything about it.

Given the predominance of slaves, children and women in the early churches, we are to imagine those house meetings with plenty of women, nursing mothers, kids running everywhere. Eph. 6:1 and Col. 3:20 seem to suppose that children would be present at the church gatherings and would listen attentively to what was said. The equal footing upon which women were accepted into the church through baptism would itself have been shocking and a huge advert for the value of the human person which there was and is in true Christianity. The way true Christianity gives meaning to the individual, makes them see their value before God, is something we need to communicate better. We need to positively preach a definite salvation in Christ, specifically speaking of how great is the love and passion of God for us as individuals; the wonder of the fact that we here on earth can please Him, can touch His heart, there in Heaven. God is a master who is so emotionally and profoundly pleased with our service, unlike human masters who forget. Note in passing how Heb. 11:4 speaks of God bearing witness, giving a verbal testimony, to Abel's sacrifice, and that through that witness Abel is as it were still speaking to us, in that to this day God is still speaking / testifying to that acceptable act of service performed by Abel. This is how delighted our Heavenly Master is with our service; and this would've meant so much to first century slaves. We won't succeed in convicting men and women of their value before God if we're merely preaching ideas, theology, interpretation... And if that was all the message of the early Christians had amounted to, they wouldn't have enjoyed the phenomenal success which they did amongst women, young people and slaves.

### **Female House Churches?**

What is worthy of reflection is that the New Testament speaks of households run by women: Mary (Acts 12:12), Lydia (Acts 16:14,40); Nympha (Col. 4:15) and Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11). These women were presumably wealthy widows or divorcees who hadn't remarried. We are left to speculate whether they were in some way the 'leaders' of the house churches which met in their homes. Women are described as ruling households in 1 Tim. 5:14; Tit. 2:4,5. The woman of Prov. 31 clearly had autonomy within the private sphere of the household, even though the husband was the public leader. Seeing Christianity was initially a house-church, household religion, we are left to wonder how much women actually led house churches, especially seeing that the majority of early Christian members appear to have been women. The wall paintings [frescoes] found in the Christian catacombs around Rome are highly significant for our present study. The significant ones for our purposes are the catacombs of Priscilla on the Salaria Nuova, Callixtus on the via Appia Antica, and that of Domitilla on the via Ardeatine. They feature in places scenes of female Christians raising cups, with the inscription *agape* over them. Some show a woman occupying the central place in the meal, with a large cup in her hand, with the other women looking at it intently. Some of the frescoes [there are many of them] show women dressed as slaves doing this in what appears to be a wealthy home. These frescoes seem to me indicative of how groups of slave women formed house churches, and faithfully kept the breaking of bread. Some frescoes show the women sharing the bread and wine with children around the table; one shows a woman holding a scroll, as if she is reading Scripture to the others. One fresco features a woman holding a cup of wine inscribed '*nobis*'- 'for us' (8). Some frescoes show men in the group, but the woman in the centre, as if she is leading the meeting, or as the host of the household.



How does one square this with New Testament teaching about brothers leading breaking of bread meetings? I came across an analogous situation some years ago in Northern Kazakhstan, shortly after the collapse of atheism and the USSR there. A zealous group of elderly sisters baptized over 300 people in a short space of time, establishing a whole set of house churches, comprised almost exclusively of women. In time, a few men became interested. They had known little of the Bible, coming from a Soviet background. They were taught by the sisters, baptized by them, and became members of the already-existing house churches. But they on their own admission felt unable to lead the meetings, as they were babes in Christ compared to those sisters. I can imagine similar situations arising in the early church. The dynamic success of those female house churches in Northern Kazakhstan was similar to what happened in the first century; groups of sisters coming together in home situations and bonding together in Christ, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor... it would've been an amazing thing to behold. What went wrong in Kazakhstan was what went wrong in the early church; things got institutionalized, power politics entered the scene, the live, raw appeal of Christ to the world got somehow muted and made respectable.

Perhaps the Lord foresaw the phenomena of female house churches when He told the parable of the woman who gathers other women together in her home to celebrate her finding of the lost coin. The unity between Christian sisters was celebrated in the *Acts Of Thecla*, where we read of sisters uniting to publically demonstrate against Thecla's condemnation to death for her refusal to marry a non-Christian. Christianity certainly had something uniquely appealing to first century women. Whilst I think some of the 'liberation theologians' have gone too far, it's true to say that Christianity spread so rapidly and radically because it was a movement of paradigm-breaking liberation, especially for women and slaves. And the 21st century is just as much enslaved and in need of radical liberation as was the Mediterranean of the 1st century. The message of true Christianity gave meaning to the individual. It wasn't a question of signing up for some religion, which required Sunday morning attendance at a certain place and a certain time. If that was what first century Christianity had been all about, it simply wouldn't have had such success amongst poor women and slaves. For it would've been impossible for them to make regular appointments given their domestic and social situations. But true Christianity appeals [as much today as back then] to the individual. We read in the *Acts Of Thecla* [Section 34] of a woman imprisoned by the demands of her husband and society... and how she baptized herself. The idea that baptism can only be administered by a certain group of "elders" was foreign to early Christianity.

## **Conclusions**

The history of Israel shows how people struggle with the intimacy and spiritual demands of a 'house church'. The Passover was intended to be kept in families, slaying a family lamb for the household. Going outside the house was forbidden (Ex. 12:22)- indicating how it was to be a family feast. But by Josiah's time, the Passover meal was eaten at a central point in Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:23). The family / home no longer was the spiritual focus; and by the time of the New Testament, Passover is no longer described as a feast of Yahweh but instead a "feast of the Jews". Everything became formalized and institutionalized. Likewise the early history of Christianity shows a sad shift from the enthusiastic, on-fire-for-the-Lord house churches of the first century to the stone cathedrals of institutionalized Christendom.

One wonders whether our enthusiasm for church halls is in fact in line with New Testament practice. By having them, especially in India or Africa, we may feel that we have 'arrived' as a religion, but the essential belief and practice of God's Truth is surely independent of them.

If someone will only join us if we have a building, then they can hardly believe the Gospel and see their desperate need for baptism into the Lord. Psychologists have suggested that we need association on three different levels: the large group level, where we have a sense of belonging to something transcending our local state and area [which we have in the world-wide membership of the body of Christ]; the ‘congregation’ level, where people know most of the others and yet there are a few strangers [which Corinth, e.g., had in their occasional larger gatherings]; and the ‘cell’ level, where there is mutual support, in-depth personal fellowship and understanding. This would have been possible in the household ecclesias. One wonders whether our larger ecclesias should not consider a similar breakdown. We surely need to realize that our services are not as it were a theatre, with actors on a stage and an audience looking on. We are a body consisting of members who share out to each other the essence of Christ; the body makes increase of itself, building up itself in love. We are a family, not just an audience, linked together by a real and far reaching involvement and responsibility in each others’ lives. We show Christ to each other; and this is so much easier in home meetings.

### Notes

- (1) Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea Of Community* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980) p. 41.
- (2) See Carolyn Osiek and David Balch, *Families In The New Testament World: Households And House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) pp. 16,17.
- (3) Ample photographs of the catacomb art depicting these scenes are to be found in J. Deckers, H. Seeliger, G. Mietke *Die Katacombe ‘Santi Marcellion e Pietro: Repertorio delle pitture* (Vatican City: Pontificio istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1987). This is a huge 3 volume production with a large number of photographs of catacomb art.
- (4) Adolf von Harnack, *The Mission And Expansion Of Christianity In The First Three Centuries* (New York: Harper, 1961 ed.) p. 368. This same conclusion is reached by Rodney Stark, *The Rise Of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- (5) O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).
- (6) Orlando Patterson, *Slavery And Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- (7) ‘The Martyrdom Of Perpetua And Felicitas’, in H. Musurillo, translator, *Acts Of The Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) pp. 106-131.
- (8) Ample photographs of the catacomb art depicting these scenes are to be found in J. Deckers, H. Seeliger, G. Mietke *Die Katacombe ‘Santi Marcellion e Pietro: Repertorio delle pitture* (Vatican City: Pontificio istituto di archeologia cristiana, 1987). This is a huge 3 volume production with a large number of photographs of catacomb art. The photo plates relevant to what I’ve written of here are numbers 30a-b; 31a-b; 19a-b; 20a-b; 33c; 58a-b.

### 16-3-3 Rich And Poor In The First Century

## *“The poor of this world”*

The Lord Himself had implied that it was to the poor that the Gospel was more successfully preached. And Paul observed that in Corinth, not many mighty had been called, but most of them were poor (1 Cor. 1:26-28). “Christianity in its beginnings was without doubt a movement of impoverished classes...the Christian congregation originally embraced proletariat elements almost exclusively and was a proletarian organization” <sup>(1)</sup>. It has also been observed that the New Testament generally is written in very rough Greek, of a low cultural level when compared with other Greek literature of the period <sup>(2)</sup>. The way he exhorts the Thessalonians to work with their own hands so that the world couldn’t criticize them implies the readership of Thessalonians were mainly manual workers (1 Thess. 4:11). Likewise Eph. 4:28. Paul wrote as if the “abysmal poverty” of the Macedonian ecclesias was well known (2 Cor. 8:1,2); and yet he goes on to reason that they had “abundance” in comparison with the “lack” of the Jerusalem Christians (8:14). The Jewish Christians called themselves “Ebionites”, based on the Hebrew word for ‘the poor’ - “it was probably a conscious reminiscence of a very early term which attested by Paul’s letters as an almost technical name for the Christians in Jerusalem and Judaea” <sup>(3)</sup>. Even if not all these poor converts were slaves, they were all subservient to their employers / sources of income. Craftsmen would have had to belong to a pagan trade guild, normally involving idol worship which a Christian had to refuse, and slaves of course had no ‘right’ to their own religion if it differed from that of their household. *Everything was against the spread of the Truth amongst the poor of the first century.* And yet, the Truth grew and prospered, as it marched through town after town across the Roman empire. There can be no doubt that its’ development was due to the early believers’ spiritual energy and powerful example, rather than to any favourable social dynamic. And yet right before our eyes, the very same miracle is going on. And it *is* a miracle, of first century proportions. The poor of Africa, Europe, Asia, the Americas, those with *so much* to distract them, with *so much* to attract them to false, feelgood religion...are in the face of all this, *in the very teeth of gripping, wrenching poverty and the distraction this brings with it*, not only coming to the Truth but spreading it so powerfully. For real poverty does distract, terribly. How am I going to feed my children, pay the rent when it needs all my salary, from where to get new clothes for growing children, how to live in a room that has no windows as a -30 Winter approaches...all this distracts, terribly, from spiritual matters. And yet it is being overcome, day by day and hour by hour, by the power of the true Gospel in the lives of very ordinary women and men. And in the barest essence, the Western brotherhood is also distracted by the things of this world, and yet is also waking up as it did 120 years ago to the power of the Truth we possess.

The early church chose its leadership according to spiritual qualifications. The radicality of this is easily lost upon us in this age. But we need to understand that religion was perceived as almost a hobby for the wealthy, who showed their wealth by being patrons for a cult or religious idea. True Christianity was not a hobby. It was and is a life-demanding commitment, which demands the very core of our personhood. It wasn’t a question of mere manners, following a certain set ritual and clothing; it’s about morals, about real character-changing ethics. It’s no spare time hobby, engaged in for social reasons. Further, the idea of a poor person being in a decision making position in a religious group was bizarre to the first century mind. To respect a poor person was very hard for them: “If you’re poor, you’re a joke, on each and every occasion. What a laugh, if your cloak is dirty or torn, if your toga appears a little bit soiled, if your shoe has a crack in the leather. Or if several patches betray frequent mending! Poverty’s greatest curse, much worse than actually being poor, is that it makes man

objects of mirth, ridiculed, grumble, embarrassed... Sons of freeborn men give way to a rich man's slave"<sup>(4)</sup>. That Christianity should follow a *poor* man and His poor disciples was a real challenge to society. And yet, Christianity spread amongst rich and poor alike. The encouragement to us is that even when it is apparent that what we are preaching is just *not* what society wants to hear, or even appears able to hear, the power of the Gospel itself *will* bring about a response if we truly witness. When Paul commands to place the poor brother in a position where he can make judgments between wealthy brethren who are disagreeing with each other [only the wealthy could afford to take out litigations as they were doing], he was really asking a lot. But he never baulks. He always goes for it, and fearlessly, without any embarrassment, lays down the implications of Christ and demands our response.

### *Wealthy Individuals*

It is worth noting, though, that the NT does reflect the fact that a number of wealthy individuals came to the Truth too; and that these were bound together in fellowship with the poor. There were wealthy women amongst the earliest followers of Jesus (Lk. 8:3); and James and John came from a family who owned their own fishing boat and could employ servants (Mk. 1:19,20). Zacchaeus was wealthy- and note that he wasn't commanded to divest himself of all that wealth (Lk. 19:1-10). Consider the Philippi ecclesia- the wealthy lady from Lydia, the homeless slave girl, the middle class, respectable jailer, and the slaves of his and Lydia's household. There was nowhere else in the ancient world that all these classes could come together in such unity. Paul himself was not poor- "to be a citizen of Tarsus one had to pass the means test of owning property worth at least 500 drachmae"<sup>(5)</sup>. He was thought wealthy enough to be able to give a bribe (Acts 24:26). He assured Philemon that he personally would meet any debts arising from the situation with Onesimus. Consider the other wealthy converts: the Proconsul of Cyprus (Acts 13:12), Lydia, Jason who was wealthy enough to put down security for Paul, assisted by prominent women (Acts 17:4,9), Greek women of high standing at Berea (Acts 17:12), Dionysius and Damaris in Athens (Acts 17:16-34), Crispus the ruler of the Corinth synagogue (Acts 18:8 cp. 1 Cor. 1:14), Erastus the city treasurer (Rom. 16:23). Marta Sordi quotes evidence for there being Christians amongst the Roman aristocracy even during the first half of the first century<sup>(6)</sup>. These few wealthy converts would have bonded together with the mass of poor and slaves who had also come to Christ. It was a unique unity. The list of believers' names in Romans 16 is there for a purpose: to show how all types had come together in the Rome ecclesia. Women are named and greeted [uncommon in contemporary Jewish letters of the time]; some names are common slave names: Phlegon, Hermes, Philologus; whereas tradition has it that the Narcissus mentioned was a famous and wealthy member of the court of Claudius. Greetings are given from two members at Corinth: "Erastus the treasurer of the city [of Corinth] salutes you, and Quartus, a brother" (Rom. 16:23). There is an intended juxtaposition here: of the wealthy and powerful brother Erastus, and the unknown [slave?] Quartus, who all the same was "a brother", on the same spiritual standing. Phoebe is described as the *prostates* of the Cenchræ ecclesia and Paul himself- a word translatable as "patroness" (Rom. 16:1,2). It could be that she funded Paul's activities at least in part. The same implication may be behind Paul's description of the mother of Rufus as being his "mother" (Rom. 16:13). This would have continued the example of wealthy women like Joanna supporting the ministry of Jesus (Lk. 8:2).

If one goes through the Acts and the New Testament letters and makes a list of all the individuals who are named, we have a list of about 78 people. About 30 of these people have some indication in the narrative as to their social status; and the majority of these are from

above average social stations. For example, the way Achaicus, Fortunatus, Tertius and Lucius in Corinth and Clement in Philippi all have Latin names in Roman colonies could well indicate that they were from the original stock of colonists, who tended to be well ahead of the local population. Gaius had a home big enough for the Corinth ecclesia to meet in (Rom. 16:23). Crispus was the leader of the Corinth synagogue and yet he and Gaius were the first people Paul converted there (1 Cor. 1:14). Thus in this case the initial response was from the socially well to do, although the later converts were generally poor. By all means compare with how wealthy Lydia was the first convert in Philippi. Anyone who was a household leader or with a home large enough to accommodate the ecclesia was clearly of a higher social level. Thus the Philippian jailer, Stephanas and Chloe had a "household" (1 Cor. 1:11; 16:15), as did Philemon; and even Aquilla and Priscilla although artisans were wealthy enough to have room to host an ecclesia (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3-5). Titus Justus [whose name implies he was a Roman citizen] had a house adjacent to the synagogue in Corinth. Mark's mother had a home in Jerusalem that could accommodate a meeting (Acts 12:12); Baranbas owned a farm (Acts 4:36); Jason was wealthy enough to stand bail for Paul and entertain his visitors (Acts 17:5-9). An Areopagite was converted in Athens (Acts 17:34). Apollos and Phoebe were able to travel independently. Remember that most people at the time lived in cramped tiny rooms, so unbearable that most of their lives were lived outdoors as far as possible. Tertius was a "scribe", which was a learned profession; Luke was a doctor. Yet next to these brethren are listed the likes of Ampliatus (Rom. 16:8), which was a common slave name. Romans 16 is an essay in the unity between rich and poor in the early ecclesia. Although the majority of Corinth ecclesia were poor, there were still some in good standing enough to be invited out to banquets in the course of their business obligations (1 Cor. 8:10; 10:27). The slave at conversion becomes "the Lord's freedman" and "the free person Christ's slave" (1 Cor. 7:22). Thus this extraordinary unity between social classes was made possible through being "in Christ".

"Not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men" were converted in Thessalonica (Acts 17:12 RSV). Lydia was a wealthy woman, trading in luxury garments ("purple"), and a female head of household. The attraction of the Gospel for wealthy women has been often commented upon in the historical literature. We are left to imagine wealthy sisters marrying poorer brethren, or remaining single, with all the scandal attached to it in the first century world, pining for children, comforted only by each other and the surpassing knowledge of Jesus their Lord.

All this said, there is no question that the early church was characterized by its poverty; for "to the poor the gospel is preached" successfully. "The fact that some Christians in the first century sold themselves into slavery to help out fellow believers suggests the poverty of the Christian community as a whole" <sup>(7)</sup>. This further reflects the bond there was between rich and poor, free and slave. In the first century generally, however, the gap between rich and poor was growing <sup>(8)</sup>. And yet true Christianity brought together in one all the social classes in an extraordinary unity. We have commented elsewhere how the shortage of marriage partners led to intermarriage between social groups, within the ecclesia. This was yet something else which contributed towards the startling and arresting difference between the ecclesia and the world in the first century, and which attracted men and women to it. The evidence that Christianity drew largely from the poor cannot be gainsaid, and yet the sizeable evidence above indicates that it was far from purely working class. The wonder is the way the rich and poor bonded together to create a unity that arrested the attention of their surrounding world. Even in the ministry of Jesus was this so. The disciples were from very varied backgrounds; and Lk. 5:30 RVmg. describes how publicans and sinners had Pharisees and

Scribes among them as they all sat at the same table gathered around Jesus. There was something in His person and teaching which welded people together.

The Jerusalem ecclesia is an example of how rich and poor were united together. There were clearly wealthy members- Simon of Cyrene owned a farm (Mk. 15:21). Barnabas sold lands (Acts 4:36). Ananias and Sapphira had land. And then there were the middle class. Mary owned a house in Jerusalem and had at least one servant (Acts 12:12-17). Levi was a tax collector wealthy enough to throw a large banquet, implying he had a large home (Mk. 2:13-17). James and John had a fishing business in Galilee that employed day labourers. And then there were the poor. The Lord Jesus and the apostles healed the beggars and diseased, who presumably became members of the church. Acts 6:1; 2:44; 4:34 imply there were large numbers of very poor people in the church. James the Lord's brother was presumably a carpenter, poor like the Lord was. And yet he was the leader of the early church. Unlike many other religious movements, early Christianity drew its members from right across society; and one of the poorest was their leading light! This unity, as we have so often said, would have been their biggest single advertisement. And yet the Acts record artlessly says so little about social or economic class distinctions- precisely because they were not important. Any uninspired writer would have made great capital of this phenomenal feature of the early church.

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## Notes

(1) Karl Kautsky, *Foundations Of Christianity* (Orabis & Windrush, 1973 ed.), pp. 9,323.

(2) Adolf Deisman, *Light From The Ancient East* (Hodder & Staughton, 1927); A.J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects Of Early Christianity* (Louisiana State University Press, 1977), ch. 2. More recently, a translation of the Gospels has been produced by Andy Gaus, entitled *The Unvarnished Gospels* (Threshold Books, 1988). His aim is to reflect the roughness of the Greek used in the Gospels in contemporary English. This is well worth reading. Peter's letters are a strange exception, although this may be because he was illiterate and wrote through a secretary. The relative roughness of Paul's letters shows that he was writing to his readers in a style they would understand, rather than exercising his own cultural level.

(3) Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Penguin, 1993 ed.), p. 23.

(4) Juvenal, quoted in Roland Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse and Roman Culture* (New York: Paulist, 1999), p. 41.

(5) Derek Tidball, *The Social Context Of The New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997 ed.), p. 93.

(6) Marti Sordi, *The Christians And The Roman Empire* (Norman: University Of Oklahoma Press, 1986), p. 28.

(7) K. Donfried & P. Richardson, *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (Eerdmans, 1998) p. 131.

(8) Wayne Meeks and Robert Wilken, *Jews And Christians* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978).

## 16-3-4 Unity In The Church

There is repetition of the command to *all* ecclesial members to greet *all* the other members with a "holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Pet. 5:14). It's hard to translate into our terms the huge meaning of this in the first century world. It would've been unthinkable for a slave to take such initiative to kiss their master, or indeed any free person. This practice of all kissing everyone else in the congregation would've been arresting and startling. Sociologically, it stood no chance of ever being done. And yet these social and inter-personal miracles were what made Christianity stand out so noticeably- and in essence, our overcoming of social and inter-personal barriers ought to do the same for our community



in the present world. But does it? Are we *so* markedly different from others... ? Is our love and unity of such an evidently deep and different quality?

Of course, the early believers found their new unity difficult. The weaker ones didn't practice it; which was why the rich feasted at the Corinth breaking of bread, and the poor went hungry. Perhaps the poor hit back by abusing the gift of tongues- showing off that they could speak, e.g., in Japanese when there was no call for it. Yet despite the failures of the early church, the dramatic progress of Christianity meant that their general unity was powerful enough to constitute a gripping witness to the world, just as the Lord had predicted that His crucifixion would inspire. And so with us. We *are* divided. Unity amongst us can seem impossible; we are too many opposing personality types, too many different ethnic groups, too widely scattered, too lazy to reconcile with each other. We must hang our heads in shame over some of our weaknesses as a community. And yet, the Lord was not dead in vain for most of us. His cross and His living again do quite evidently inspire a love and unity which *is* converting the world. And yet we have a long way to go.

One thing that can make a true unity in the church difficult is that we believe that we "have the Truth" about the basic doctrines of the Gospel, on the basis that we have searched the Bible for that Truth, and yet we can tend to therefore treat *every* matter of Biblical interpretation as 'the Truth'. We can slip into a logical fallacy, whereby 'the Bible is true, this is what I think the Bible teaches, therefore this is the truth, therefore if you don't agree with me you don't believe the truth nor the Bible'. We can perceive that by tolerating a brother or sister who has a different view to us on a non-essential, we are somehow selling out, giving away God's Truth. But *we personally* aren't doing this, by simply doing as Paul says: "Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations", i.e. don't keep making an issue over his weaknesses in the faith or your disagreement with his view of things. Don't keep agitating it. Let it be. That's surely what the verse is saying in plain enough words. More subtly, we can also have the impression that if we break bread with somebody, we are saying that we agree with their Biblical interpretations and way of life. The core doctrines of our faith are the basis of our fellowship- but nothing else. Different views on prophecy, different personality types resulting in differing approaches to clothing and how we run our meetings... these and the host of other differences between us, exist only as challenges for us to overcome. They challenge us to tolerance. Those like myself from a conservative mindset simply must find the grace to accept those who differ. And vice versa. The idea has been pushed by a few extreme members of our community that there is such a thing as 'guilt by association', whereby the wrong ideas or ways of another enter into us through the bread and wine. Nowhere in the Bible is this taught- we each die for our own sin, not that of our brother.

And if there is no 'guilt by association', then we shouldn't be worrying too much about who *within the body of Jesus* we fellowship. And when it comes to defining the body of Jesus, we have some clear Biblical guidance. We are baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), so nobody unbaptized is in the body. And valid baptism isn't just a going under the water; it requires a belief of the "one faith".

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 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. And 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, unity in the church broke up, and the possibility of world-converting witness evaporated. Seeing the great commission is to be powerfully obeyed in our last days, we simply *must* learn the lesson.

### ***The World Crucified***

Appreciating the massive gap which there is between the believer and the world will help us realise how there ought to be no gaps between *us*. The whole way of thinking and hope which we have is totally at variance with this world. *The differences are radical and fundamental, not cosmetic*. Thus the New Testament is full of direct and breathtaking challenges to the thought of the Roman world in which the early believers lived. Thus, the Romans allowed the existence of the autonomous *politaea*, the city-state, so long as within its religion it featured the worship of the Emperor. And yet the NT writers speak of the *ecclesia* as a city which is independent, defiantly devoted to the worship of the one and only true God (Eph. 2:19; 3:20; Heb. 12:22; 13:14; Rev. 21). The writers must have nervously penned those inspired words, knowing the problems it would create. The Spirit of God could have chosen not to so directly challenge this world; and yet there is a chasmic difference between the community of God and the surrounding world, which the New Testament unashamedly triumphs in. The whole basis of this radical separation is the fact that Christ died for us. He died to unite us who believe in what the NT terms “*the unity*”, without seeking to further define it... (Jn. 11:52; 17:23; Eph. 1:10; 2:14; 4:3). We were reconciled to each other as well as to God “in one body by the cross” (Eph. 2:16). His death unites us in that standing before His cross, all our pettiness disappears, and we are impressed again with the reality that if He so laid down His life for us, so we must lay down our lives for the brethren (1 Jn. 3:16). It really and truly is a case of one for all, and all for one. And yet through His death, the world is crucified unto us, and we are unto this world (Gal. 6:14). In nothing can we boast or glory to this world, save in this, that He died for me, that He died for *us*, we brethren-in-Christ, we who have believed through grace; and that therefore this world, what it offers, what it threatens, what it stands for, is now dead for us, just as surely as we believe that the triumphant body of Jesus hung dead upon the stake.

### **16-3-5 The First Century Mediterranean Understanding Of Society**

When Western / Euro-American people read of an Iranian father killing his son because he converted to Christ and shamed the family, we are shocked. But many people living in societies like Iran are far less shocked, they find it perfectly natural and understandable, even if they don’t agree with it. How society is today in much of the non-Western world is similar to how it was in the first century Mediterranean. An individual was defined not according to their own personhood and unique characteristics, but according to their place in relation to others. Indeed, this was how things have been world-wide, for it was only until the 17th century that individualistic culture began to take off in Europe.

### **Geographical Origin**

The teaching of both Old and New Testaments concerning the ultimate value and meaning of the individual person was radical stuff, so radical that it was rarely fully understood even amongst the people of God. For example, it was important to know where a person was from- because people from certain areas were understood as being a certain person. Hence the Jewish refusal to accept that Jesus could be Messiah, because He was from Galilee, and "out of Galilee arises no prophet" (Jn. 7:52), indeed nothing good could come out of Nazareth (Jn. 1:46). This led to what we would call today stereotyping and racism. People didn't travel very far, and so this of itself reinforced some of the stereotypes. Horizons were extremely limited for the average person. Vergil could say that "to know one Greek is to know them all"; and Philo likewise made total generalizations about Egyptians in his writings. Paul refers to the common maxim that "Cretans are *always* liars...lazy drunkards" (Tit. 1:12)- but goes on to appeal to the Cretan believers to *not* be like that, to challenge and break the stereotype! It's the same with the Corinthians- the very term "Corinthian" meant a drunkard, shameless man. And yet it was in this very city that so many were called to the Lord, and He attempted to turn them away from that very stereotype they had been born into. And the very fact that the Son of God was from "that despised Nazareth" was the ultimate deconstruction of this understanding- that leaders, kings etc. could only come from some areas and not others. We need to ask ourselves whether we don't follow the same kind of stereotypes when we assume things about people- he's from *that* family, she's from *that* country, they're from *that* church / ecclesia... These attitudes deny the wonderful meaning and value of the individual of which our Lord showed us in His teaching, life, death and current work amongst us.

### **Family Of Origin**

A person was understood in connection with who their parents and ancestors were. Hence some Biblical characters are referred to as the son of X who was the son of Y who was the son of Z. Plato summed it up when he said that good people were good "because they sprang from good fathers". This is where the genealogies of Jesus would've been so hard to handle for some- because Matthew stresses how the Lord had whores and Gentiles in His genealogy. And it's also where the New Testament doctrine of the new birth and the new family in Christ were radical- for it was your family and ethnic origin which were of paramount importance in defining a person within society. John's Gospel especially emphasises the great desire to know from whence Jesus came (Jn. 3:8; 6:41,42; 7:27,28; 8:14; 9:29)- and the lack of any solid, concrete answer. To say that God was quite literally His Father was just too much for most people to handle.

### **Occupation**

Seeing one tended to be born and raised in or for a certain occupation, this too was a significant factor in how society defined people. Remember how the sailors asked of Jonah: "What is your occupation? And whence do you come? What is your country? Of what people are you?" (Jonah 1:8). Hence it is recorded that *every* shepherd was despised by the Egyptians (Gen. 46:34). Silversmiths and tent makers (leather workers?) tended to club together in community (Acts 18:3; 19:24-27). In the first century Mediterranean, shepherds were especially despised- and again, this stereotype was overturned by shepherds being chosen to receive news of the birth of God's Son and being the first to come and offer homage; Jesus describing Himself as the good shepherd, in a society where no shepherd could be "good"; and the leaders of the early church being described as spiritual "shepherds".

Summing up, a person was defined not so much by their unique personal character, credit was not given for who they had become or stopped being... but rather by the place in society into which they were born. And so these group-oriented people came to live out the expectations of society- and so the whole process rolled on through the generations. It was continuity rather than change, tradition rather than transformation, which was valued. Change was seen as some kind of deviancy- whereas the Christian gospel is all about change! The past was seen as more glorious than the present and the future, a pattern to be followed- whereas the Gospel of the future Kingdom of God on earth taught that the best time is *ahead*. And so often Paul compares the "past" of our lives with the much better "now" in Christ (Gal. 3:23-27; 4:8,9; Rom. 6:17-22; Eph. 2:11-22; 5:8). A whole *new* set of traditions were delivered to the new community, and it was *they* rather than human traditions which must now be kept (1 Cor. 11:2; 14:33-36; 2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:13,14; 3:14). The credibility of a person depended not so much on them but upon their status and place in society- thus the witness of women, slaves, children and poor people was discounted. We see it happening in the way that the preaching of Peter and John was dismissed by the elders because they were of low social status (Acts 4:13). And yet these were the *very* types of people which the Lord Jesus used as His star and key witnesses in the very beginnings of Christianity!

### **Physical Appearance**

It was believed that nature and destiny had decreed your place, and there was to be no questioning of it. Thus according to the first century principle of 'physiognomics', a slave was born with a muscular, servile body, an upper class female Roman was born beautiful, etc. The idea of education was to train them up to be as they were intended to be by nature. The ancient world believed that all that was decreed and predestined by nature would have some sort of physical reality in the appearance of a person. Hence the challenging nature of Paul's command not to judge by the outward appearance; and again, Divine providence overturned all this by choosing Paul as such a "chosen vessel", when his outward appearance and manner of speaking were so weak and unimpressive, literally 'lacking strength' (2 Cor. 10:10). This understanding of 'nature' and destiny meant that first century people were relatively passive to disasters compared to Euro-American people today. A famine was an act of God, of nature, and it had to be accepted; the idea of one ethnic group taking up a collection for another one in another place who were suffering from famine was a real paradigm breaker. And that's just what Paul engineered, in arranging for the Gentile converts to take up such a collection for the Jewish believers in Palestine who were suffering famine.

### **Education**

Today, students are 'trained' to think for themselves, be creative, develop their own opinions, push forward their own independent research, using question / problem-based learning as a paradigm for their education. 'Education' in the first century wasn't like that at all. The idea was that "every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher" (Lk. 6:40). The idea was that a person born into a certain social situation was trained to take their place in society, given that 'station and place' into which they had been born. Initiative in that sense was not encouraged; it was all about training up a person to correctly fulfil societies' expectation of them. The idea of being personally taught by the invisible Master / teacher Jesus, becoming like Him rather than like the person whom society expected, being given talents by Him which we are to trade and multiply at our initiative (Mt. 25:15-28)... this was all totally counter-cultural stuff. What was so vital in the Mediterranean world was that a person achieved conformity to accepted values. Cicero advised that in any good presentation of a

legal case or encomium, emotions and passions shouldn't be referred to. Individualism was seen as a threat to tradition and the collective society. The huge New Testament emphasis on becoming disciples, learners, of an invisible Lord, Master and teacher located in Heaven, serving Him alone, worried about *His* standards, perceptions and judgment of us- that was and is so totally opposite to the expectations of society. People were educated to be embedded in society, rather than to come out of their world and live in the new world in which Christ was the light, and all things were made new in a new creation, a new set of values. To willingly describe oneself as a slave of Christ was totally against the grain of first century social norms- for to be a slave in any form took away a person's credibility and value. And yet Paul especially in the context of describing his witness, speaks of himself as a slave of Jesus. He urges the converts to see themselves as "not your own" because they have been bought as slaves by the blood of the cross (1 Cor. 6:19,20). People were trained to take their place amongst fixed categories within society- the whole idea of transformation, of taking ones' place amidst the ecclesia of Christ, of being a saint, a called-out one, of being made free from how others' see us... was all so radical that even those who converted to Christianity likely never grasped the full extent of the ideas.

### **The Radical Nature Of The New Community In Christ**

For Paul to calmly teach in Gal. 3:28 that baptism into Christ meant that there was now no longer differentiation between male and female, slave and free, Jew, Greek or any other ethnic group, called all the first century understandings of society into total question. Indeed, the idea that Gentiles could become spiritual "Jews", and that the Jews weren't the *real* children of Abraham, was an intentional reversal of the categories around which society had been built. Much of the early 'geography' of the first century involved stereotypical descriptions of ethnic and geographical groups, usually ending up with praising the Greco-Roman peoples as being superior in every way to all others. Yet this worldview, which was accepted even by the despised ethnic groups about themselves, had to be ended for those in Christ. Being in *Him* was to be their defining feature. This was equally radical for the Jews, who held themselves above these stereotypes about themselves. They believed that "as the navel is found at the center of a human being, so the land of Israel is found at the center of the world... Jerusalem is the center of the land of Israel, the temple is at center of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies is at the center of the temple, the ark is at the center of the Holy of Holies... which spot is the foundation of the world... the holy city... is also the mother city" (1). This was all consciously countermanded in Hebrews, where each of these features of the temple is shown to have been surpassed in Christ; and it is the *Heavenly* Jerusalem which is now "the mother of us all" (Heb. 12:22; Gal. 4:26). And of course Gal. 4 drives home the point that it is the "Jerusalem which is above" which is the true Jerusalem, whereas the earthly Jerusalem and temple are in fact now to be associated with bondage and Abraham's illegitimate seed. This language of Hebrews and Galatians was just as tough on the Romans, who considered *Italia* as the "mother of all lands", and Rome to be the mother city.

Society and human existence was all about what others thought of you; appearances were all important, loss of face before your community was a fate worse than death, and the honour of your family or community was crucial. You had to be polite, say what was right in the ears of your hearers rather than what was true, never shame those in your 'group' by telling inconvenient truths, say what the others want to hear. Against this background, and it's a background not so strange for any of us today in essence, the commands to be truthful, even if it meant becoming the enemy of some because you told the truth (Gal. 4:16), take on a new challenge. Likewise the message of imputed righteousness was powerfully challenging. For

the whole message of Romans is that our only acceptability is through *God* counting us righteous although we are not... and it is *His* judgment which matters, not that of the million watching eyes of society around us. 1 Cor. 4:3-5 teach that the judgment of others is a "very small thing", an irrelevancy, compared with Christ's judgment of us. The fact that we have only one judge means that whatever others think or judge of us is irrelevant. That may be easy enough to accept as a theory, but the reality for those living in collective societies was far-reaching. Appreciating the ultimate importance of our standing before *God* means that we have a conscience towards *Him*, and a rightful sense of shame before Him for our sins. Yet in collective societies, where life was totally lived in the public realm and anything done 'in private' is seen as deviant (cp. Jn. 7:4; 18:20), shame was related to how *others* saw you, not your internal reflections and assessment of your guilt or innocence for things like private thoughts and unknown deeds. And there's every reason to think that the global village of the 21st century is an equally conscience-less place, where so long as you talk in niceness and don't get caught actually *doing* anything society thinks is wrong, you can exist with no internal, personal conscience at all. Indeed, the word "conscience" originated from words which literally mean 'common / with others / knowledge'- conscience was collective, whereas the Biblical understanding of it is more on a personal level.

First century society was structured around binary opposites- you were in or out of a certain group, for or against, either / or. These black and white views led to the stereotypes we've considered above. For Paul to introduce the idea of conscience, of the possibility of some individuals having a different conscience to others, and the need to tolerate this, was therefore quite radical- and the Corinthians and others evidently struggled with it. It was not until the 17th century that Europeans started to move towards accepting 'shades of grey' rather than black and white, so Christ and Paul were well ahead of their time in this. But it wasn't only that shades of grey had to be accepted; instead of treating only your fellow ethnic / social / gender / occupational group members as "in" with you, the new Christian had to accept people in his or her 'out' groups as now 'in'. No longer were some other groups to be treated indifferently or in a hostile manner; people from other towns, ethnic groups, lower social class, gender etc. were to be lovingly accepted as one would their very own family members. There was to be now the "household of faith" (Gal. 6:10), with people from all the 'other' groups now to be accepted as 'brother' and 'sister', which meant denying the natural ties to your family in the way that surrounding society expected- for to them, loyalty must be to family above all else. Denying this and putting our bonding with Christ and *His* family first was indeed equivalent to self-crucifixion (Mk. 8:34). Meals were usually only taken within the family, and the men ate together (2). For the breaking of bread to be a collective meal for male and female together was unheard of- it reflected the new understanding of family which there was to be "in Christ". Collective societies are all about submission and obedience to those above you in the hierarchy- yet repeatedly, Christians are exhorted to be obedient and submissive to the Lord Jesus and the new community in Him (Rom. 1:5; 6:16,17; 2:8 etc.). And even within the new community, Paul's own example showed that acceptance in the eyes of those who appear to be the pillars of the society of Christ is also of little ultimate value if they have fallen away from the understanding of grace (Gal. 2:9). To keep using the word "radical" doesn't do justice to the colossal change in worldview that was required on conversion to Christ. Reflecting on all this, it seems to me that the reason the Jewish people crucified their Messiah was above all because He so powerfully turned their whole worldviews upside down- and they just couldn't handle it, just as so many families today turn against the one who truly turns to Christ.

## **The 21st Century Global Village**

Westerners shouldn't be too hasty to assume that their culture is totally unlike collectivist culture. Increasingly, it is returning to it in essence. Everyone is so awfully worried at what others think, and tend to live out their expectations; young women in Eastern Europe will go without basic food in order to find the money to buy the designer clothes and gadgets that society thinks are acceptable; the single mum in downtown Sydney works overtime to enable her daughter to have the latest jeans or T-shirt, without which she'll be mocked in class; the 'war on terror' and concern about global warming have led society to club together in a collectivist way; the move towards house churches in the last half of the 20th century has now given way to a trend towards mega churches, safety in numbers. Image in the eyes of ones' fellows has become important as never before; no longer is it so cool to be a hippy or a punk, the coolness is to be seen as cool by a society you consider cool. 'Us and them', 'cowboys and Indians' thinking has been spread throughout society from the top down, as President after President utters that war cry. Thus into modern Western society all the radical elements of the Gospel once again must break through... the radical nature of the call to personal relationship with Jesus, the demand of total personal transformation, the acceptance of others because they are in Christ rather than for what they look like or with whom they are associated... the list of incisive demands can be extended into every Western life. For one outcome of globalization has been actually the re-enforcing of values, norms and expected behaviour; and we are to protest against that in our lifestyle in Christ.

I'd like now to present two examples of the way in which Paul so radically stepped out from the society of the first century, and turned on their heads all the expectations and norms which went with it.

### **Galatians: An Encomium**

Cultured, educated people in the first century presented themselves to others by means of an 'encomium'. This was a document or major speech which included five sections, clearly defined in the various manuals of rhetoric which survive, and which surely Paul would have been taught. The purpose of the encomium was to demonstrate how the person was an upright member of the community and worthy of honour within it. Students of the letter to the Galatians have detected these five sections of the encomium followed in an almost classic manner by Paul in Galatians 1:10-2:21. Borrowing from the research of others (3), I present them here:

1. Opening (*prooimion*) 1:10-12: Paul's Gospel
2. Lifestyle (*anastrophe*) 1:13-17: Paul as persecutor of the church and preacher of the Gospel. Gal. 1:13 uses the very word *anastrophe* ("way of life")
3. Achievements (*praxeis*) or "deeds of the body" 1:18-2:10- Paul's work in Jerusalem, Syria and again in Jerusalem
4. Comparison with others (*synkrisis*) 2:11-21- Paul and Peter; Paul and the Jews
5. Conclusion (*epilogos*)- 2:21 Paul and grace.

The encomium was essentially self-praise and self-justification within society. Paul almost mocks the encomium, by using its elements to show how radically different are the standards of thinking and behaviour for the Christian. In Gal. 1:15 Paul speaks of his birth (*genesis*),

which in the usual encomiums would've been a reference to his family of origin, which as we've shown was all important in a collectivist society. Paul never speaks of his parents, as would've been normal in an encomium- and seeing he was born as a free man, he could've made an impressive point at this stage had he wished. But the birth he speaks of is that which came from God, who gave Paul birth by grace. His place in God's invisible household was all important, rather than what family he belonged to naturally. An encomium would typically have a reference to a man's education- and Paul could've made an impressive case for himself here. But rather he speaks of how God Himself revealed Christ to him, and how his spiritual education was not through interaction with any other men of standing in the Christian community, but rather in his three years alone in Arabia (Gal. 1:18). It has been suggested that Paul actually coined a new Greek term in 1 Thess. 4:9, when he spoke of how he had been taught-by-God (*theodidaktos*) (4). To claim an education 'not by flesh and blood' (Gal. 1:16) was foolishness to 1st century society. In the description of his "deeds", Paul could've made a fair case both as a Jew and as a Christian. But instead he spends Gal. 2:1-10 speaking of how he had laboured so hard to avoid division in the church of Christ, to teach grace, avoid legalistic obedience to the norms of Jewish society, and to help the poor. *These* were the works he counted as significant. It was usual in an encomium to speak of your courage (*andreia*) and fortitude. Paul uses the word *andreia*, again in conscious imitation of an encomium, but he relates it to how he courageously refused to "yield submission even for a moment" to the pressures to conform to Jewish societal expectations (Gal. 2:5). When it comes to the *synkrisis*, the comparison with others, he chooses to compare himself with Peter, who caved in to the pressures from the Jews, agreeing to act smart before men rather than God, whereas Paul says he withstood this and insisted upon a life of radical grace which paid no attention to what others thought of his appearances.

### **Other References To The Encomium**

Phil. 3:4-11 reads rather like an encomium, with Paul writing of how he was "circumcised on the eighth day... of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5). But then he as it were alters course half way through, as if to say 'Nah, just kiddin'. He speaks of his "confidence in the flesh", his former "gains", as being now "loss for Christ"; he's almost sarcastic about his humanly impressive encomium. For he says all this in the context of the preceding chapter, Phil. 2, where he has shown that the only true path of glory lays after the pattern of the Lord Jesus, who had to die the death of the cross in order to be highly exalted. A similar sarcasm about his humanly impressive encomium is to be found at more length in 2 Cor. 11:21-12:10. All the classic elements of the encomium are there- his origin and birth, training, accomplishments, comparison with others etc. But then he says that those who compare themselves with others (*synkrintes*) are fools (2 Cor. 10:12), and that he himself has been speaking as a fool, a raving madman. That was what he thought of an encomium after the flesh. This is all a needful lesson for our generation, surrounded as we are by pressure to trust in education, achievements, being humanly cool and impressive. Paul goes on to say that actually, he prefers as a Christian to "boast of things that show my weakness" (2 Cor. 11:30). Instead of speaking of glorious "deeds of the body", he speaks of his labours, imprisonments, beatings etc. And thus he draws out the paradox, incredible for the first century mind- his real strength and power is in his weakness, for it was this that made him trust in God and in the grace of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 12:10). Instead of impressing those around him, Paul sought to impress the Father and Son above. His strength was not, as society then thought, in what he had inherited and developed from the communities into which he was born- it was rather in the grace of God transforming his character. His patron,



his teacher and elder, was the Lord Jesus, and the God who raised Jesus from the dead (Gal. 1:1; Rom. 8:11), rather than any visible 'elder' of his natural communities.

There are other passages which appear to allude to parts of the encomium- e.g. for Paul, his glory was not in heroic "deeds of the body" but rather in the fact that when he first preached to the Corinthians, he was suffering from "weakness... much fear and trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3)- a reference to anything from agitated nervous breakdown to malaria. We have Gal. 4:13 in the same vein: "You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at the first".

### **Paul's Public Defence Speeches In Acts**

In the same way as Paul would've been trained to write and present an encomium, so he would've been trained in the rhetoric of how to make a public defence speech. There was a set format for defending oneself, as there was for the encomium. And in his defence speeches recorded in Acts, Paul again follows the accepted order of defence speeches- but his *content* was absolutely radical for the first century mind. Quintilian in his *Instructions To Orators* laid down five sections for such a speech- and Paul follows that pattern exactly. There was to be the exordium [opening statement], a statement of facts (*narratio*), the proof (*probatio*), the refutation (*refutatio*) and the concluding peroration. The speeches were intended to repeatedly remind the judges of what in fact was the core issue- and Paul does this when he stresses that he is on trial (*krinomai*) for "the hope of the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6; 24:21; 26:6,7,8).

Yet as with his use of the encomium format, Paul makes some unusual twists in the whole presentation. It was crucial in the set piece defence speech to provide proof and authorized witness. Paul provides proof for the resurrection in himself; and insists that the invisible Jesus, a peasant from Galilee, had appeared to him and "appointed [him] to bear witness" (Acts 26:16; 22:15). That was laughable in a court of law. Yet the erudite, cultured, educated Paul in all soberness made that claim. Aristotle had defined two types of proof- "necessary proof" (*tekmerion*), from which irrefutable, conclusive conclusions could be drawn; and "probable proof", i.e. circumstantial evidence (*eikota / semeia*). Paul's claim to have seen Jesus on the Damascus road was of course circumstantial evidence, so far as the legal system was concerned- it could not be proven. Yet Paul calls this his *tekmerion*, the irrefutable proof (Acts 22:6-12; 26:12-16). Luke elsewhere uses this word and its synonym *pistis* to describe the evidence for the Lord's resurrection (Acts 1:3; 17:31). Paul's point of course was that the personal transformation of himself was indeed *tekmerion*, irrefutable proof, that Christ had indeed risen from the dead. And so it should be in the witness which *our* lives make to an unbelieving world. Significantly, Paul speaks of the great light which his companions saw at his conversion, and his subsequent blindness, as *eikota*, the circumstantial evidence, rather than the irrefutable proof (Acts 22:6,9,11; 26:13). Now to the forensic mind, this was more likely his best, 'irrefutable' proof, rather than saying that the irrefutable proof was simply he himself. Yet he puts that all the other way round. Thus when it came to stating 'witnesses', Paul doesn't appeal to his travelling companions on the road to Damascus. These would've surely been the obvious primary witnesses. Instead, he claims that "all Judeans" and even his own accusers "if they are willing to testify", are in fact witnesses of his character transformation (Acts 22:5; 26:4,5). The point is of tremendous power to us who lamely follow after Paul... it is our personal witness which is *the* supreme testimony to the truth of Christ; not 'science proves the Bible', archaeology, the stones crying out, prophecy fulfilling etc. It is we ourselves who are ultimately the prime witnesses to God's truth on this earth. All

this was foolishness in the judgmental eyes of first century society, just as it is today. Our preaching of the Gospel is likewise apparent foolishness to our hearers, like Paul it is not "in plausible words of wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:1-7), even though, again like Paul, many of us could easily try to make it humanly plausible. Paul's credibility as a preacher was in his very lack of human credibility- he was hungry and thirsty, poorly dressed, homeless, having to do manual work (1 Cor. 4:11; 2 Cor. 11:27); he was the powerless one, beaten, imprisoned and persecuted (1 Cor. 4:8-12; 2 Cor. 6:4,5). It's hard for us to imagine how unimpressive and repulsive this was in first century society. And yet it was exactly this which gave him power and credibility as a preacher of Christ's Gospel. And he sets before us a challenging pattern.

## Notes

(1) *Tanhuma*, Kedoshim 10.

(2) Kathleen Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993).

(3) Hans Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985) pp. 135 ff.

(4) Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey, *Portraits Of Paul: An Archaeology Of Ancient Personality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) p. 42.

## 16-4 The Obstacles To The Growth Of Christianity

### 16-4-1 The Obstacles To The Growth Of Christianity

The achievement of the early brethren and sisters in the first century was simply remarkable. A group of 11 working men, without education or money, nobodies in their own society, living in a 2nd class province on the eastern extremity of the Roman empire, with no influential backers, succeeded in spreading a movement that soon claimed thousands of followers throughout the Roman empire. They faced up to their Lord's last wish- that they seek to win every man in the world for Christ. The vision of a world for Christ was clearly what motivated the early ecclesia. They saw this as their collective and individual aim. Primacy was given to preaching in the community; just as there is in any group comprised of fresh converts. In Acts 6, the apostles themselves couldn't leave off their preaching in order to deal with administrative matters, and so they set up a group of other brethren to handle this. The message was clear: the leaders of the community were themselves committed preachers. In seeking to find the extent to which our 21st Century faith is reflective of the 1st Century ecclesia, we do well to reflect on this. We seem by contrast to see administrators as our seniors, just as the world does.

We have a tendency to hive off the first century ecclesia in our minds, to think that they were as they were, but we are as we are. They had the success which they did, but of course, we can't hope for the same. We can do this with any consideration of history; it can fail to touch us personally. We can feel so sorry for ourselves that the possibilities which Biblical history opens up fail to inspire us. We think that everything was easier for others than it is for us. This is especially so with the matter of preaching. The success of the first century brethren can be seen as mere history rather than a direct challenge to us to go out and do likewise. I want to develop a three point path of logic:

1. God wishes all men to be saved; the power of salvation is in the Gospel, which is the calling of God to Himself. God's desire for human salvation and the ability of the Gospel to call men to it hasn't changed between the 1st and 21st centuries.
2. There were major obstacles to the spread of the Gospel in the 1st century. The nature of the religious and social world at that time made success impossible, humanly speaking. And yet the Gospel spread amazingly.
3. Whatever obstacles there are to our preaching in the 21st century can only be of a lesser magnitude. And we enjoy many advantages which the early brethren didn't. The early ecclesia is recorded in New Testament history for our inspiration, as a challenge to us, rather than as history written down for mere fascination value or background interest.

And so the question must be faced: why aren't we succeeding in the spread of the Gospel to the same extent? To answer this question, we need to compare not only our methods with theirs, but seek for other reasons for their success. But firstly, we need to reinforce our acceptance of the fact that the odds were stacked against the success of those early brethren.

## 16-4-2 The offence of the cross

The cross was foolishness to the Gentiles and an offence to the Jews. In Roman thought, the cross was something shocking; the very word ‘cross’ was repugnant to them. It was something only for slaves. Consider the following writings from the period <sup>(1)</sup>.

- Cicero wrote: “The very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them, but...the very mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man...your honours [i.e. Roman citizenship] protect a man from...the *terror of the cross*”.

- Seneca the Elder in the *Controversiae* records where a master’s daughter marries a slave, and she is described as having become related to *cruciarum*, ‘the crucified’. Thus ‘the crucified’ was used by metonymy for slaves. The father of the girl is taunted: “If you want to find your son-in-law’s relatives, **go to the cross**”. It is hard for us to appreciate how slaves were seen as less than human in that society. There was a stigma and revulsion attached to the cross. This was the offence of the cross.

- Juvenal in his *6th Satire* records how a wife ordered her husband: “Crucify this slave”. “But what crime worthy of death has he committed?” asks the husband, “no delay can be too long when a man’s life is at stake”. She replies: “What a fool you are! Do you call a slave a man?”.

The sense of shame and offence attached to the cross was also there in Jewish perception of it. Whoever was hung on a tree was seen as having been cursed by God (Dt. 21:23). Justin Martyr, in *Dialogue with Trypho*, records Trypho (who was a Jew) objecting to Christianity: “We are aware that the Christ must suffer...but that he had to be *crucified*, that he had to die a death of such shame and dishonour- a death cursed by the Law- prove this to us, for we are totally unable to receive it” <sup>(2)</sup>. Justin Martyr in his *Apology* further records: “They say that our madness consists in the fact that we place a *crucified* man in second place after the eternal God”. The Romans also mocked the idea of following a crucified man. There is a caricature which shows a crucified person with an ass’s head. The ass was a symbol of servitude [note how the Lord rode into Jerusalem on an ass]. The caption sarcastically says: “Alexamenos worships God”. This was typical of the offence of the cross.

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## Notes

(1) These quotes are from Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion In The Ancient World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) .

(2) Quoted in Maurice Goguel, *Jesus The Nazarene* (New York: Appleton, 1926).

## 16-4-3 The rejection of Caesar

The whole idea of “the Kingdom of God” was revolutionary- there was to be no other Kingdom spoken of apart from Caesar’s. But our brethren preached the Gospel of the Kingdom *of God*. And those who openly accepted these principles were inevitably persecuted- expelled from the trade guilds, not worked with, socially shunned, their children discriminated against. David Bosch observes: “Christians confessed Jesus as Lord of all

lords- the most revolutionary political demonstration imaginable in the Roman Empire". It has even been shown that in Nero's time it was forbidden for Christians to use Imperial coinage, with its images of Caesar as Lord. It was in this sense impossible to buy or sell unless one was willing to accept the mark of the beast- exactly as in Rev. 13:17. The next verse goes on to identify the number of the beast / man as being 666. And yet this is the sum of the Hebrew letters in 'Neron Caesar'! Whatever other application these verses may be seen to have to Catholic persecution, there can be little doubt that their first century context applies to the persecution of the early converts. Later, Domitian demanded that he be worshipped as Lord and God, " Dominus et deus noster" (Suetonius, *Domitiani Vita*, 13.4). John records how Thomas called the Lord Jesus "my lord and my God", in active opposition to this. One couldn't worship Caesar and the Lord Jesus. The Lord Himself had foreseen this when He warned that His followers couldn't serve two masters. Domitian demanded to be called 'Master', but this was impossible for the Christian. Indeed, much of Revelation seems taken up with this theme of the first century refusal to worship the Caesars and deified Roman empire on pain of persecution (Rev. 13:4; 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20). "Following the Neronian persecution, being a Christian was tantamount to being part of a criminal conspiracy, and Christians (unlike other religious groups) were punished simply for being Christians (Tacitus *Annals* 15.44.5; Pliny *Letters* 10.96.2-3). Their crime was an unwillingness to worship any God but their own, an exclusiveness the Greeks labelled "atheism." The refusal to sacrifice to pagan gods and on behalf of deified emperors was perceived as a threat to the harmonious relationship between people and the gods" (1). There are also several word plays upon and indirect allusions to Caesar worship in Revelation. Rev. 9:11 is an example- the condemned King of the bottomless pit is called "Apollyon", which G.B. Caird takes to be an allusion to Domitian, "who liked to be regarded as Apollo incarnate" (2).

Although in many parts of the 21st century world the tension between the believer and the beast is not articulated so starkly, the essential realities of the conflict remain, and must be felt by us. The radical, heretical nature of the book of Revelation needs to be appreciated against this background; it's almost a polemic against the Caesars, and to speak in this way against them was punishable by death. And Revelation speaks of the capital of the beast system (Rome) as being in the wilderness, rather than as the (perceived) centre of a chique, cosmopolitan metropolis. And of course, Rome is spoken of as a whore... the most abusive image possible! The whole vision was given "on the Lord's say" (Rev. 1:10)- and this appears to be an allusion to the way that there was "a day in the Roman calendar when all the Roman citizens had to go to the local temple and declare 'Caesar is Lord'" (3). On that very day, when John was supposed to be worshipping Caesar as Lord, he was given a vision outlining how Caesar was not in fact 'Lord' at all.

The Roman emperors and Greek heroes sometimes traced their pedigree back to a god- and therefore the genealogies of Jesus we find in Matthew and Luke were quite radical in this regard. For they traced the pedigree of Jesus back to God- as if He were the emperor (4).

## Notes

(1) J.L. Mays, Editor, *Harper's Bible Commentary* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

(2) G.B. Caird, *The Revelation Of St. John The Divine* (London: Black, 1966) p. 120.

(3) Thomas Gaston, *Come And See: An Exposition Of Revelation* (Hyderabad, India: Printland, 2007) p. 37.

(4) R.T. Hood has powerfully demonstrated how the genealogies of Jesus would have been seen as revolutionary and subversive to the emperor cult. See his chapter 'The genealogies of Jesus' in A. Wikgren, ed., *Early Christian Origins* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961) pp. 1-13.

#### 16-4-4 Women And Slaves In The First Century

The first century society was built around the concept of *oikonomia*, household fellowship. The head of the house was the leader, and all the extended family and slaves had to follow his religion and be obedient to him. For slaves, this was on pain of death. However, the call of Christ was to *individuals*; and yet individual conversion to a religion was unheard of at the time. And yet further, it was usual for the head of the household to automatically be the leader of the religion which his household practised. But for the true Christians, this was not necessarily so to be; for the Lord had taught that it was the servant who was to lead, and the least esteemed in the ecclesia were to judge matters (1 Cor. 6:4). Elders of the household ecclesias had to be chosen on the basis of their spiritual qualification, Paul taught. The radical nature of these teachings is so easily lost on us. Even if not all these poor converts were slaves, they were all subservient to their employers / sources of income. Craftsmen would have had to belong to a pagan trade guild, normally involving idol worship which a Christian had to refuse, and slaves of course had no 'right' to their own religion if it differed from that of their household. *Everything was against the spread of the Truth amongst the poor women and slaves of the first century.* And yet, the Gospel grew and prospered, as it marched through town after town across the Roman empire. The Romans allowed the existence of the autonomous *politaea*, the city-state, so long as within its religion it featured the worship of the Emperor. And yet the NT writers speak of the ecclesia as a city which is independent, defiantly devoted to the worship of the one and only true God (Eph. 2:19; 3:20; Heb. 12:22; 13:14; Rev. 21). The writers must have nervously penned those inspired words, knowing the problems it would create. The Spirit of God could have chosen not to so directly challenge this world; and yet there is a chasmic difference between the community of God and the surrounding world, which the New Testament unashamedly triumphs in. And let us do so too, not being conformed to this world, but being transformed unto the things of God.

Slaves in the first century were seen as mere bodies owned by their masters or mistresses. Hence Rev. 18:13 describes slaves as *somata*, bodies. They were seen as both the economic and sexual property of those who owned them (1). It seems Paul had this in mind when he spoke of how we have one master, Christ, and our bodies are indeed not our own- but they are His, to be used according to His wishes. For many slaves, this would've meant running the risk of death or flogging. And yet despite this radical demand, Christianity spread rapidly amongst the huge slave population of the first century world. The insistence to marry "only in the Lord" was very hard to obey in the first century. The *Acts Of Thecla* record how Thecla's refusal to marry a non-Christian was judged as a criminal act, and as a threat to the whole fabric of society. The pressures and related issues facing Christians in many areas today is just as radical. Likewise female slaves- amongst whom the Gospel spread so powerfully- were the sexual property of their owners, who could sub-let them as he wished. This was all part and parcel of being a female slave. There are many extra-Biblical records of female Christian slaves being martyred for their faith, running away and being cared for by other Christian women, or committing suicide. The moral demands of the New Testament were even harder to follow then they are now.

It is clear that although women weren't to teach brethren in ecclesial settings, they *did* teach—either unbelievers, or other sisters, we assume. The references to women teaching would have been anathema to many of the surrounding cultures in which the Gospel spread in the first century: “Not only the arm, but the voice of a modest woman ought to be kept from the public, and she should feel shame at being heard... she should speak to or through her husband” (Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 31-32). Likewise the encouragement for a woman to “learn in silence” was a frontal attack on the position that a woman's duty was to follow the religion of her husband and concern herself with domestic duties rather than religious learning. The way the Lord commended Mary rather than Martha for her choice to learn and her rejection of domesticity similarly challenged the prevailing gender perception. There is no doubt that a 1st century Christian woman was far more liberated than in any other contemporary religion.

According to Plato, no artisan could be a citizen of the ideal state. Aristotle tells us that in Thebes no man could become a citizen until ten years after he had stopped working at a trade. Cicero believed that "No workshop can have any culture about it". And then, into this culture, walks Jesus. A working man, who in practice learnt His matchless spirituality in the workshop. And whose religion had for its founding fathers a band of working men from Galilee. Truly did Christianity with its women and slave converts turn the first century world upside down. It could only have been on the basis of their transformed personalities and that 'something' about them, which converted the masses, and also the educated white collar converts whom we know were made.

## Notes

(1) Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery In Early Christianity* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2002).

## 16-4-5 The Roman Empire And Christianity

### *The problems for Roman citizens*

In both Thessalonica and Philippi, strong opposition arose to the preaching of the Gospel because it was held that it was preaching another King, Jesus, in opposition to Caesar, and that the obligations of this new religion were at variance with the Imperial Cult (Acts 16:21; 17:7). In a sense, these allegations were true. Christianity taught that the convert became a member of a new, spiritual Israel. It was irrelevant whether he or she was a Jew, Roman or Gentile. And the convert had to act inclusively rather than exclusively towards other converts. It must have been hard for a Roman citizen to willingly become as it were a 'citizen' of 'spiritual Israel', a 'member' of the despised and captive Jewish race. To not participate in the cult of emperor worship was serious indeed; Roman citizenship could be lost over this matter. Pliny wrote that Christians were therefore “unable by temperament or unwilling by conviction to participate in the common activities of a group or community”. They were seen as any true living Christian is: a bit weird, unsociable, aloof from worldly pleasure, and thereby a silent critic of those who indulge. “The Christian would not attend gladiatorial shows or games or plays. He would not read pagan literature. He would not enlist as a soldier, for then he would come under orders that might conflict with his standards and with his loyalty to Jesus Christ. He would not be a painter or sculptor, for that would be to acquiesce to idolatry. Nor would he be a schoolmaster, for then he would inevitably have to



tell the immoral stories of the pagan gods. The Christian had better steer clear of business contracts, because they required the taking of oaths, which the Christian abjured. They had better keep out of administrative office because of the idolatry involved...and so on” (1). The Romans considered anyone outside the Roman world or who rejected Roman manners and laws as being a barbarian; and yet the Gospel appealed to Roman citizens to reject these very manners and laws. Thus Ramsay comments: “To the Romans *genus humanum* meant not the human race in general but the Roman world, men who lived according to Roman manners and laws; the rest were enemies and barbarians. The Christians, then, were enemies to civilised man, and to the customs and laws which regulated civilised society...they introduced divisions into families and set children against their parents” (2).

The Roman view of things seems to have been consciously questioned by the language of the New Testament preachers; they set up God’s Kingdom and the things of the Lord Jesus in conscious contradistinction to those of the Roman kingdom and lords.

### *The Roman empire / system Versus The Kingdom of the Lord Jesus*

The denarius of Tiberius which Jesus used bore the words: *Tiberius CAESAR DIVI AUGUSTI Filius AUGUSTUS Pontifex Maximus*. Caesar was to be seen as the Son of God. The Lord Jesus was the *only, and begotten* Son of God. The implication is that no other ‘son of God’ was *begotten* as Jesus was- He was the *real* Son of God, the one and only (Jn. 1:14,18; 3:16,18). Caesar was to be worshipped as God (see L.R. Taylor, *The Divinity Of The Roman Emperor*). Julius Caesar was known as *Divus Julius* after his death; indeed, many of the Caesars were held to have ‘resurrected’ to heaven and been granted Divine status. “To us [and this is the emphasis] there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 8:4-6) takes on a vital radicality in the light of this. As does NT teaching about His resurrection and subsequent Divine glorification.

The Roman proconsuls were to be called “Saviour”. But for Christians, there was only *one* Saviour, the Lord Jesus. The Caesars were frequently called “Saviour”- Josephus thus addressed Vespasian. Hence the radical import of the way that Jude 25 calls the Lord Jesus our *only* Saviour. ‘Caesar is Lord’ was the cry of the Roman empire. Pliny wrote that he considered refusal to make the customary gesture to the emperor’s statue to be a criminal act punishable by death. But “To us there is but one Lord, Jesus” the Christ, i.e. Jesus the Messiah of the despised, weird Jewish race. The Roman concept of *religio* allowed each subject nation to have their own gods, so long as the cult of the emperor was also worshipped. But Rom. 3:29 states that the God of Israel was the one God of the Gentiles too. This is in sharp distinction to the way the Romans thought of the god of the Jews as just another national deity. Caesar was king of many subject kings, Lord of many conquered and inferior lords. In this we see the radical challenge of 1 Tim. 6:15,16: that Jesus Christ is the *only* potentate, the Lord of Lords, the King of all Kings. The RV margin brings out the Greek even more radically: “them that rule as lords”- those who think they are lords when compared to the Lord Jesus they are nothing. Many of the terms used in relation to Caesar worship are deliberately used in the New Testament and redefined in an exclusive Christian context, setting the Christian view of them up against any other use of them, and insisting upon it as the only valid meaning of the term. Thus ‘*evangelion*’ was a well known concept. It meant the good news of victory, and the corresponding duty to make thank and praise offerings for it. The Imperial Cult used the word for announcing Caesar’s victories, his birthdays, his accession to power, his granting of *salvation* to his people...Mark’s Gospel especially uses the word *evangelion* in a way which sets it up in contrast to the way it was used in the

Imperial Cult. It is the good news of the birth, victory, resurrection and Kingdom of the Lord Jesus, and the *evangelion* calls men and women to make self-sacrifice in response to it.

The wider family / household of the emperor bore a special name related to the name of the emperor; thus at the time of Augustus, they were called the Augustiani. They were his distant relatives and personal servants who were known for their loyalty to him. It was an honour to be part of this empire-wide extended household. The name 'Christian' was coined in Antioch in parody of this. These men were the honoured members of another empire-wide household of relatives and servants, yet their emperor was the Christ. This title for them would have been an open and defiant rebellion against the cult of the emperor. Some Caesars such as Gaius, Nero and Domitian felt that they would not only become Divine on their death, but they were to be treated as Divine in their lives. They wished to be considered as mediators between the gods and Roman citizens. The NT passages which speak in such exalted terms of Christ's present exaltation were not just written to provide trinitarians with pseudo-ammunition against us. They used that exalted language for a very real purpose- to highlight how the Lord Jesus was the one who had become 'Divine' and been 'highly exalted' on His death, and how even in His life He had been worthy of the honour due to God alone, on account of the degree to which He manifested the Father. And to Jesus alone had been given world-wide authority, not to Caesar [as they claimed]. And moreover, He had been given all power in Heaven as well as earth. He alone was the *only* mediator between God and all men, rather than Caesar. The Lord's own words were radical enough, when He taught that Caesar should be *honoured* but not *worshipped*.

Although Thomas' exaltation "My Lord and my God!" may appear an off-the-cuff gasping out of praise, can I suggest there was far more to it than that. I suggest he was alluding to or quoting Ps. 35:23: " Stir up thyself, and awake to my judgment, my God and my Lord" . The Lord Jesus had indeed arisen and stirred up in resurrection, and Thomas realized that it was to his judgment. When we look closer at the Psalm, it seems to reveal something of the thoughts of the Lord Jesus. He had desired God to awake to *his* need. And now Thomas shares those same thoughts, through his relationship to Jesus. And this is a very Johannine theme; that the relationship between Father and Son is to be shared by the believers, on account of the way they relate to the risen Lord Jesus. Or perhaps Thomas had Ps. 91:2 in mind: " I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge, my fortress, my God; in him will I trust" . When Thomas addressed Jesus as " My Lord and my God" , he was likely alluding to the way the Emperors [Domitian especially, according to Seutonius] demanded to be called " *Dominus et Deus noster*" - Our Lord and our God. Thomas was saying something radical- he was applying to the Lord Jesus the titles which those living in the Roman empire were only to apply to Caesar. And our exaltation of the Lord Jesus should be just as radical in practice. Further, I note that Yahweh Elohim is usually translated in the Septuagint 'Kyrios, ho theos mou'- " Lord, my God" . Am I going too far in thinking that Thomas saw in the risen Jesus the fulfillment of the Yahweh Elohim name? He would thus have been fulfilling the Lord's prophecy in Jn. 8:28: " When you lift up the Son of man, then you will realize that I Am..." . Finally the disciples were grasping that " All men may honour the Son just as they honour the Father" (Jn. 5:23). Thomas' expression of praise was thus blasphemy to both Jews and Romans. A true perception of the exaltation of the Lord Jesus leads us to a unique position which cannot be accepted by any who are not truly of Him.

The names of the Roman emperors were to be greatly revered. The cult of emperor worship grew very strongly in the 1st century. Yet Rev. 13:2 describes the names of the leaders of the beast, which on one level represented the Roman empire in the 1st century, as "*blasphemous*

*names*". To assign divine titles to the emperor was, to the Jewish and Christian mind, a blasphemy (Dt. 11:36; 2 Thess. 2:4). This would have made the Apocalypse an outlawed document in the first century. Consider too the clear references to the evil of the emperor worship cult later in Rev. 13: *one of its heads*. . . is set up as the very opposite of the true Christ. Like the Lamb, who was killed and then raised up (5:6), the Beast seems to disappear and then return to life (17:8). This passage may be a reference to some definite event, such as the murder of Caesar and the healing of the empire under Augustus, the legend of *Nero redivivus*, whereby Nero was believed to have returned from the dead. The marvellous cure of the Beast excites admiration and leads to the adoration of the dragon and the Beast (17:8). This is an allusion to the rapid progress of the emperor cult and to the ready acceptance of the immoral example of the emperors. The beast of the earth in Rev. 13:11-18 seems to have some application to the cult of emperor worship which became so popular throughout the Roman empire: it speaks in the voice of the dragon (v. 11), from whom it receives its power; and like the first Beast, it attempts to mimic the Lamb (v. 12, 13). It seems to be a personification of an Antichrist embodied in the pagan priesthood, which endeavoured to draw all men to the cult of the emperor. In these thoughts we see just how radical was the Apocalypse in its first century context.

"The image to the beast" (13:13) would refer to representations of the divinized Roman emperors. "The wound of the sword" (13:13) is possibly an allusion to the mortal wound Nero inflicted upon himself in ad 68. Nero was perceived to live again in the persecutor Domitian (Tertullian, *Apol.* 5). Note how it is "the beast" who appears to have died or been wounded and then revives (17:8)- and yet these are references to what happened to Nero. The symbolism correctly perceives how the empire was incarnated in one man, the emperor.

The beast of 17:4 was "full of blasphemous names". Not only the heads of the Beast (13:1), but its whole body is covered with them, indicating that the entire empire sanctioned the emperors' arrogation of divine titles; such titles could be found throughout the Roman world, inscribed on public buildings and monuments. The golden cup which the whore has (cp. 18:6; Jer 51:7) has contents which would have been understood as idolatrous cults and the vices of Rome-all in sharp contrast with its outward beauty and the splendour of the woman. These prophecies were therefore in direct and open criticism of the Roman empire which surrounded the early ecclesia. Rome boasted that "I sit a queen" (18:7). The chief sin of Rome as of all pagan empires consists in their assertion that their power and their authority derive exclusively from themselves, that they are their own masters, recognizing no superior law. Please note that in seeing a first century fulfillment of Revelation I in no way thereby necessarily exclude a continuous historic or latter day fulfillment of it also.

The Roman empire was thus painted in the most awful colours; and yet it must have seemed just the ordinary world to the early believers; the place they grew up in, outside of which they generally had no experience. And yet the message of Rev. is to "flee" from Babylon / Rome- "flight" consists in refusing to participate in the sins of the Romans. Paul admits that we are unable to leave the world (1 Cor 5:10), and therefore we are to see this as symbolic. And surely there are similarities with our own position at the end of another age- we need this apocalyptic language to make us realize exactly *how* evil is the world around us and the need to flee it. The description of Rome's trading in chapter 18 would have been especially powerful- it would have seemed that Rome was invincible, economically and politically unshakeable, admired by the whole world. And yet it was to be brought down by Divine judgment. Note too how these passages are also applicable to Jerusalem- as if there in the city

that was so defiantly anti-Roman, the same abuses in essence were going on, and would meet a like judgment.

I am of the view that the seals and vials of Revelation have such strong connection with both the Olivet prophecy and the actual events in the land in AD66-70 that it is impossible to discount the application of Revelation to this period. This means that it would have been written some time before AD70. A major theme is the need to resist the Caesar worship and maintain their separation from the world around them. Indeed, the whole of Revelation can be read, in its' AD70 application, as an account of the struggle between Christ and Caesar. Such strong imagery is used in order to emphasise that there could be no third road. It was one or the other. Thus Rev. 4,5 presents a picture of the throne of Heaven, but it is replete with reference to the imperial ceremonial court. Consider the points of contact and contrast:

- Greco-Roman kings were considered to be divine, and their courtrooms were arranged in concentric circles centring upon the Caesar / King- just as with the true throne room
- Their attendants were often arranged in groups of 7s and 12s- after the supposed seven planetary spheres and the 12 signs of the zodiac. Compare this with the 7s, 12s and 24s [2 x 12] in Revelation (4:4,5,10; 5:6-10).
- These attendants sung hymns of praise to the Caesar (cp. 4:8-11; 5:9-14)
- The Caesar dispersed justice to the empire / kingdom, symbolised by a scroll (cp. 5:1-8).
- Language such as God, Son of God, Lord's day, saviour of the world was used in the imperial cult (3).

Suffice it to say that today just as much as in the 1st century, there is a radical clash of cultures and belief systems between us and this present world. The radical nature of the conflict cannot be overstated.

One of the most well known concepts in the empire was the *Pax Romana*- the idea that the Roman empire brought peace and blessing to those within its rulership and Kingdom. Yet this is consciously and explicitly alluded to in the NT passages which speak of the universal peace and goodwill which can only and exclusively come to mankind through the Gospel and reign of Jesus.

Some of the Roman leaders initially pushed the idea of Plato, that all land should be state owned and be given up by individuals to the state. Yet Acts 2:44; 4:32 use language which is directly taken from Plato's *Republic*: "All things common...no one called anything his own". The early church was seeking to set up an idealized alternative to the Roman empire!

Roman citizenship was the most coveted thing in the Roman empire. Phil. 3:20 claims that we *all* have the coveted citizenship. Heb. 11:13-16 contains some radical demands in a first century context- to see the *true* city, when Rome was *the* city to be identified with; to be a non-citizen of any earthly state... how hard would that have been for Roman citizens to read, hear, and say 'Amen' to! And how hard it would be for Roman citizens, or those who aspired to it, to realize that the highest honour was to be part of "the commonwealth of Israel" (Eph. 2:12), that pokey, undeveloped, despised corner of the great Roman empire. And the call of Christ to middle class 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens is just as radical.

The way the sun was eclipsed at the Lord's death is recorded in terms which clearly contrast with the prevailing view that at the demise of the emperors, the light of the sun was eclipsed. Both Plutarch (Caesar, 69.4) and Josephus (Antiquities 14.12.3,409) speak of eclipses of the sun at the death of Julius Caesar. The Lord Jesus in His death is thus being proclaimed as the true Caesar. Likewise Cassius Dio *History* 51.17.5) claims that at the fall of Alexandria to the Romans, "the disembodied spirits of the dead were made visible". Similar claims were made for other Roman victories. And yet this is clearly put into context by the record that around the Lord's victory, the graves were opened and the dead actually came forth.

Martin Hengel concludes that the early Gospel records were so radical that they would've been part of an "underground literature". He suggests that the Roman law forbidding oral or written prophecies about the fall of the Roman empire- on pain of death- was enough to make the Olivet prophecy alone a highly illegal document (4).

### **Social Problems**

The stress of Christianity on *individual* conversion and responsibility meant that as Jesus had predicted, families were divided when one accepted Him. 1 Cor. 7 shows that there were times when a wife accepted Christianity but her husband didn't. Yet society expected her to treat him as her head in all religious matters. Plutarch taught that "it is becoming for a wife to worship and know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tightly upon all queer rituals and superstitions. For with no god do stealthy and secret rites performed by a woman find any favour". These comments were very relevant to the many sisters who must have discreetly broken bread alone or in small groups. One can imagine all the social and domestic conflicts that Christianity created. This is why the movement was so slandered. There were no temple, no priests, this religion was seen as weird. Just as many new converts today are mocked for the fact the believers in their area have no church building, no priests etc. The early Christians were slandered- their breaking of bread was misrepresented as cannibalism, the eating of a dead body; the 'love feast' was claimed to be an immoral gathering, and the Christian focus on loving each other was given overtones of immorality by their detractors. Their separation from the world likewise was wilfully misinterpreted as "hatred of the human race". The tragedy is that the gross misbehaviour of the Corinthians and others gave the slander at least some basis.

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### **Notes**

(1) Michael Green, *Evangelism In The Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) p. 40 .

(2) W.M. Ramsay, *The Church In The Roman Empire* (New York: Putnam's, 1893) p. 236.

(3) These and many other links can be found in David Aune, "The influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John", *Papers Of The Chicago Society Of Biblical Research* 28 (1983): 1-26.

(4) Martin Hengel, *Studies In The Gospel Of Mark* (London: SCM, 1985) p. 28.

### **16-4-6 The Attraction Of Judaism**

It is apparent from letters like Romans and Galatians that there was a strong tendency for Gentile Christians to join Judaism. And we also know that many Jewish converts soon

returned to Judaism. Humanity lacks faith; it was far easier to believe that the system of altar, temple, sacrifice and priest could grant forgiveness than to *believe* that the work of this man Jesus, whom many had never seen, had already obtained all this, and there was nothing else required than a deep internal acceptance and belief of this as historical reality, and living a life in response to it. It also needs to be understood that the Romans didn't tolerate the exclusive nature of the Christian religion; it wasn't registered as a religion, and the exclusiveness of it was an affront on the Roman concept of *religio*, whereby any religion was tolerated so long as the worshipper also worshipped Caesar as Lord. Yet Christianity denied this: there was only one Lord, Jesus. "One Lord, one faith" was therefore a radical, defiant statement. And it seems that new converts were requested to state that "Jesus is Lord" at their confession of faith at baptism. The only religion that was officially tolerated in the empire which didn't accept Caesar as Lord was Judaism. Jews were not conscripted for the Roman army; Dolabella expressly exempted them from military service <sup>(1)</sup>. This was a major attraction of Judaism. They were allowed their own *gerousia* or senate, and they had their own courts of justice. Their economic and social advantages often provoked riots in cities like Alexandria where there were many Jews. The synagogues welcomed proselytes [circumcised Gentiles] and also "God fearers" [uncircumcised Gentiles], and on this basis Gentile Christians could easily associate with them. Yet Christianity enjoyed none of these advantages. The Lord had taught that His true people would be thrown out of the synagogues rather than welcomed into them.

The apostles had every disadvantage when they set about trying to convert Jewry to Christ. A handful of men without formal rabbinical training were trying to correct the theology and religious practice of the professional religious leaders; in a religious environment where tradition and eldership were so highly regarded. And yet, "a great company of the priests" was obedient to their preaching. Their understanding of Messiah was directly opposite to that of the Jews, who were seeking a warrior king to deliver them from the Romans and establish a Kingdom. In any case, the Jews didn't understand Messiah as the Son of God, exalted to the level Jesus was. They failed to appreciate His spiritual achievements and the saving necessity of them. They saw Messiah as the embodiment and triumph of everything Jewish, rather than as a universal Saviour from sin. Yet the Christians presented a crucified carpenter-teacher as the summit of Israel's development, in the face of all these attractions of Judaism. They defined Messiah as a deliverer, e.g. in *Psalms of Solomon 17* (written about 50 BC):

"Behold, O Lord, and raise up for them their King, the Son of David

And gird him with strength to shatter unrighteous rulers,

And to purge Jerusalem from Gentiles that trample her down to destruction".

Further, there were elements of Christian teaching which were a direct affront to Judaism. Part of being a Christian was to expect to be treated by the Jews in just the same way as they had treated Jesus. The Sabbath was replaced with keeping the first day of the week for worship; the food laws were reduced by Paul's inspired teaching to parts of "the weak and beggarly elements". The Jewish hatred of the Christians is revealed by the riots that ensued when the Gospel was preached in the synagogues, and in the persecution of the Christians at the hands of the Jews in Jerusalem, Damascus and in the Asian cities (according to the letters in Rev. 2,3). The insistence that Jewish converts be baptized would have been hard of acceptance; for Gentiles took just such a ritual bath when they converted to Judaism.

One major obstacle for Jewish minds would have been their perception that prayer and worship were to be carried out in the Jerusalem temple. This would have been a particular barrier for the many Jews in Jerusalem who converted to Christ. Whilst initially it appears the believers did attend the temple services, it is also significant that Acts repeatedly brings out the parallels between prayers and worship performed in the *temple*, and those performed in the ordinary homes of believers. Some passages about worship in the temple appear to be in parallel with others about such worship in homes. Luke seems to emphasize how important was the home as a place for prayer. Cornelius is presented as praying at home at the ninth hour, which was the hour of temple prayer (Acts 10:3,30). The prayer of Acts 4:24-31 speaks of the God who made heaven and earth and the sea and everything in it- a classic Jewish liturgy used in the temple prayers. The point being, such prayers didn't have to be made in the temple through the Jewish priests. Further, there is extra-Biblical evidence (from Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian) that the third, sixth and ninth hours were the times for prayer amongst the early Christians- but these were the very hours of prayer in the temple! This would have been so hard to accept to the Jewish mind- that your own humble home [hence Luke stresses meetings and prayers *in homes* so much] was the house of God. It had been so drummed into the Jewish mind that the temple was "the house of prayer" (Is. 56:7; 60:7 LXX)- but now they were faced with the wonderful reality that their own home was that house of prayer. Only those brave enough to really reach out for a personal relationship with the God of Heaven would have risen up to this challenging idea. And yet the very height and thrill of the challenge inspired so many to do so.

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## Notes

(1) Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 14.10.8

## 16-4-7 Other First Century Objections To Christianity

To both Jew and Gentile in the first century, nothing new could be true. Tradition and received wisdom were the order of the day; just as in many societies today where the Truth is beginning to spread. The concept of 'truth' was mocked by the Greek intellectual tradition which underpinned the first century world. It was felt to be simplistic and even repulsive to suggest that 'truth' resided in any one individual. When Jesus defined Himself as "the Truth", and when Paul in Colossians states that *all* wisdom dwells in one individual, Jesus, they were going right against what all thinking people accepted. And so it is with us today. None of the other religions demanded any ethics of their members; and thus the Roman world of that time was highly immoral, living only for "bread and circuses". In the first century, the first signs of breakdown of society / empire were evident- largely brought on by the way society had become so disfigured by lust, selfishness and cruelty. The 1st century world and that of the 21st century are remarkably similar. There was wealth in the 1st century- but it existed side by side with abject poverty. Betting shops and plush restaurants were everywhere; the theatre deteriorated until most of the shows were sexual, bawdy and depraved. Chariot racing in Rome and big time sport today bare a close resemblance. The financial rewards of the sport made a nonsense of real values, then just as much as today. Charioteers sold themselves just as football players do today.

The message and demand of Christ in moral terms would have stood out starkly and attractively, despite all the first century objections to Christianity; and so it should be with us,



living in identical circumstances. In the Graeco-Roman world, sexual immorality was just the done thing. The feeling was that the body is essentially evil, therefore what was done with the body wasn't that great a deal. The call of the Gospel was that the body is for the Lord (1 Cor. 6:13)- something totally unheard of. And Paul places sexual sins at the beginning of his list of works of the flesh in Gal. 5, labelling the point to the Corinthians that sin involving the body was in fact especially bad. This was radical stuff in a culture where prostitution and sexual immorality were seen as an almost necessary part of religion. Yet the Christian teaching of chastity was actually attractive to people precisely because of its radical difference. And yet we can be sure that this was also a barrier to the general mass of humanity at the time. This is just one of many examples where Christianity consciously broke through deeply held boundaries and worldviews. The self-consciousness of how the Gospel did this was bound to make it obnoxious to the majority. Consider how Gal. 3:27-29 teaches that there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male nor female... consciously alluding to the Jewish morning prayer of the male Jew, which thanked God that he was not born a Gentile, a slave nor a woman.

'Offence' against a deity was only in ritual impurity, whereas Christianity preached that sin was a real and felt offence against God Himself. Self-surrender, faith... these were totally new concepts. And the working classes too were not exactly open to conversion. Their social and economic life depended upon trade guilds and clubs, which usually met in an idol temple. To leave these idol-dominated guilds was to lose any chance of a stable income. And yet the early brethren taught unashamedly the need to quit idol worship. At whatever cost. And yet men and women lined up for baptism in response to this. The harder, demanding side of God attracted.

### **16-5-1 Why Christianity Spread In The First Century**

In the light of all these obstacles in the path of the progress of Christianity in the first century, there must have been some distinct reasons for its success. We began by saying that the will of God was no stronger for the advancement of His Truth in the first century than at any other time. If the Gospel is indeed "the power of God unto salvation", then it cannot be that God would add an extra drawing power to it which is present in some centuries but not in others. It remains, therefore, to be concluded that there was something in the method and message of the early preachers which was so attractive that it somehow over-rode all the obstacles which there were to the acceptance of the message by ordinary people in the first century. One other consideration is that there is no lack of Biblical evidence that the early community saw their whole purpose as being to be a light to the world. Their main leaders (Peter, Paul, Stephen) were first and foremost preachers, rather than theologians or administrators. They used every opportunity to get the message out: when Paul was nearly lynched in Jerusalem, he turned about on the steps of Antonia and addressed the crowd; he took advantage of an illness to preach to the Galatians. He and others like him pressed every eventuality and circumstance into the service of the Gospel.

### ***Prayer In The First Century***

There is no doubt that the early Christians' emphasis upon prayer was a major reason as to why they succeeded. Luke, both in his Gospel and in the Acts record, lays great emphasis on prayer<sup>(1)</sup>. His Gospel contains far more references to prayer than the others. He records prayer incidents at key points in his narrative, reflecting his observation that prayer was the means by which God granted success.

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## Notes

(1) This feature has been examined in depth in F. Plymale, *The Prayer Texts of Luke-Acts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

### 16-5-2 The Example Of The Community

Contemporary accounts emphasise the impressive *love* of the early believers; how they were prepared to raise money for their poorer brethren both near and also far away, even to the point of selling their homes and land to provide for them. The prayer meetings for a brother in prison, the genuine care for each other...this must have stood out as something altogether different from what had previously passed as 'religion' in the experience of first century humanity. This was all in fulfilment of the Lord's prayer / reflections in John 17, that His death would lead to a love and unity between those who benefit from it, that could convert the world. And we simply *must* ask ourselves, whether our love for each other is perceived by this world? When a brother in Trinidad was handed the death sentence, believers world-wide wrote to the authorities appealing for mercy. This, to my mind, was a living example of the power of the Truth. Another one was where a postal worker was converted, having been impressed at how a poor old sister in Kazakhstan received letters from all over the world. Visitors to Bible Schools have sometimes remarked that they saw a love and true sense of family amongst us that proved that whatever is our doctrinal basis, it must be the Truth. But there ought to be far more examples of this sort. Instead, I fear that our disunity, the way some of us sometimes behave like any other mixed up little Protestant group that has gotten bitter and twisted over the years...I fear that this turns so many away from us. And yet we who hold God's Truth ought to be using that purity of doctrine to elicit a purity of love and caring and unity which will be immediately arresting to all who come into contact with it. *In a world of quasi-love and pseudo-care, true Christians ought to be an arresting reality to those who meet us. The example of the community should be powerful. Our difference as people will reflect our fundamental doctrinal difference with other groups. There are times when our community achieves this wonderfully. And yet is it not so that at some times and in a few places we are little more than a society for mutual admiration, a social club, co-dependent on sub-groups within the community, rather than genuinely functional for all members of our community, and reaching out thereby into the world...?*

### 16-5-3 House Meetings In The First Century

It would be wrong to get the impression from the early days in Jerusalem that most Christian converts in the first century were won by mass meetings and big evangelists like Peter. There is every reason to think that what happened there was unique. It would have been almost impossible to hold such mass meetings in the Roman empire. And there is no archaeological evidence for the existence of any buildings for Christian meetings until well into the 2nd century. It follows that the massive growth of Christianity in the 1st century was mainly through personal witness and small house groups. The Acts record is very abbreviated. Surely we are to see in groups like that based around Lydia an example of typical first century groups of believers. The impression we get from the record is that this was the usual style of Christian meeting. The Gospel was preached from homes, such as Jason's in Thessalonica

(Acts 17:5), that of Titus Justus and Stephanas in Corinth (18:7; 1 Cor. 1:16; 16:15), Philip's in Caesarea (21:8), Lydia's and the jailer's in Philippi (16:15,32-34), the home owned by the mother of John Mark in Jerusalem (1:13; 12:12). The spread of the Gospel from homes is therefore a major theme of the record; and the obvious implication is that the audience was the friends and family of the convert, to whom they had personally witnessed. There are many stories recorded of the gradual infiltration of the middle and upper classes of Roman society by Christianity, on account of the lives and words of slaves. This was quite against the norm of society, where the master of the house controlled the religion of the household, including that of the slaves. But such was the insistent power of personal witness that society was turned on its head.

#### 16-5-4 Witness In The Workplace

It was during the course of their daily lives that the early converts made their witness. Note how Paul implies that it was during the course of his daily work that he won many converts: "You remember, brothers, our work and toil. *It was while* we were labouring night and day...that we proclaimed to you the gospel of God" (1 Thess. 2:9). Celsus claimed that Christianity was attractive "only to the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children...[the Christian evangelists] were wool-workers, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels [who enticed]...children and stupid women [to come along to]...the wooldresser's shop, or to the cobbler's or the washerwoman's shop, that they may learn perfection"<sup>(1)</sup>. This could almost be a quotation from 1 Cor. 1, where Paul describes the converts as just such people. And yet from out of their ordinary life situations, the witness went forth. Not from specially built halls, but from the workplace. And so it has ever been. This is why Pliny could observe that Christianity "penetrated not only the cities but even the villages and farms"<sup>(2)</sup>. It was individuals converting individuals.

The example of the early Christians, especially their deportment under persecution and even death, was what converted others. The Thessalonians were convinced that what Paul taught them was not the word of men but the word of God, because of who Paul was: his life, his self-sacrifice, his caring, convinced them (1 Thess. 2:1-14). Paul speaks of how they had become examples to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia; and yet he also notes in the same context how the Gospel has been spread throughout those very same regions, Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess. 1:7,8). Their example was associated with the acceptance of the message. Their faith had "gone forth" and so thereby had the word of the Lord "sounded forth" (RV). Paul likewise warned the Corinthians that only a church which was manifestly united, with each member using his gifts in an orderly, sensitive and respectful way...only such a church could convict the unbeliever of Truth (1 Cor. 14:23 and context). And this was all building on the Lord's clear statements in John 17- that the united church would lead to all men knowing of His grace and truth. This is why the Acts record describes the spectacular growth of the early church in the same breath as noting the intense unity and "all things common" between the believers. The mass conversions stopped after the politics of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, and the division over welfare matters in Acts 6. While that incredible and genuine unity prevailed, converts were made by the thousand.

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## Notes

(1) Quoted in Henry Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, Cambridge : C.U.P., 1965, pp. 158,165.

(2) Quoted in Betty Radice, *The Letters Of The Younger Pliny*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969.

### 16-5-5 The Witness Of Christian Unity In The First Century

Gamaliel made the powerful point that false Messiahs were exposed by the fact that their followers “scattered” as in the case of Theudas, or “dispersed” as in the case of Judas of Galilee (Acts 5:36,37). The implication was surely that the followers of Jesus would likewise disunite if He were anything other than the real and legitimate Son of God. The unity of the community thereby is a witness to His reality and legitimacy. And so it was in the first century.

The link between holy living and powerful preachers is made apparent by the following quotation from Justin: “We who formerly delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring all we have into a common stock and share it out to all according to their need; we who hated and destroyed one another and on account of their different manner of life would not live with men of another tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live happily with them, and pray for our enemies and endeavour to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ, so that they may become partakers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God” (*First Apology*, 14). The genuine love of true believers on the opposing sides in areas of ethnic cleansing, in the former Yugoslavia and also in Central Africa, has likewise been a powerful witness to the world. Our *disunity* will have, and does have, the expected and opposite effect: it will diminish the power of our witness. This is what happened in the 2nd Century.

Speaking of that time, we read in [the uninspired] 2 Clement 13:3: “For when the heathen hear from our mouth the oracles of God they wonder at their beauty and greatness; then, discovering that our deeds are not worthy of the words we utter, they turn from their wonder to blasphemy, saying that it is all a myth and delusion”. The rich variety of good works which the spirit of Christ brings forth were reduced by the later church into a cold abstention from, e.g., the more gross sexual sins; but the dynamic and positive *agape* of the first believers, with all its varied manifestations, was lost. And so one fears it can be with our community; we may not commit the grosser sins, but the dynamic of love in positive action has perhaps been lost. One gets the impression from the 2nd century writings that the joy dropped out of Christianity; and yet the joy of the converts, and the urgent need to retain that first joy of conversion, is a major theme in the NT (e.g. Acts 8:8; 13:52; 15:3). This strange joy must have been a major factor in confirming the Gospel as authentic. And it was cumulative. John had no greater joy than to hear that his spiritual children walked in truth (3 Jn. 4). Paul told the Thessalonians that they were his glory and joy (1 Thess. 2:19). There is a great joy in converting someone and seeing them grow. There’s no joy like it. The early church were nearly all converting others. It must have been a wonderful place to be, building itself up on its own momentum, a momentum which made them so credible in their appeal to men. There is a definite link between the power of witness and the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that bears witness (Jn. 15:26); and yet we are the witnesses. We evidently don’t possess the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit today, and all spirituality must involve our allowing the word of God to work upon us. So the Spirit bears witness in us in that the spirit of Christ, the joy, peace,

love which we show as individuals and thereby as a community, gives as much credibility to our witness as did the performance of miracles in the 1st century. And so Paul told the Thessalonians: “Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much assurance”. The “assurance”, the power of confirmation, was in the credibility which the Spirit of Christ in their examples gave to their preaching of the word. And likewise in 1 Cor. 2:3-5: “My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God”.

The unity between Jew and Gentile must have been especially impressive. Philo records of Jamnia: “There lived a mixed population, the majority of them Jews but the rest a number of foreigners who had nested there as vermin from neighbouring territories”<sup>(1)</sup>. And there are many other such references to the bitter hatred between them. This “enmity” between them was taken away for those who were in Christ (Eph. 2:11; Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28). It must have made a startling and arresting witness. And yet sadly, it didn’t continue; the old tensions and feelings rent apart that unity.

The extraordinary unity of the early believers was compounded and expressed by the development amongst them of a specific kind of vocabulary and traditions. This was totally different to the *cultus* developed in most of the other religions; it was all a sign of their special and loving unity. Terms like “ecclesia”, “elect”, “calling” etc. all took on a new and specific meaning. “Ekklesia” in ordinary Greek referred to the voting assembly of citizens in a free Greek city, but the term came to have a highly specific meaning. *Christos* would have meant ‘ointment’ to the ordinary Greek; and yet within Christian circles it came to define the Messiah.

Baptism was seen as the major divide between the church and the world, and this led to the sense of Christian unity there was in the first century. The Jews often baptized themselves after various incidents, but Christian baptism was a one off and permanent crossing of the threshold between the “dirty” world and the clean community in Christ. The people of the world are described in the NT as “outsiders [1 Cor. 5:12,13; 1 Thess. 4:12; Col. 4:5]...darkness...without hope...who do not know God [1 Thess. 4:5; Gal. 4:8; 2 Thess. 1:8]” compared to the light and hope within the community. Remember that there were few pure atheists in the first century- most professed some kind of faith in a god. Yet the world is described as not knowing God at all. 1 Cor. 5,6 presuppose a conception of the Christian community as pure and holy, and of the outside world as impure and profane. Those who departed from the faith didn’t just drift away; they were formally pronounced anathema (1 Cor. 16:22), delivered unto the satan of this world. And it follows that within a community with such tight boundaries, there would be strong identity with each other who were within those boundaries. The joy and elation of new converts (1 Thess. 1:4,6) was due to having crossed such a major boundary- it was a joy which those who joined another religion would not have so felt. It explains why Paul could feel “so affectionate toward” his converts (1 Thess. 2:8), and why he felt “bereft of you for a time, in person but not in heart” (2:17). This pain of separation from each other, this longing to see each other, was quite unknown to the other religions. 1 Cor. 2:6-9 stresses how they possessed a truth which nobody else apart from them could know. Whilst this feature of true Christianity led into the arrogance and pride which eventually doomed the early church, when and whilst used properly, it bound them even closer together. Nikolaus Walter observes that the first century generally “did not experience religion as a binding force that was capable of determining everyday reality by offering support, setting norms, and forming community”. And yet the Truth enabled just



such things to occur. In this, as today, the example of the community is the ultimate proof that the doctrines we teach are indeed the Truth and of themselves demand conversion.

The amount of travel by the early brethren was extraordinary, and could only have been impressive to the world around them. The same could be said of us today, regularly travelling for days across Russia and North America to attend gatherings, flying and hitch hiking around Africa to meet each other...driving hours to meeting. The NT letters feature passages which served as letters of recommendation (Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 16:10-12 cp. Phil. 2:25-30; Col. 4:7-9; Eph. 6:21; Philemon 22; Rom. 15:24). Thus hospitality became a required Christian virtue (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8). Even ordinary Christians could count on this hospitality. Yet “security and hospitality when travelling had traditionally been the privilege of the powerful, who had relied upon a network of patronage and friendship, created by wealth. The letters of recommendation disclose the fact that these domestic advantages were now extended to the whole household of faith, who are accepted on trust, though complete strangers”<sup>(2)</sup>. This was the practical outcome of the doctrines believed; a member of the ekklesia of God would be welcomed as a brother or sister in Laodicea, Ephesus, Corinth or Rome. And so it largely is amongst us today.

Celsus, a hostile observer of Christianity, commented about the unity of Christians in the first century: “Their agreement is quite amazing, the more so as it may be shown to rest on no trustworthy foundation. However they have a trustworthy foundation for their unity in social dissidence and the advantage which it brings and in the fear of outsiders- these are factors which strengthen their faith”<sup>(3)</sup>. Sadly the “fear of outsiders” was what led the church to its tragic downfall.

The social mix amongst believers must have been startling. Excavations at Ostia near Rome have revealed how the spacious homes of the wealthy stood right next to the *insulae*, the blocks of squalid flats in which the poor lived. There was little differentiation of rich and poor according to which neighbourhoods they lived in. So when we read that the wealthy believer Gaius was ‘host of the whole church’ (Rom. 16:23), we are to imagine this wealthy man opening his spacious home to the urchins who lived in the neighbouring blocks who had come to Christ. This must have been startling for the surrounding populace. Such was the witness of true Christian unity.

The family based structure of the first century is hard to fully empathize with from our distance. Family was all. Peter comments that the disciples had “left our own homes” (Lk. 18:28 RVmg.), and the parallel Mt. 19:27 says “left *all*”. Your home was your all. To have to leave it for the sake of Christ was the most fundamental thing you could do. Hence the real meaning in the first century of the Lord’s response that such converts would receive families in this life, i.e. in their relationships in the ecclesia. And yet the radical call of Christ is no less demanding and intrusive as men and women meet it today, the only difference being that the starkness of the choices is less pronounced today- but just as essentially real.

### *The Community Is The Witness*

Summing up, the community of believers and the nature of it was the essential witness. Every man and woman in that early church saw it as their duty to witness to Christ, by every means at his or her disposal. And this is perhaps where our community is sadly different. The urgency of our individual and collective task seems not to be perceived as it should be. We

are not preaching a system or entry into an organization; we are preaching a person, Jesus Christ. In that sense men and women can only be brought face to face with Him insofar as they see Him manifested in the real life men and women around them. True witness to Him must almost axiomatically be through personal contact. Think of how John can so passionately write of the Jesus whom he had seen with his eyes, handled with his hands, and *therefore* he proclaimed Him. There was no need to spend time talking about methods of preaching. The fire and the passion was within them; to the extent that Paul, albeit under inspiration, breaks some of the rules of grammar, invents new words, in his passion to get over the message. Love found its way. They told others the news of the love of their lives. And this is just the same today; and it's why new converts are always the most effective preachers. Witness to the man Christ Jesus can in no way be resigned to certain speakers or committees of brethren. There is something urgently and insistently personal about it. It has been observed that the most fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism was that Christianity was founded on a person rather than mere ideas<sup>(4)</sup>. We must be careful to preserve this emphasis: essentially upon a living, real, historical and yet now ascended person, not just an endless set of propositions and ideas. The records of early Christianity speak as if the 'Christian problem' was caused by a ringleader who was then alive. Thus in AD49 Claudius "expelled Jews from Rome because of their constant disturbances impelled by Chrestus" (Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4). The historians and authorities assumed that this Chrestus / Christ was alive and inciting rebellion. There was such a clear link between the invisible, living, ascended Jesus, and the actions of His brethren on earth.

One of the major social problems in first century society was that Rome had enforced economic and political unity by herding together [especially in the cities] people of many ethnic backgrounds, with the result that blazing ethnic hatreds were created. Ramsay MacMullen has written of the immense "diversity of tongues, cults, traditions and levels of education" encompassed by the Roman Empire. And yet it is almost with allusion to this that Paul can write that for those in Christ there really is no Jew or Gentile, male or female. In the cities of the Roman empire, people of many cultures, speaking many languages, worshipping all manner of gods, had been dumped together helter-skelter. And yet Christianity gave people a new nationhood and ethnicity- the new Israel. The contrast with the bitterly divided world around them must have been arresting to the eyes of those who saw it.

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## Notes

(1) Quoted in E.M. Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule* (Leiden: 1976), p. 175.

(2) E.A. Judge, *The Conversion Of Rome*, North Ryde, Australia: Macquarrie Ancient History Association, 1980 p. 7.

(3) Quoted in Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) p. 54.

(4) R.T. Herford, *Judaism In The New Testament Period* p. 227 comments: "Paul grasped the fact that the Christian religion was founded on a Person, not an idea".

## 16-5-6 The Role Of Women In The First Century

Men greatly outnumbered women in the Greco-Roman world. Dio Cassius blamed the declining population of the Roman empire on the shortage of females<sup>(1)</sup>. J.C. Russell<sup>(2)</sup> claims that there were 131 males / 100 females in Rome itself, and 140 / 100 in most of the rest of the empire. A study of inscriptions at Delphi enabled the reconstruction of 600



families; and of these only six had raised more than one daughter<sup>(3)</sup>. This was partly due to female infanticide, and also partly due to the awful methods of contraception and abortion employed, which often resulted in the death of the woman.

And yet there is every reason to think that Christianity attracted women to it disproportionately. It held a liberating message for women, allowing and encouraging them to study Scripture and be independent from their male society when it came to personal faith and relationship with Jesus, even enabling them to formally teach each other and those in the world. Christian women enjoyed far greater marital security than pagans; abortion was outlawed for the early Christian; and they were to be respected for their own personhood by their brethren. Through being able to work with the likes of Paul in his preaching work, they broke through the surrounding low expectations of female roles. The competing religions offered no such respect of women. Some like Mithraism were limited solely to males. The Christian stress on the need to marry only within the faith must have led to many sisters being single for the Lord's sake; and there were doubtless many others who were divorced by unbelieving husbands. Such women were usually condemned to a life as prostitutes (hence the Lord said that if a man divorced his wife, he made her commit adultery). Yet the sisters' problem with finding partners doubtless led them to go out into the world and convert men; as well as providing the basis for a unique society of females which would have drawn to it other hurting and neglected women within Roman society. Another outcome of the unusual situation would have been that women married brethren of different social rank to their own- there are records of higher rank women marrying brethren of far inferior status socially. The social world of the first century was turned upside down by those sisters and their preaching, in the same way as Northern Kazakhstan and other parts of the world have likewise been by the witness of large groups of sisters. Childless, single women would have been looked down on even more in those days than they are in ours. Time and again, the sisters would have asked themselves: 'What am I doing this for?'. And every time, ultimately, the answer was that they were committed to this invisible man, the Lord Jesus, who had loved them to the end and was surely coming to claim them as His own.

An inventory of property removed from a Christian house church in North Africa listed 16 men's tunics and 82 women's tunics, along with 47 pairs of specifically female shoes and no men's<sup>(4)</sup>. Adolf Harnack notes that the early source documents "simply swarm with tales of how women of all ranks were converted in Rome and in the provinces...the general truth that Christianity was laid hold of by women in particular"<sup>(5)</sup>. Henry Chadwick likewise: "Christianity seems to have been especially successful among women. It was often through the wives that it penetrated the upper classes of society in the first instance"<sup>(6)</sup>.

The use of women as witnesses was a significant factor in the rapid spread of Christianity. Confining them to purely 'support roles' not only halves the workforce in our enterprise; we are ignoring the simple fact that it was specifically *female* networking which produced such huge results in the first century. The Torah required "two or three witnesses" (Dt. 19:15); yet Roman law disallowed women as witnesses. Significantly, the Torah didn't. The fact it doesn't, and therefore accepted women as witnesses, was actually quite a radical thing. The records of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus are carefully framed to show that there were always two or three witnesses present- and they are all *women*:

<b>Cross</b>	<b>Burial</b>	<b>Resurrection</b>
<b>Matthew</b> Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and	Mary Magdalene, "the	Mary Magdalene,

<b>Mark</b>	Joseph, Mother of the sons of Zebedee Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Joses, Salome	other Mary" Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of Joses	Mary" Mary Magdalene, James, Salome Mary Magdalene, mother of James
<b>Luke</b>			

The emphasis is surely deliberate- women, the ones who were *not* witnesses according to the world, were the very witnesses chosen by God to testify the key truths concerning His Son. And His same approach is seen today in His choices of and amongst us.

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## Notes

- (1) Dio Cassius, *The Roman History* (London: Penguin Classics, 1987 ed.).
- (2) J.C. Russell, *Late Ancient And Medieval Population*, published as vol. 48 pt. 3 of the *Transactions Of The American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia, 1958.
- (3) Jack Lindsay, *The Ancient World: Manners and Morals* (New York: Putnam's, 1968).
- (4) See R.L. Fox, *Pagans And Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987).
- (5) Adolf Harnack, *The Mission And Expansion Of Christianity In The First Three Centuries* (New York: Putnam's, 1908) Vol. 2 p. 73.
- (6) Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) p. 56.

## 16-5-7 Style Of Preaching In The First Century

The Gospel was presented in different forms by the early preachers, according to their audience. John the baptist set the pattern in this. Having quoted the prophecy about the need for the rough to be made smooth and the proud to be humbled in order for the to accept Jesus, John “said *therefore* to the multitude...ye offspring of vipers” (Lk. 3:7 RV). He used tough and startling language because that was what the audience required. He had set his aims- to humble the proud. And so he used “therefore” appropriate approaches. The early preachers as Paul became all things to all men, so that they might win some. They therefore consciously matched their presentation and *how* they articulated the same basic truths to their audience. I fear that we have all too often proclaimed the Gospel in a vacuum. We have forgotten that we are proclaiming good news *to* someone; not just stating propositional truth in intellectual self-justification to an imaginary, invisible listener. The Western way of equating ‘preaching’ with a Sunday evening ‘lecture’, presenting the same facts to an often imaginary audience, has done much to settle us in this way of thinking. Fortunately, we are at last changing our perspective, realising that we aren’t proclaiming good news if nobody is listening. Preaching means telling *someone*, not just talking to ourselves. Paul sought by all means to close the gap which there inevitably is between the preacher and his audience. Thus in Athens and Lystra he mixes quotes from the Greek poets with clear allusions to God’s word. His speeches in those places quote from Epimenides and Aratus, allude to the Epicurean belief that God needs nothing from men, refer to the Stoic belief that God is the source of all life...and also allude to a whole catena of OT passages: Ex. 20:11; Gen. 8:22; Ecc. 9:7; Jer. 5:24; 23:23; Is. 42:5; 55:6; Ps. 50:12; 145:18; 147:8; Dt. 32:8. This was all very skilfully done; surely Paul had sat down and planned what he was going to say. He tries to have as much common ground as possible with his audience whilst at the same time undermining their position. He wasn’t baldly telling them their errors and insisting on his own possession of truth; even though this was the case. He didn’t remove the essential scandal of the Gospel; instead Paul selected terms with which to present it which enabled his hearers to realize and face the challenges which the scandal of the Gospel presented. And Paul’s sensitive approach to the Jews is just the same. *If we are out to convert men and women, we will be ever making our message relevant. If we tell the world, both explicitly and implicitly, that we don’t want to convert them, then we won’t. If we want to convert them, if we earnestly seek to persuade them and vary our language and presentation accordingly, then we will.*

## Different Preaching Styles

First century preaching wasn’t merely bald statement of facts nor a pouty presentation of propositional Truth. A very wide range of words is used to describe the preaching of the Gospel. It included able intellectual argument, skilful, thoughtful use and study of the Scriptures by the public speakers, careful, closely reasoned and patient argument. Their preaching is recorded through words like *diamarturesthai*, to testify strenuously, *elegcho*, to show to be wrong, *peitho*, to win by words, *ekithemi*, to set forth, *diamar*, to bear full witness, *dianoigo*, to open what was previously closed, *parrhesia*, to speak with fearless candour, *katagellein*, to proclaim forcefully, *dialegesthai*, to argue, *diakatenchein*, to confute powerfully. The intellectual energy of Paul powers through the narrative in passages like Acts 19: “disputing and persuading...disputing daily...Paul purposed in the spirit...this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people”. Sometimes there was simple, joyful proclamation of the good news (*euaggelizein*), sometimes patient comparison of the OT Scriptures (*suzetein*, Acts 9:29, *paratithestai*, 17:3, *sumbibazein*, 9:22); at other times there was the utter defeat of the listener by argument (*sunchunein*, 9:22). This is a far cry from the blanket attitude to ‘the world’ which our preachers so often show. There *is* a place for intellectual argument; belief is a matter of the mind as well as the heart. First of all there must be an intellectual understanding if there is to be conversion. Men were “persuaded”, not just emotionally bullied (Acts 17:4; 18:4; 19:8,26; 28:23,24). The intellectual basis of appeal is made clear in the way we read of accepting ‘truth’ as well as accepting the person of Jesus. Thus converts believe the truth (2 Thess. 2:10-13), acknowledge truth (2 Tim. 2:25; Tit. 1:1), obey truth (Rom. 2:8; 1 Pet. 1:22 cp. Gal. 5:7), and ‘come to know the truth’ (Jn. 8:32; 1 Tim. 2:4; 4:3; 1 Jn. 2:21). Preaching itself is ‘the open statement of the truth’ (2 Cor. 4:2). And so it is perfectly in order to seek to intellectually persuade our contacts. It isn’t enough to teach or merely ‘witness’ the Gospel; rather must we seek to persuade men to embrace it. It is, first and foremost, a battle for the mind before the battle for the heart. The first century

was a time of great intellectual quest and insecurity. The large amount of philosophy around meant that people were searching for something that made sense. And we can't say that the 21st century is any different. If anything, it's even more fertile. The early preachers witnessed primarily because of the doctrines they believed and the wonder of the grace they had experienced. They didn't preach because it was the sensible thing to do; it was against the grain of any first century man to preach the message they did. And this was no doubt why there was such emphasis on reasoning and persuading others of their teaching.

There was an urgency to the early preaching of the Gospel. The preachers weren't worried about covering their backs, looking good and sound and traditional in the eyes of their watching brethren. They saw clearly humanity's need and Christ's salvation, and offered it to people, unashamedly persuading them to be urgently baptized into His death and resurrection. When this spirit was lost, the church went wrong. The urgency of the Gospel was diluted as time went on. The New Testament records baptisms being done immediately, the same hour of the night a person believed. But by the late second century, baptisms were supposed to be performed on Easter morning; it was more convenient and dignified to do them together at the same time rather than individually as and when the person who believed required it (1). And the same trend can be seen in ossifying churches and missionary organizations today; baptism becomes something which can be deferred, and the vital personal urgency of response to the Gospel is sadly lost, and soon the community becomes sterile and unfruitful. The simplicity of what Paul preached can be seen from reflecting how he was only three weekends in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9), but in that time he converted and baptized pagans and turned them into an ecclesia. Given the long hours worked by people, his number of contact hours with the people would've been quite small. He then had to write to them in 1 Thessalonians, addressing basic questions which they had subsequently asked, such as 'What will happen to dead believers when Christ returns?', 'When will Christ return?'. The level of their instruction before baptism must have been *very* basic. It is rare today to see such focus upon the urgency of baptism. Yet I submit that if we have the spirit of the early church, we will be pushing baptism up front to all we meet. And this was one of the first century keys to success.

(1) Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming The Gospel* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2003) p. 51.

### 16-5-8 Christian Ethics In The First Century

Slaves and women were treated not as things but as people. Indeed, the Truth appealed for individual repentance and offered individual relationship with God and personal salvation. In doing so, it affirmed people as individuals, for who they were. Those who endured were to be given a white stone with a name nobody else knew apart from them and their Lord. This was a far cry from the 'you'll all get to Heaven or wherever' offered by other religions. *We too need to affirm others as people; not seeking to prove ourselves right and them wrong all the time. We want that person to be saved; that person who has blue eyes, that one over there who has only one leg, that one over there who is smoking. We want to affirm them as people, to get over to them that God wants them personally in His eternal Kingdom, that He really knows them and loves them and wants them for who they are.*

Our early brethren preached a person, even a personality cult- based around the man Christ Jesus. They preached a Christ-centred Gospel, to the extent that the preaching of the entire Gospel is sometimes summarised as "preaching Christ" (Acts 8:35; 5:42; 28:31). They preached a Man, a more than man, who has loved us more than we loved Him, and more than we ever can love Him. In this there is an imperative for response. It's not the same as demanding obedience merely for the sake in a good time to come. This *is* a motivation; but in our spiritual dysfunction, we don't always find the Kingdom a sufficient motivation. Yet the

Kingdom is not only ahead of us as a carrot; we have the love of Christ behind us too, to which we must respond. Jesus the man, Jesus crucified, Jesus risen, Jesus exalted to the highest place in the universe, the Jesus who will return in inevitable and insistent judgment to begin His eternal Kingdom here, raising and saving the dead in Him, the Jesus who meantime is present amongst us His people, urging us onwards in our witness and mission for Him...this was the burden of the Apostolic message. Paul, with his back against the wall, facing death, could triumph that he knew *who* he had believed; not so much *what* he had believed, as *whom* (2 Tim. 1:12). And *we must ask whether our witness hasn't lost something of this Christ-centredness, becoming too apologetic, more Bible-centred than Christ-centred, more reward orientated rather than seeing the Gospel as also an invitation to serve this Man...*

We have seen that the moral standards of Christianity were attractive to the 1st century world. The height and seriousness of the demand of Christ in itself attracted men and women. It is possible to discern within the NT letters the beginnings of a body of teaching about moral behaviour. The same outline themes are discernible in Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Peter and James:

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Colossians</i>	<i>Ephesians</i>	<i>James</i>	<i>1 Peter</i>
The new birth [baptism]	2:12	4:4-6	1:18	1:23
The things of the old life that must be left behind	3:9	4:22	1:21	2:1
The image of God and Jesus; the new life that must be put on	1:19	4:24	1:18	2:21
The theme of submission to Jesus as Lord of our lives	3:18	5:22	4:7	2:13; 5:19
Exhortation to stand strong against temptation / the 'devil'	4:12	6:11	4:7	5:8,9
Watch and pray, endure to the end	4:2	6:18	5:16	4:7

All too often our preaching has been simply stating the errors of others and our own correct doctrinal position. This is right and proper that our witness includes this; but the insistent moral outcome of those doctrines really must be stressed. The insistent stress by Paul on the need to live lives worthy of our beliefs is really powerful. He knew that this was the main drawing power for the community. It has often been pointed out that sections of his letters seem to have strong links between them. Consider:

1 Thess. 5      Rom. 12

:12,13a	Respect elders
:3-8	Don't think too highly of yourselves
:13b	Peace among yourselves
:18	Peace with all men
:14	Care for weak and unruly(14:1); Receive the weak
:15	Not evil for evil, but good to all men
:17	Not evil for evil, but good to all men
:16	Rejoice always
:12	Rejoice in hope
:17	Pray unceasingly
:12	Continue in prayer
:19	Don't quench the Spirit
:11	Fervent in spirit
:20	Don't despise prophecy
:6	Prophecy
:21	Test all things, hold fast to good
:9	Cleave to good
:22	Avoid evil
:9	Hate evil

The conclusion from this could be that there was in fact a common document to which Paul is referring- a kind of practical guide to true Christian living that was expected of converts. If this is the case, then the early community would have been committed to being joyful, prayerful, tolerant, peaceful, loving, humble, Bible based, as a fundamental principle. These were what accepting Christ in baptism would have required. These things as well as the doctrines we know relating to God, Jesus, the Kingdom etc. , these would have been seen as the message of the Gospel of Christ. One wonders whether our presentation of the Gospel, and subsequently our own belief, has not been all too phlegmatic and theoretical, and perhaps therefore our community has lack the evident spirituality which is the greatest attraction to a world lost in sin and selfishness.



## *The Power Of Truth*

A real forgiveness was offered. There were men and women like Saul of Tarsus who felt they were kicking against the pricks of their own consciences, longing for cleansing. Of course there were concepts like grace, mercy, forgiveness floating around in the 1st century world. But they were abstractions. The grace of God, His real and personal forgiveness and salvation, were ideas given personal shape in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And further, that historical man, whom many had never seen, was given shape and reality in the form of the community who bore His Name and witnessed to Him. There, in the first century ecclesia, the grace and salvation of God became credible in that society of mutual love and care. The word became flesh in them as it had done in their Lord. *We too must capitalise on the fact that men and women out there have consciences. They want forgiveness. They may not want a church to join and attend on Sundays- because they would say they get nothing out of organised religion- but they do need, desperately, reconciliation with God. And we can introduce them to it. Our own examples will prove the credibility of all this. If we act in anger and hatred and self-justification all the time, all our wonderful theories of rightness with God will have no credibility. Yet if we live out the calmness of good conscience with God, we will make them see that this can only be because we believe and understand the one and only Truth itself.*

There was a confidence exuding from the early preachers that they had arrived at Truth. They 'had the Truth' in that what they knew and had experienced was enough for salvation. Unlike the surrounding philosophies and religions, they knew whom they had believed; they weren't going somewhere in vague hope, they had arrived. They had something concrete to offer others. They preached from a basis of personal hope and conviction and experience, quite unlike the more 'political' methods other religions used to recruit members. The philosophers and teachers of the 1st century had little conviction about the value or truth of their position. But the Truth came "not only in word but also in power...and with full conviction (Gk. *plerophoria*)" (1 Thess. 1:5). This conviction was not mere dogmatism and self-belief; and likewise our witness must carry with it a "full conviction" that contrasts with the uncertainty about faith, doctrine, hope etc. which many professing 'believers' of other faiths reveal when they are probed in any depth about their positions. Paul preached the seriousness of the issues which there are in the Gospel; and yet people flocked back to hear more (Acts 13:41). The preaching of truth involves the message of something being exclusive, and compellingly so. In the first century, "no pagan cult was exclusive of any other and the only restriction on initiation into many cults was the expense"<sup>(1)</sup>. *We must show in our lives that what we have is true; that no other person in the office, in the street, behaves like we do; because we have something they don't. Our examples will show that all roads don't lead to the same place. We won't need to tell others of the superiority of our faith over others'; it will be self-evident, the world in which we live will make this judgment for us. And in the work of converting others, their judgment / opinion on this is what is important, not our own statements that we have the Truth and all others are wrong. This is in fact the case, but the power of it is only if others perceive this for themselves and on their own initiative. The Lord Jesus said that He Himself was the witness that what He said was true. And what was true of His witness is true of ours.*

The early preachers were out to make converts. They had a sorrow and grief for the lost, to the extent that Paul could say (after the pattern of Moses) that he could wish himself accused for Christ if this would mean Israel's salvation. They weren't shy, as we can tend to be, about the uniqueness of their religion. They weren't just offering good advice or how to read the



Bible effectively. They made no secret of the fact they wanted to convert people. The idea of 'conversion' in the radical sense they preached it was unknown to the world of the 1st century. The other religious cults required attendance at meetings, offering some sacrifices, but *belief* in the cult wasn't so important. Likewise, many religions and sects of Christendom may talk about faith, but it has little meaning; the most important thing in practice is that you attend their meetings, and give some material support. How you privately lived, your own ethical position in your heart, wasn't important in 1st century religion. And, for all appearances to the contrary, neither is it in many of the groups we appear to have to compete with. The very height and depth and seriousness of the call of the Truth is powerful; men and women, women and men, see that their innermost lives and ethics will be affected by the message we ask them to believe. So radical is the moral imperative of what we preach that they see that accepting it requires a real break with the past- radical conversion. It isn't just shifting churches to one a little bit better, trying out a new social set or another philosophy. The radicalness of our demand upon men and women, or rather the demand of the Gospel we teach, of itself impels them to action and conversion. There's a radical in every one of us, even if our years in this world have worn it away somewhat. And the Gospel, in all its scandal, is the ideal appeal to this element in us. I can recall several times explaining to a young man the implications of his baptism in terms of his need to refuse military service soon. Or explaining to a soldier how very difficult it will be for him to leave the army, and suggesting he delays baptism. And yet in all these cases, the more I outline the difficulties, the more I stress the moral imperative of belief of the Truth, the more earnest and demanding these young men become. The height of the demand of itself impresses them with the need to rise up to it. People are desperate, morally. And they realize it. Subconsciously they realize that they must make that radical changeover to a true, tight, demanding, difficult system of Divine morality. And the same factor was at work in the first century. The religions then as now didn't make the exclusive claims on a person which true Christianity does. Jesus was to be their Lord and master, their *despotes*, and to be accepted as having an exclusive claim upon them. No other religion was that exclusive in its claim.

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## Notes

(1) Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) p. 25.

## 16-5-9 The Exclusivity Of Christianity

It is the exclusivity of Christianity which attracts. This is why those who have taught that other religions are equally valid ways of coming to salvation have made no converts. The exclusive nature of the Truth is one of the things which attracts, even though it might seem to us that this is what would turn people away from us. They were living in the 1st century in a spirit of religious pluralism, where one religion was seen as good as another; and we too live in the same atmosphere. Like them, our response must be to preach the exclusive nature of salvation in the real Christ. Thomas Robbins pointed out that one was " **converted** to the intolerant faiths of Judaism and Christianity while one merely **adhered** to the cults of Isis, Orpheus, or Mithra." Pagans never sought to make converts **to** any cult--only **away** from atheism, as they saw it. The very fact that conversion demanded something, a sharing in the sacrifice of the representative Christ, meant that there was something attractive about it. There was a cost to this religion- it was all about self-crucifixion. If the moral demands of the Truth are preached up front, this of itself is an attraction; the message itself has the power of

conversion. The exclusivity of Christianity laid great stress on individual conversion. Most cults took their funding from the state and from a few wealthy donors, rather than from a rank and file. Therefore it was a radically new concept for each man to lay aside what he could regularly (1 Cor. 16:1,2); and for the poor saints in one place to raise welfare to send to unknown ones in another part of the empire, e.g. the contribution of Corinth (who had not many wealthy) for the poor brethren in Jerusalem. That one had to *give* something from ones own pocket would have been a radical difference for the ordinary person.

Summing up, the early brethren were looking for a response. They were preaching toward decision, for conversion. The Lord taught us that He will make His followers fishers of men; and fishers catch something, they aren't fishermen if they just offer a bait indifferently. Paul taught that his hearers should repent and turn to God and do works meet for repentance (Acts 26:20). The address in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia has three parts, each marked by an appeal to the listeners. Clearly it has been planned in advance, and was an appeal for response (Acts 13:16,26,38). These preachers weren't shy in asking men and women to decide for or against the love of God in Jesus. They challenged men to do something about the message they had heard.

### *Playing On Disillusion*

There were many disillusioned with the Imperial Cult, and the exclusivity of Christianity appealed to them. Juvenal, a contemporary of Paul, had much to write in criticism of it. Especially noticeable was the fact that many were disgusted at the moral state of society. Surely sensitive people must have been impressed by the Christian focus upon morality. Many realised that all the many gods were all the inventions of the human mind, and there must be one true God who could be worshipped in the same way by all peoples. The Truth presented this to them, as Paul did in Athens. None of the religions offered reconciliation with God, nor did they offer in any certainty a hope of anything after death. Yet true Christianity offered just this. *We also live in a world disillusioned with itself, knowing their moral filth, seeing through the hypocrisy of an evangelical movement led by adulterers, no longer turning a blind eye to the perversions of the Catholic priesthood. They are searching for something, but they don't know what. We may be entering a post-Christian era, but not a post-religious one. People seem more interested in religion now than they were 10 years ago. The radical difference between us and the world, the uniqueness of our position, must be evident up front. Christianity is perceived as just another sub-culture within society. Yet the world's experience of us should show them that real Christianity is in fact a radical counter-culture, although it is rooted in love.*

There was also a realization by many that 'God' and the gods had been abstracted into almost nothing in practice. It was strongly felt by Greek philosophy that anger and wrath were too primitive attributes to apply to God: "to attribute such an emotion to a divine being was absurd and blasphemous. Deity, every novice in Greek philosophy knew as an axiom, must be *apathes*, without disturbing emotions of any kind. The idea of the Divine anger was not something which penetrated into Christianity from its pagan environment: it was something which the church maintained in the face of adverse pagan criticism". The preaching of a God angry with sin, passionately consumed in the death of His Son, feeling every sin, rejoicing over every repentance and baptism...this was something radically new. 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 and the exclusivity of Christianity must be more up front in our witness. We too can abstract God and His being into nothingness. His passion and feelings can be forgotten by us, so great is our emphasis upon abstract theory.*

### 16-5-9-1 The Openness Of Early Christianity

#### **An Open Table**

The exclusive, hard hitting message of early Christianity was mixed with an amazing openness in terms of fellowship. The issue of fellowship / association and disfellowship / disassociation was a major destructive influence within both Judaism and the later ecclesia of Christ. In first century Jewish thought, eating with someone was a religious act; and you only openly ate with those who were of your spiritual standard; and never with the unclean, lest you be reckoned like them. The Lord Jesus turned all this on its head- for He ate with sinners- and very public sinners at that- *in order to bring them to Him*. He didn't first bring people to Him, get them up to His moral level, and *then* eat with them. The anger and shock which met the Lord's actions in this regard reverberates to this day in many churches.

It's easy to assume that the arguments about "regulations about food" (Heb. 13:9) in the first century hinged about what *types* of food should be eaten, i.e. whether the Mosaic dietary laws should be observed or not. But the angst about "food" was more passionately about *with whom* you ate. Peter explains in Acts 11:3 how utterly radical it was for a Jew to eat with a Gentile. Bearing this in mind, the way Jew and Gentile Christians ate together at the Lord's supper would've been a breathtaking witness of unity to the watching world. And yet ultimately, Jew and Gentile parted company and the church divided, laying itself wide open to imbalance and every manner of practical and doctrinal corruption as a result. The problem was that the Jews understood 'eating together' as a sign of agreement, and a sign that you accepted those at your table as morally pure. The Lord's 'table manners' were of course purposefully the opposite of this approach. Justin Martyr (*Dialogue With Trypho* 47.2-3) mentions how the Jewish Christians would only eat with Gentile Christians on the basis that the Gentiles firstly adopted a Jewish way of life. And this is the nub of the problem- demanding that those at your table are like you, seeing eating together as a sign that the other has accepted your positions about everything. The similarities with parts of the 21st century church are uncanny.

Yet Luke's writings (in his Gospel and in the Acts) give especial attention to meals and table talk. Societies tended to distinguish themselves by their meal practices (1). Who was allowed at the table, who was excluded- these things were fundamental to the self-understanding of persons within society. So when the Lord Jesus ate with the lowest sinners, and Peter as a Jew ate with Gentiles... this was radical, counter-cultural behaviour. No wonder the breaking of bread together was such a witness, and the surrounding world watched it with incredulity (Acts 2:42,46; 4:32-35). Note too how Luke mentions that Paul ate food in the homes of Gentiles like Lydia and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:15,34).

Paul's reasoning in 1 Cor. 10-12 seems to be specifically in the context of the memorial meeting. The issue he addresses is that of disunity at the Lord's table- different groups were excluding others. It is in this context that he urges believers to "discern the Lord's body" (1 Cor. 11:29)- and the Lord's body he has previously defined as referring to the believers within that one body. For in 1 Cor. 10:17 he stresses that all who have been baptized into the body of God's people "being many are one loaf, and one body". There's only ultimately one

loaf, as there's only one Christ. All within that one body are partaking of the same loaf whenever they "break bread", and therefore division between them is not possible in God's sight. "The bread which we break, is it not the *koinonia*, the sharing in fellowship, of the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). By breaking bread we show our unity not only with Him personally, but with all others who are in His one body. To refuse to break bread with other believers- which is what was happening in Corinth- is therefore stating that effectively they are outside of the one body. And yet if in fact they *are* within the body of Christ, then it's actually those who are refusing them the emblems who are thereby declaring *themselves* not to be part of Christ. Having reminded us that "by one Spirit are we all baptized into the one body" (1 Cor. 12:13), Paul makes the obvious point- that as members of that body we *cannot*, we dare not, say to other members of the body "I have no need [necessity] of you" (1 Cor. 12:21). To fellowship with the others in the body of Christ is our "necessity"; this is why an open table to all those who are in Christ isn't an option, but a necessity. Otherwise, we are declaring ourselves not to be in the body. Indeed "those members of the body which seem to be more feeble, are necessary" (1 Cor. 12:22). By rights, we ought to be condemned for such behaviour; for by refusing our brethren we are refusing membership in Christ. And yet I sense something of the grace of both God and Paul when he writes that if someone says "Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?" (1 Cor. 12:15). I take this to mean that even if a member of the body acts like they aren't in the body, this doesn't mean that ultimately they aren't counted as being in the body. But all the same, we shouldn't stare condemnation in the face by rejecting ourselves from the body of Christ by rejecting the members of His body at the Lord's table. That's the whole point of Paul's argument. Naturally this raises the question: "Well who is in the body?". Paul says that we are baptized into the body (1 Cor. 10:17); and this throws the question a stage further back: "So what, then, makes baptism valid?". Baptism is into the body of Christ, into His person, His death and His resurrection; and not into any human denomination or particular set of theology. If the illiterate can understand the Gospel, if thousands could hear the Gospel for a few hours and be baptized into Christ in response to it- it simply can't be that a detailed theology is necessary to make baptism valid. For the essence of Christ, His death and resurrection, is surely simple rather than complicated. Those who believe it and are baptized into it are in His body and are thus our brethren- whatever finer differences in understanding, inherited tradition and style we may have. The early church didn't make deep theological issues a test of fellowship; indeed, the range of understanding and practice tolerated by Paul in his churches is considerable. And we can't simply argue that Paul was allowing them time to mature; for if fellowship is to be based around strict doctrinal standards, then Paul's tolerance all the same disproves the proposition that fellowship cannot be extended to those in error of understanding. He reasons in 1 Cor. 8:7-11 that the weak brother was one who felt that idols did have some kind of real power, representative of some real 'god'; and Paul doesn't state that such brethren should be disfellowshipped, rather does he argue that the "strong" should be careful not to cause them to stumble. He doesn't imply that his position is somehow time limited or a special concession to Corinth. He simply didn't have the hangup about doctrinal correctness on every point which so many believers have today.

The incident when the Lord sets a child in the midst of the disciples is instructive (Mk. 9:33-37). He wasn't asking us to imitate children, but rather the lesson was about *receiving* children. In our child-focused age, children have considerable importance. But not in those days. A Jewish boy wasn't really considered a person until he became a "child of the law"; early critics of Christianity mocked it as a religion of women and children. Artists, even well into the modern era, depicted important children as having adult features. The point the Lord was making was that receiving the unimportant and overlooked was to receive Him, because

He was especially manifest in them. And He is today; and His displeasure is therefore just the same today with any who seek to exclude the immature and insignificant.

Christianity began as a sect of Judaism. And Judaism was focused upon external behaviour rather than being united by a common theology. There was a wide range of beliefs tolerated within first century Judaism, as there is within it today. The openness of Judaism, out of which early Christianity arose, was reflected in the fact that "attendance in the synagogue was a matter of reputation; no one kept complete records" (2). "Fellowship" was something experienced between those present and wasn't based on a strict membership list nor subscribing to a detailed list of theology.

### **The Danger of a Closed Table**

Fellowship with each other is based around and a reflection of our fellowship with the Father and Son; the horizontal bond is totally connected to the horizontal bond. By excluding our brethren, we are counting ourselves as out of fellowship with Christ. Denying them fellowship is to deny our own fellowship with Christ. Mk. 9:38-42 contains the account of the question about the disciples of John the Baptist, who were doing miracles but not "following with" the disciples of Christ; in response to the question about what our attitude should be to such persons, the Lord Jesus soberly warned: "Whosoever shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it were better for him if a great millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea". The "little ones who believe on me" would appear in the context to be the misguided and misunderstanding disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus is saying that by refusing to recognize them as brethren, we may cause them to stumble, and therefore merit the condemnation reserved elsewhere in Scripture for Babylon. The apparently disproportionate connection between rejecting a brother and receiving Babylon's judgment is indeed intentional. We are being asked to see how utterly important and eternally significant is our attitude towards our brethren in this life. If we reject or refuse to recognize them, we may well cause them to stumble. And this happens so frequently. Those disfellowshipped and otherwise rejected so often fall away. But that stumbling is reckoned to the account of those who caused their stumbling by rejecting them. Even if, therefore, some believers in Christ misunderstand Him [as the disciples of John the Baptist appear to have done in some ways], we are to accept them and not reject them- for by doing so, we may cause them to stumble further, to our own condemnation.

### **The Sense In Which The Lord's Table Was Exclusive**

The only exclusivity of the Lord's table was that it was not to be turned into a place for worshipping pagan idols. Paul saw the sacrifices of Israel as having some relevance to the Christian communion meal. He comments: "Are those who eat the victims not in communion with the altar?" (1 Cor. 10:18); and the altar is clearly the Lord Jesus (Heb. 13:10). Eating of the communion meal was and is, therefore, fundamentally a statement of our fellowship with the altar, the Lord Jesus, rather than with others who are eating of Him. The bread and wine which we consume thus become antitypical of the Old Testament sacrifices; and they were repeatedly described as "Yahweh's food", laid upon the altar as "the table of Yahweh" (Lev. 21:6,8; 22:25; Num. 28:2; Ez. 44:7,16; Mal. 1:7,12). And it has been commented: "Current translations are inaccurate; *lehem panim* is the 'personal bread' of Yahweh, just as *sulhan panim* (Num. 4:7) is the 'personal table' of Yahweh" (3). This deeply personal relationship between Yahweh and the offerer is continued in the breaking of bread; and again, the focus is upon the worshipper's relationship with Yahweh rather than a warning against fellowshiping

the errors of fellow worshippers through this action. What *is* criticized in later Israel is the tendency to worship Yahweh through these offerings at the same time as offering sacrifice to other gods. Is. 66:3 speaks of this dualism in worship:

**What was offered to Yahweh**

"An ox is sacrificed,

a lamb is slain,

an offering is brought,

incense memorial is made,

**What was offered to other gods simultaneously**

a man is killed;

a dog is struck down;

swine-flesh is savoured;

idols are kissed"

And the new Israel made just this same blasphemy in the way some in the Corinth ecclesia ate of the Lord's table and also at the table of idols ["demons"]. Paul wasn't slow to bring out the similarities when he wrote to the Corinthians. It is this kind of dualism which is so wrong; to be both Christian and non-Christian at the same time, to mix the two. But differences of interpretation between equally dedicated worshippers of Yahweh, or believers in Christ, were never made the basis of condemnation.

**The Heavenly Host**

It was apparent that in the breaking of bread meetings, there had to be a host. The host was a vital figure. And yet herein lay the huge significance of breaking of bread meetings being held in homes- presumably the home of a richer believer- and yet it was the table *of the Lord*. *He* and not the master of the house was the host of that meeting. It's for this reason that it was unthinkable for any invited by grace to their Lord's table to turn away other guests- for it wasn't *their* table, it was the table of another One, and they were but guests. Attempts to bar others from the Lord's table in our own time are equally rude and deeply lacking in basic spiritual understanding. There are evident similarities between the breaking of bread experience and the marriage supper which we shall eat with the Lord Jesus in His Kingdom. The breaking of bread assembly is called "the table of the Lord"- and yet He says that we shall eat at "My table" at His return (Lk. 22:30). The Lord clearly taught the continuity between the breaking of bread and the future marriage supper by observing that He would not again drink the cup until He drinks it anew with us at the marriage supper (Mt. 26:29). The parables of how the Gospel invites people as it were to a meal are suggesting that we should see the Kingdom as a meal, a supper, of which our memorial service is but a foretaste. We are commanded to enter the supper and take the lowest seat (Lk. 14:10), strongly aware that others are present more honourable than ourselves. Those with this spirit are simply never going to dream of telling another guest 'Leave! Don't partake of the meal!'. But this is the spirit of those who are exclusive and who use the Lord's table as a weapon in their hands to wage their petty church wars. The very early church didn't behave like this, but instead sought to incarnate and continue the pattern of the meals of the Lord Jesus during His ministry. And this is one major reason why their unity drew such attention, and they grew.

Further, the Lord teaches that if we're invited to a feast, we should take the lowest place, genuinely assuming the others present are more honourable than us; and we take our place at that table awaiting the coming of the host (Lk. 14:8). Our attitudes to the seating and behaviour on entry to the feast will affect our eternal destiny- for when the Lord comes, He

will make the arrogant man suffer "shame", which is a commonly used descriptor of the rejected at judgment day (Lk. 14:9). The Lord goes on in that same discourse to explain what our attitude should be- He tells the parable of the great supper, to which those who were invited didn't pitch, and there was a desperate, last minute compelling of smelly street people to come in and eat the grand meal. "When you are bidden of any man to a meal" (Lk. 14:8) is clearly meant to connect with "A certain man made a great supper, and bade (s.w.) many" (Lk. 14:16). Evidently the idea of eating with the Lord at His table connects with the breaking of bread. Our attitude at that memorial supper is in essence our attitude at the greater supper of the last day. We sit there with our Lord and with our brethren. We will sit there at the last day with the deep feeling, like the handicapped beggars had in the parable: "I should not be here. What am *I*, me, me with all my weakness, doing *here*?". If we sit likewise at the breaking of bread with that spirit, we will not even consider grabbing the best seat for ourselves; nor would it cross our mind to say to someone else sitting there "Hey you, what are *you* doing here? If *you're* here, I'm gone! Don't you dare take that bread and wine, you're not in fellowship!". Yet this is precisely the attitude of those who exclude their brethren from participation at the Lord's table; for the breaking of bread is a foretaste of the feast to come, and the Lord is teaching that our attitude to our brethren at it is in fact going to be reflected in how He deals with us at the latter day marriage supper. It seems so many of our exclusivist brethren are voting themselves out of their place at the Kingdom; although I believe God's grace is such that He has a place even for them.

And our attitude to others will be reflective of our perception of God's grace in calling us- as we were invited by such grace, so we will invite others to *our* table who likewise cannot recompense us (Lk. 14:12). If we are the blind and maimed invited to the Lord's table, we will invite the blind and maimed to our table. The extent of God's grace to us really needs to sink in. When was the last time *you* did an act of pure grace to others like this...? The servant seems surprised that after the crippled and blind beggars have been drafted in to the opulence of the feast, "yet there is room" (Lk. 14:22). Quite simply, there are more places in the feast of the Kingdom than there are people willing to fill them! How encouraging is that thought! The same Greek word for "place" recurs in Jn. 14:2,3, where the Lord Jesus taught that He was going to die on the cross in order to prepare a place for us in His Father's palatial mansion. The effort made in preparing the feast therefore speaks of Christ's life, death and resurrection for us. And it's *so* tragic that most people don't want to know. So in a sense, "all you gotta do is say yes". Just accept the invitation; take the messengers for real. Although perhaps we are left to read in the detail to the story, that many a desperate beggar just couldn't grasp that the messenger was for real, and preferred to stay put. Maybe only the *truly* desperate thought 'Maybe there's some truth in it...I've nothing to lose'. The many places in God's Kingdom... are only for those who desperately want them. Those who make meaningless excuses about how busy they are, those who can't believe that really God could be true to His word and really give us beggars a place in His wonderful Kingdom... will by their own decision not be there.

And yet... the Lord followed right on from this parable with the demand to hate one's own life, pick up their cross and follow Him, without which we cannot be His disciple. He also told the parable of God coming with a huge army to meet us who are far weaker- and our need to make peace with Him and forsake all that we have in order to follow Christ (Lk. 14:25-33). These radical demands of Jesus are in fact a development of His parable about the supper. For amongst some Middle Eastern peoples to this day, refusing the invitation to enter the banquet for such a meal- especially after having signaled your earlier acceptance of the invitation- was "equivalent to a declaration of war" (4). And so the parable of *us* as the man



going out to war against a far superior army suddenly falls into place in this context. "So likewise, whosoever he be of you that doesn't renounce all that he has, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:33). The renouncing or forsaking of all we have refers to the man with 10,000 soldiers renouncing what human strength he had in the face of realizing he was advancing against a force of 20,000. The picking up of the cross, the 'hating' of our own lives, the renouncing all we have... obviously refers to doing something very hard for us. But the context is the parable of the supper, where the 'hard' thing to understand is why people refused the invitation, why they just couldn't believe it was real and for them; or why they just let petty human issues become so large in their minds that they just couldn't be bothered with it. Simply believing that we will be there, that in all sober reality we have been invited to a place in the Kingdom, that God is compelling / persuading / pressurizing us to be there... this is the hard thing. This is the hating of our lives, picking up our cross, forsaking our human strength and surrendering to God.

Let's not under-estimate the struggle which there is to believe the simple fact that there are more places in the Kingdom than people willing to fill them; that really God is begging us to come in to the place prepared for us through the death of His Son. When we read of the Master telling the servant to "*compel*" the beggars to come in to the feast, it's the same Greek word as we find used in one of the excuses given for not going in to the feast: "*I must needs go and see*" (the field the man had supposedly bought that evening without ever seeing it) (Lk. 14:18,23). Just as our loving God, with all the power of His most earnest desire, can seek to *compel* us to accept His offer, so the power of our own flesh *compels* us the other way. The petty human issues had become so large in the minds of the people concerned that they ended up telling obvious untruths or giving very poor excuses to get out of attending; life had gotten on top of them and that was it. The story seems so bizarre; the refusal of such a wonderful invitation would've been the element of unreality which struck the first hearers. The point is that petty human issues, coupled with our lack of appreciation that we are down and out beggars, really will lead people to lose out on eternity. The other such element of unreality would've been the persistence of the host to fill the places with anyone, literally *anyone*, willing to come on in. It's not so much a question of 'Will we be there?' but rather 'Do we really want to be there?'. Because if we do, we shall be.

And we who have firmly accepted the invitation are also the preachers and bearers of the message. *We* are the ones who are to "*compel*" men and women to just believe it's for real and come on in. And we do this work with all the power of *God's* compulsion behind us. For *He* wishes to see the places filled. And yet we work against the terribly powerful compulsion of the flesh. 1 Cor. 9:13 states that necessity or compulsion is laid upon us to preach the Gospel. This is the same word translated "*compel*" in Lk. 14:23. The compulsion is laid upon us by the tragedy of human rejection of the places Christ prepared for them, and the wonderful, so easy possibility to be there. Significantly, this same Greek word is used elsewhere about the 'necessities' which are part of our ministry of the Gospel (2 Cor. 6:4; 12:10). The urgency of our task will lead us into many an urgent situation, with all the compelling needs which accompany them.

The theme of eating continues after Luke 14- for Luke 15 contains parables told by the Lord in answer to the criticism that He ate with sinners (Lk. 15:2). He explained that He had come to seek and save the lost, and that was why He ate with them (Lk. 15:4 cp. Lk. 19:10, where He justifies eating with Zacchaeus for the same reason). Note how in the case of Zacchaeus, the man only stated his repentance after he had 'received' Jesus into his house and eaten with Him. This exemplifies how the Lord turned upside down the table practice of the Jews- He

didn't eat with people *once they had* repented, but *so that* His gracious fellowship of them might *lead them to* repentance. The parables of Lk. 15 speak about eating in order to express joy that a person had repented and been saved- the eating was to celebrate finding the lost sheep, coin and son. But the Lord was saying that this justified His eating with not yet repentant sinners. Thinking this through, we find an insight into the hopefulness of Jesus for human repentance- He fellowshiped with them and treated them *as if* He were celebrating their repentance; for He saw eating with them in this life as a foretaste of His eating with them in His future Kingdom. He invited them to a foretaste of the future banquet. His fellowship policy was therefore to encourage repentance; and seeing He wished all to be saved, He didn't exclude any from His table.

## The Gospel

Preaching a simple, clear Gospel and not being obsessed with fellowship issues were, in my view, one of reasons why the early church succeeded; and why we in the 21st century so often fail. The conversions recorded in the Gospels, those in Acts 2, and that of Paul himself, all occurred before the letters of the New Testament were written. Yet they were conversions made upon the same basis as we should be making them today- the preaching of "the Gospel" and belief into it. This indicates that the content of the Gospel preached and required for conversion was far less than what we have tended to think- many of the 'extras' refer to matters of interpretation which whilst true in themselves, are not fundamental parts of the Gospel message but rather what distinguishes us from other denominations. As such they may have relevance in terms of securing a sound convert into our group- but not into Christ. The Lord taught that His converts should remain in the synagogues (with all their false teachings about the death state, Satan, the nature of Messiah and His Kingdom) until they were thrown out. He had absolutely no 'guilt-by-association' mentality which later became so much a part of so many versions of Christianity. There's fair historical evidence that Christians remained in the synagogues until they were thrown out. Eventually the synagogues brought in "the blessing of the minim" as one of the eighteen benedictions (*Shemoneh Esreh*): "And for the Minim [Christians] let there be no hope [of eternal life]"- and all present had to repeat this. This of course forced Christians out of the synagogues- but it was a result of Jewish exclusion of them, rather than any fear of guilt by association on their part. This fearlessness in fellowship attitudes was a key to their success, at least initially; and the amount of time and energy expended by latter day believers on the fellowship issue is in my opinion a significant reason for our failure both in quantity and ultimate quality of evangelism.

Paul's letters were all responses to real, specific situations and problems, answering questions etc. Albeit under Divine inspiration, those letters were written *ad hoc*. They're not as it were a series of chapters in a consciously planned exposition of the Gospel. People were baptized well before those letters were written- on the basis of the Gospel which is (unsurprisingly enough!) contained in the records of the Gospel. It could therefore be argued that all we find in Paul's letters, true and important as it all is, isn't actually the core message of the Gospel, which is quite simply the life, teaching, work, death and resurrection of Christ. Paul's writings are an elaboration upon it. But the actual content of that elaboration was unknown to those who were first baptized, e.g. at Pentecost. Further, the bulk of first century Christian converts were illiterate; they wouldn't have all heard read all of Paul's letters. Given that all copies of letters had to be written by hand on costly papyrus or similar specific material, and then transported and safely stored, it's unlikely that all Christians had instant access to all of Paul's letters (although interestingly Peter writes as if he was familiar with all Paul's letters, 2

Pet. 3:16). We would be quite mistaken to think of the early Christians as having access to the New Testament books in the way most of us do today. And certainly, the average Christian convert wouldn't have had access to them before baptism. By saying this I am in no way devaluing the undoubtedly true and important theology, teaching and guidance which they contain. I'm simply saying that people were baptized (in large numbers) without knowing that material. Their source of instruction was from the Gospel records themselves.

Our attitude to others at the Lord's table is of course a function of our general attitude to others. As we have been accepted by grace by the Father and Son, so we also ought to accept our brethren. The Lord Jesus broke his bread with sinners in order to bring them to Him, and not as a sign that they made some kind of acceptable grade with Him. One sees in Him radical outgoing acceptance of people, even to the cost of His own life, rather than seeking to exclude people from His fellowship. God grants us the status of being "forgiven" through our being in Christ; He grants us forgiveness, if you like, before our repentance. This isn't to decry the importance of repentance; but it arises from our effort to be what we are in spiritual status. We are to be unconditionally kind to even our enemies, so that we may heap coals of fire upon their head (Rom. 12:20). I don't understand this as meaning that our motivation for such kindness should be the gleeful thought that we will thereby earn for them greater and more painful condemnation at the last day. Such motives would surely be foreign to all we have seen and known in the Father and Son. Rather am I attracted to the suggestion that there is a reference here to the practice, originating in Egypt, of putting a pan of hot coals over the head of a person who has openly repented (4). In which case, we would be being taught to show grace to our enemies, in order that we might bring them to repentance. This would chime in with the teaching elsewhere in Romans that God's goodness leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). And this is how we should be, especially with our brethren. The idea of excluding our brethren seems to me the very opposite of the spirit of grace which we have received.

### Notes

(1) Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) Ch. 7, 'Deciphering a meal', pp. 249-275.

(2) Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Random House, 2005) p. 103.

(3) Roland De Vaux, *Studies In Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961) p. 39.

(4) H. B. Tristram, *Eastern Customs* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004 reprint) p. 82.

(5) J. Zeisler, *Paul's Letter To The Romans* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989) pp. 306,307.

### Appendix 1: Could Gentiles Eat The Passover?

It has been argued that the breaking of bread is the equivalent of the Jewish Passover, and Ex. 12:48 says that only the circumcised could eat of it. Here are a few comments:

- Whatever interpretation we wish to place upon Ex. 12:48, we have to reconcile it with the above evidence for the openness of the Lord Jesus with regard to His table fellowship, using

it to bring people to Him, rather than as a test of fellowship or intellectual / moral purity of understanding or living.

- Peter ate with the uncircumcised- and got into trouble with the Judaist brethren exactly because the Law had forbidden the uncircumcised from eating the first Passover (Acts 11:3). The Jews had put a [very large!] hedge around this law by forbidding Jews from eating with Gentiles period. Yet Peter was taught that this was wrong- and he ate with Gentiles, it seems even before they were baptized. But the point is, he had been taught by the vision that all the old Mosaic category distinctions of clean / unclean, circumcised / uncircumcised, had now been ended. It seems this was as large a challenge to the church in the 1st century as it is in the 21st.

- Although the Passover and memorial meeting are related, the relation is at times by way of contrast rather than only similarity. e.g. in the first Passover, the families were to provide a lamb; whereas in the antitype, the Lord Jesus is the lamb of Divine and not human provision. The Paschal lamb of God takes away the whole world's sin, rather than just providing blood for the temporal redemption of Israel's firstborn, etc.

- Circumcision under the new covenant doesn't refer to anything outward, visibly verifiable. For now "he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart in the spirit, and not in the letter" (Rom. 2:29)- seeing we can't judge the secret things of others' hearts, how can we tell who is circumcised in heart or not? The 'sealing' of God's people today, the proof that they are the Lord's (2 Tim. 2:19), is not anything external, but the internal matter of being sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13; 4:30), or being sealed with a mark in the mind / forehead, as Revelation puts it (Rev. 7:3; 9:4).

- The Gentiles in Israel, circumcised or not, could keep the feast of unleavened bread (Ex. 12:17-20) which was related to the Passover.

- If Ex. 12:48 is read on a literalistic level, i.e. that only the circumcised could eat the Passover, this would surely mean that no female could eat it? Yet this was not the case.

- It's Num 9:14 which speaks in more general terms of whether or not a Gentile could partake of the Passover- and here it's made clear that yes he/she could, and no mention is made of being circumcised: "And if a stranger shall sojourn among you, and will keep the passover unto the Lord; according to the statute of the passover, and according to the ordinance thereof, so shall he do: ye shall have one statute, both for the stranger, and for him that is born in the land".

- Commands that were intended for subsequent generations often include the kind of rubric we meet in Ex. 12:14,17: "And this day shall be unto you for a memorial, and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD: throughout your generations ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever... therefore shall ye observe this day throughout your generations by an ordinance for ever". But we don't meet that 'throughout your generations' with regard to the uncircumcised men not being allowed to eat it.

- So my suggestion is that the command of Ex. 12:48 that no uncircumcised could eat of the Passover, and that the Gentiles amongst the people should be circumcised if they wanted to eat it, was specific to that first Passover. As Israel and the mixed multitude that went with them sat in Egypt under threat of losing their firstborn sons, they could find salvation by

keeping the Passover and entering into covenant with God through circumcision. Both Jewish tradition and the implication of Moses not circumcising his sons is that the Jews in Egypt weren't circumcised; yet "all the people that came out were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, them they had not circumcised" (Josh. 5:5). Implication would be that many were circumcised in order to keep the first Passover according to the command given them in Ex. 12. We could therefore take Ex. 12:48 as a specific command for those who kept the first Passover to be circumcised, rather than an ongoing principle. The Jewish sage Maimonides (*A Guide For The Perplexed* Vol. 3 ch. 46) explains: "The reason of the prohibition that the uncircumcised should not eat of it (Exod. xii. 48) is explained by our Sages as follows: The Israelites neglected circumcision during their long stay in Egypt".

- This approach would explain why Num. 9:14 doesn't demand that Gentiles be circumcised to keep future Passovers; why there's no comment that the exclusion of the uncircumcised should be kept "throughout your generations"; and why Ex. 12:50 speaks as if Israel fully obeyed the command about circumcision and Passover eating in a once-off sense when they kept that first Passover. And of course this is the reason for many branches of Judaism welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles to the Passover celebration- for they don't understand Ex. 12:48 to preclude it, but rather Num. 9:14 encourages it.

- This approach also helps answer a difficult question: Why was the lamb or kid kept for four days (Ex. 12:2,6)? If the effects of circumcision take three days to wear off (Gen. 34:25), it could be that the uncircumcised males were intended to circumcise themselves, chose the lamb, and then keep the Passover four days later. Some Jewish commentators claim that God fell in love with Israel whilst she was still in her blood (Ez. 16:6) in that some Jews circumcised themselves at the time of the first Passover- hence one Rabbi speaks of the blood of circumcision and the blood of the first Passover running together.

## The Table Manners of Jesus

There is huge emphasis within the Gospels upon eating and table fellowship. The meals of Jesus are noted, and His parables often refer to meals and eating together (Mt. 21:31,32; 22:1-14; Lk. 7:36-50; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 12:35-38; 14:1-24; 15:1,2; 11-32; 19:1-10; 24:30-32; Jn. 2:1-12; 21:1-14). This is without doubt a major theme of the Gospels. Clearly, we are intended to learn something from this emphasis. The huge focus upon meals and table fellowship which we find in the Gospels clearly carried over in significance to the early church; because having given such emphasis to Christ's open table fellowship in his Gospel, Luke in Acts records how the disciples broke bread with each other in their homes as a sign of their unique fellowship in Christ (Acts 2:42,46). Significantly, it was by eating with Gentiles that Peter openly demonstrated that God had accepted Gentiles (Acts 10,11). In first century Judaism "meals... were principal expressions within Judaism of what constituted purity. One ate what was acceptable with those people deemed acceptable" (1). The Jewish ideas of the first century were partly based upon those of the Old Testament; for there, meals were used to help draw boundaries. In the period in between the Testaments, however, not eating with Gentiles and sinners became an obsession. Judaism became increasingly exclusive. Tobit is told "Give none of your bread to sinners" (Tobit 4:17); the story of Judith tries to teach that table fellowship can make the difference between life and death (Judith 13:6-11); the additions to Esther claim that Esther had always refused to eat at Haman's table nor with the king (Esther 14:17); Sirach urged "Let righteous men be your dinner companions" (Sirach

9:16); bread was not to be shared with the sinner (12:5; 13:17). Jubilees 22:16 warns Jacob to separate himself from table fellowship with Gentiles lest he be contaminated by association with them.

### **No Guilt by Association**

It was especially important for Rabbis or religious leaders to be seen as only eating with the right types: "The Rabbis would have been chary of intercourse with persons of immoral life, men of proved dishonesty or followers of suspected and degrading occupations at all times, but especially at meals" (2). The way Jesus wilfully invited such people (tax collectors, prostitutes, Mk. 2:15) to His table shows His specific rejection of this idea. The Talmud (*b. Sanhedrin* 23a) records that the righteous Jew wouldn't sit down for a meal until they were sure who their eating companions would be. The open table policy of Jesus was radical indeed. He showed them this welcome to His table in order to lead them to repentance (Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:32). Note too how He ate with Peter in order to prove to him that He had accepted him, even before any specific repentance from Peter directed to Jesus (Jn. 21:1-14). Again, that meal was characterized by a super abundance of food, 153 fish (Jn. 21:11), pointing forward to the Messianic banquet. Jesus was assuring Peter that he would 'be there' and demonstrated that to Peter by having him at His banquet table. Indeed it has been observed that many of the meal scenes recorded in Luke feature Jesus calling people to be His disciples. He had no fear of 'contamination by communion' (a phrase used in the church of my youth). Rather, His association with sinners in this way was their opportunity to accept His salvation and thereby to be convicted of their sins and repent. In this context it has been remarked: "Jesus is not defiled by his contact with impurity but instead vanquishes it" (3). His holiness was thereby communicable to others rather than their uncleanness being as it were caught by Him. The "sinner in the city" whom He allowed at His table was a cameo of the whole thing; contrary to what was thought, He wasn't contaminated by her, but rather her presence at His table meant she left realizing her forgiveness and acceptance with Him (Lk. 7:36-50).

Exactly because Jesus ate with sinners, He was considered a sinner (Mt. 11:19). This was how strongly the Jews believed in 'guilt by association', and how intentional and conscious was the Lord's challenging and rejection of the concept. The Jews imagined the final messianic banquet at the end of the age (Rev. 19:7-9) to be filled with righteous Jews from all ages and all parts of their dispersion world-wide. But Jesus consciously subverts that expectation by speaking of how *Gentiles* shall come from all over the world and sit down at that banquet on an equal footing with the Jewish patriarchs (Mt. 8:11,12). And He went further; He spoke of how whores and pro-Roman tax collectors would have better places there than religious, pious Jews (Mt. 21:31,32). Not only were the very poor invited by Jesus to eat with Him, but also those most despised- tax collectors were amongst the most despised and rejected within Jewish society, not simply because they made themselves rich at the expense of an already over taxed peasantry, but because of their connections with the Roman occupiers. Sitting and eating with Gentiles and sinners was therefore Jesus showing how every meal of His was a foretaste of the future banquet of the Kingdom. He was calling all those previously barred from the Lord's table to come and eat. This was why the table practice of Jesus was seen as so offensive by the Jews- because it implied that their exclusive view of the future Kingdom being only for religious Jews was in fact wrong. Anyone who opens up boundaries, breaks a circle, removes one side of a triangle, faces the wrath of those within that construct. Christ's 'open table' policy then and now leads to just such anger. For

we are to reach out to the most despised of society, the very poorest of spirit, and actually eat with them in conscious anticipation of how this is their foretaste of God's Kingdom.

It's noteworthy that Jesus made no attempt to examine or quantify the repentance of those "sinners" whom He invited to eat with Him. In Judaism, as in many legalistic churches today, there was great importance attached upon making restitution for sin, compensating for sin through some ritual, and only then taking their place 'in fellowship'. The way Jesus invited "sinners", tax collectors and prostitutes to eat with Him was in careful revolution against this idea. One could argue that He knew they were repentant; but the careful omission of reference to this leads us to the conclusion that He ate with them, fellowshiped them, in order to lead them *to* repentance rather than as a sign that He accepted their repentance. It has at times been argued that "sinners" is a technical term used by the Jews to refer to all the 'people of the land', the non hyper religious Jews. But E.P. Sanders has given good reason to think that "sinners" in the Gospels means just that- moral sinners, bad people in moral terms (4). The way Jesus broke bread with Judas is perhaps the parade example of Jesus demonstrating that His table was indeed open to sinners, even impenitent ones- in the hope that the experience of eating with Him would lead them to repentance (Mt. 26:20-25 cp. Jn. 13:18-30).

### **The Essenes**

John the Baptist clearly had some associations with the Essenes, and yet it was he who prepared the way for Christ. Yet the Lord Jesus seems to have gone out of His way to invert and criticize the exclusivity of the Essenes by welcoming people of all kinds and levels of holiness or sin to His table; He was seeking to clarify that his human support base was in fact quite misguided. The *Manual of Discipline* of the Essenes taught that meals were only to be shared with those of the same level of holiness as yourself; exclusion from eating at table was a punishment for various infringements of law, just as some churches today exclude members from the "table of the Lord" for certain periods because of some 'offence'. The Essenes had the concept of being in 'good standing' with the elders and the community; and only those in good standing could eat at the same table. Table fellowship became something of an obsession with the Essenes- exactly because in sociological terms, it controlled the very definition of the community. It was felt that by eating with those outside the group, the whole group would be defiled: "To eat with an outsider or a lapsed member was a highly serious offence, because it was to eat or drink an uncleanness which then crept into the human sanctuary and defiled it" (5). Jesus and the later New Testament teaching of imputed righteousness contradict this; holiness can be passed on by contact with Jesus, whereas we can't pick up any guilt by association from whom we eat with. The guilt by association mentality was rife in first century Judaism: "The demand for separation was based on a desire to avoid contamination through contact with outsiders" (6). Time and again, Jesus consciously challenges these positions; He welcomed children and the lame and blind who came to Him in the temple (Mt. 21:14), when the Damascus sect of the Essenes didn't permit "the blind, lame, deaf, feeble-minded and under-age... even to enter the community" (7). The Qumran group's interpretation of Ps. 41:9 is significant. The familiar friend "who ate my bread with me" is interpreted in the New Testament as referring to Judas, who fellowshiped with Jesus but betrayed Him. But 1QH 13:23,24 interpret this as meaning that woe is prophesied to any who share table fellowship with sinners and therefore their judgment is just and avoidable if they had only eaten with the righteous. Jesus was aware of this of course and seems to have purposefully fellowshiped Judas, knowing the consequences. His wilful, conscious critique of Essene sensibilities about table fellowship was humanly speaking



foolish; because this was the very power base which John had prepared for Him to establish His Kingdom upon. But instead He shunned that and preferred to establish His Kingdom on the basis of tax collectors, the despised, the morally fallen, the irreligious. Even more fundamental was Christian teaching that atonement and forgiveness of sins was to be achieved through the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross and a willing association with His blood, through which His righteousness, which was God's righteousness, was imputed to the believer. Qumran and Judaism generally believed that holiness was "attained by strict devotion to the Law and by conscious maintenance of cleanness from any physical and ethical impurity... [this] was considered an alternative means for atonement" (8). Crudely put, if you sinned, then you atoned for that by keeping distance from sinners. The Lord Jesus taught that forgiveness was from Him, from His death and association with a crucified criminal, and you met together with other sinners to celebrate this by eating together with Him and them. This was so different to the Jewish view.

### **The Symposia Deconstructed**

There was in the first century Mediterranean world a form of banquetting known as the symposium. There was a formal meal, drinking of wine, an address, often of a religious or philosophical nature, and often sexual entertainment. The church at Corinth had clearly turned the breaking of bread meeting into such a symposium. It could be argued that the early church simply adopted the format of the symposium for their communion meetings (9). But there was to be a radical difference- the attendees were of various social classes and races, and men as well as women were to be there [symposia were typically for men, or the women sat separately]. It has been pointed out that the symposia featured "ceremonialized drinking" (10), which helps us see how the breaking of bread meeting instituted by Jesus could so easily have been turned into a kind of symposia. But the symposia were meetings of equals, from the same civic or business association, guild or philosophical college; the idea of the communion service being a gathering of sinful believers in Christ from all parts of society and of both genders, slave and free, was radical. Significantly, Mk. 6:39 describes the huge crowd sitting down to eat with Jesus in *symposia*. He redefined the idea of a symposia. The abundance of food would have reminded the crowds of the descriptions of the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom as having super abundant food. All who wanted to partake were welcome; there was no attempt by Jesus to interview all those men, women and children and decide who was clean or not. Vine comments on the significant fact that the Lord blessed the meal: "According to the Jewish ordinance, the head of the house was to speak the blessing only if he himself shared in the meal; yet if they who sat down to it were not merely guests, but his children or his household, then he might speak it, even if he himself did not partake". His leading of the blessing was therefore a sign that He ate with these people and / or considered them as His own household. Luke's parallel record speaks of the crowds reclining to eat that meal (Lk. 9:14,15 *kataklyno*)- to invite us to see it as a real banquet. The later feeding miracle occurred on the other side of Galilee to Magdala (Mt. 15:39), suggesting the miracle occurred in Gentile territory, with people present from "far off" (Mk. 8:3; hence the guests "glorified the God of Israel", Mt. 15:31). Surely there were Gentiles present at that meal, and the LXX uses this phrase to speak of how Gentiles from "far off" would come and sit down at the Messianic banquet of the last days (Is. 60:4; Jer. 26:27; 38:10; 46:27). Clearly Jesus intended His meal with that huge crowd to be a foretaste of the future Kingdom. To exclude people from the Lord's table is therefore tantamount to saying they have no place in God's Kingdom. Hence Paul warns that we can eat condemnation to ourselves by not discerning the body of Christ; by excluding some from His table, from the one loaf, we are saying they are not in His body, not possible candidates for His Kingdom; and thereby we

exclude ourselves from that body. It's not surprising that the early church, at least in Corinth, allowed the meeting to turn into the kind of 'symposia' they were accustomed to. The church of later ages, including our own, has struggled terribly in the same way. The communion service has tended to become a club, a meeting of equals, and too often it has effectively been said "If he's coming, if she's accepted there in fellowship, then I'm out of here". In essence we are faced with the same temptation that was faced and succumbed to in the earlier church- to turn that table into a sign of our bonding with others of our type, rather than allowing the radical challenge of Christ's table fellowship to really be accepted by us as a radical advertisement to the world of Christian unity. The Jewish sensitivity regarding your table companions has too often been transferred to the church of our day.

### **The Parable of the Great Supper**

The parable of the great supper in Luke 14 really says it all. People were begged to come in, anyone, whoever they were, street people, and those living in the countryside near the city. These people were "drawn from the ranks of those people who live close to the city precincts because their livelihood depended on the city, but not within the city walls because the nature of their business was too naturally noxious, socially odious or religiously suspect... an assortment of refugee aliens, disenfranchised villagers, run-away slaves, prostitutes, roving beggars" (11). Yet these very people are in the parable invited to the Messianic banquet. The targums on the Old Testament depictions of that feast stressed that it was a feast for righteous Jews who had been despised by the Gentiles in this life. Jesus absolutely contradicts this; "He is toppling the familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its socially constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a scandalous alternative" (12). The radical import of an open table is no less scandalous today in many Christian groups. Hence one of the chief complaints against Jesus was that He welcomed sinners *and ate with them* (Lk. 15:1,2). His answer was that this is but a reflection of the openness of God towards each of us; for we are all, would we but realize it, the irreligious and marginalized. And Jesus wasn't passive in this; He in an outgoing way sought to fellowship with such people. This is our personal comfort, and yet also our challenge insofar as we are to reflect that to others. Note how He invited Himself into the house of Zacchaeus to eat with him, fully aware of the perception that "to stay in such a person's home was tantamount to sharing in his sin" (13).

### **Conclusions**

We see in the table manners of the Lord Jesus a conscious and wilful outgoing desire to challenge the idea of guilt by association and to reflect the Father's outgoing searching for the repentance of sinners by inviting them to His table. His example incited the anger and hatred of the self-righteous religious right within the people of God at His time. Insofar as the early church carried His example forward, the true church grew and their communion services became showcases to the world of the Christian unity which is so powerful of itself to convert the world. But as they began to tone down the radical table standards of Jesus and turn those meetings into just another 'symposia' of the world around them, meetings between equals of the same background and standing, and even allowing the immoral spirit of those meetings to be replicated in Corinth and Thyatira at least, so the power of their witness was compromised and the church no longer showcased God's accepting, searching spirit towards sinners. Our practicing of the spirit of Christ in this matter of open table will lead us too to crucifixion by our brethren; but we can live no other way than true to Him, and we will in our turn through living out His example in this be a true light to the world, and attract to ourselves and to Him the very men and women for whom He died.

## Notes

- (1) Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (London: Doubleday, 2000) p. 473.
- (2) Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (New York: KTAV, 1967 ed.) p. 55.
- (3) J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (London: Doubleday, 2000) p. 231.
- (4) E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: S.C.M., 1985) pp. 174-211.
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- (6) P.R. Davies, 'Food, Drink and Sects', *Semeia* Vol. 86 (1999) p. 161.
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- (8) Craig Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness* (Leicester: I.V.P., 2005) p. 81.
- (9) Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist* (MN: Fortress, 2003).
- (10) W.J. Slater, *Dining in a Classical Context* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) p. 7.
- (11) W. Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1995) p. 93.
- (12) J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) p. 550.
- (13) I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) p. 697.

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It has been argued that the breaking of bread is the equivalent of the Jewish Passover, and Ex. 12:48 says that only the circumcised could eat of it. Here are a few comments:

- Whatever interpretation we wish to place upon Ex. 12:48, we have to reconcile it with the above evidence for the openness of the Lord Jesus with regard to His table fellowship, using it to bring people to Him, rather than as a test of fellowship or intellectual / moral purity of understanding or living.

- Peter ate with the uncircumcised- and got into trouble with the Judaist brethren exactly because the Law had forbidden the uncircumcised from eating the first Passover (Acts 11:3). The Jews had put a [very large!] hedge around this law by forbidding Jews from eating with Gentiles period. Yet Peter was taught that this was wrong- and he ate with Gentiles, it seems even before they were baptized. But the point is, he had been taught by the vision that all the old Mosaic category distinctions of clean / unclean, circumcised / uncircumcised, had now been ended. It seems this was as large a challenge to the church in the 1st century as it is in the 21st.

- Although the Passover and memorial meeting are related, the relation is at times by way of contrast rather than only similarity. e.g. in the first Passover, the families were to provide a lamb; whereas in the antitype, the Lord Jesus is the lamb of Divine and not human provision.

The Paschal lamb of God takes away the whole world's sin, rather than just providing blood for the temporal redemption of Israel's firstborn, etc.

- Circumcision under the new covenant doesn't refer to anything outward, visibly verifiable. For now "he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart in the spirit, and not in the letter" (Rom. 2:29)- seeing we can't judge the secret things of others' hearts, how can we tell who is circumcised in heart or not? The 'sealing' of God's people today, the proof that they are the Lord's (2 Tim. 2:19), is not anything external, but the internal matter of being sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13; 4:30), or being sealed with a mark in the mind / forehead, as Revelation puts it (Rev. 7:3; 9:4).

- The Gentiles in Israel, circumcised or not, could keep the feast of unleavened bread (Ex. 12:17-20) which was related to the Passover.

- If Ex. 12:48 is read on a literalistic level, i.e. that only the circumcised could eat the Passover, this would surely mean that no female could eat it? Yet this was not the case.

- It's Num 9:14 which speaks in more general terms of whether or not a Gentile could partake of the Passover- and here it's made clear that yes he/she could, and no mention is made of being circumcised: "And if a stranger shall sojourn among you, and will keep the passover unto the Lord; according to the statute of the passover, and according to the ordinance thereof, so shall he do: ye shall have one statute, both for the stranger, and for him that is born in the land".

- Commands that were intended for subsequent generations often include the kind of rubric we meet in Ex. 12:14,17: "And this day shall be unto you for a memorial, and ye shall keep it a feast to the LORD: throughout your generations ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever... therefore shall ye observe this day throughout your generations by an ordinance for ever". But we don't meet that 'throughout your generations' with regard to the uncircumcised men not being allowed to eat it.

- So my suggestion is that the command of Ex. 12:48 that no uncircumcised could eat of the Passover, and that the Gentiles amongst the people should be circumcised if they wanted to eat it, was specific to that first Passover. As Israel and the mixed multitude that went with them sat in Egypt under threat of losing their firstborn sons, they could find salvation by keeping the Passover and entering into covenant with God through circumcision. Both Jewish tradition and the implication of Moses not circumcising his sons is that the Jews in Egypt weren't circumcised; yet "all the people that came out were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, them they had not circumcised" (Josh. 5:5). Implication would be that many were circumcised in order to keep the first Passover according to the command given them in Ex. 12. We could therefore take Ex. 12:48 as a specific command for those who kept the first Passover to be circumcised, rather than an ongoing principle. The Jewish sage Maimonides (*A Guide For The Perplexed* Vol. 3 ch. 46) explains: "The reason of the prohibition that the uncircumcised should not eat of it (Exod. xii. 48) is explained by our Sages as follows: The Israelites neglected circumcision during their long stay in Egypt".

- This approach would explain why Num. 9:14 doesn't demand that Gentiles be circumcised to keep future Passovers; why there's no comment that the exclusion of the uncircumcised should be kept "throughout your generations"; and why Ex. 12:50 speaks as if Israel fully

obeyed the command about circumcision and Passover eating in a once-off sense when they kept that first Passover. And of course this is the reason for many branches of Judaism welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles to the Passover celebration- for they don't understand Ex. 12:48 to preclude it, but rather Num. 9:14 encourages it.

- This approach also helps answer a difficult question: Why was the lamb or kid kept for four days (Ex. 12:2,6)? If the effects of circumcision take three days to wear off (Gen. 34:25), it could be that the uncircumcised males were intended to circumcise themselves, chose the lamb, and then keep the Passover four days later. Some Jewish commentators claim that God fell in love with Israel whilst she was still in her blood (Ez. 16:6) in that some Jews circumcised themselves at the time of the first Passover- hence one Rabbi speaks of the blood of circumcision and the blood of the first Passover running together.

## The Table Manners of Jesus

There is huge emphasis within the Gospels upon eating and table fellowship. The meals of Jesus are noted, and His parables often refer to meals and eating together (Mt. 21:31,32; 22:1-14; Lk. 7:36-50; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 12:35-38; 14:1-24; 15:1,2; 11-32; 19:1-10; 24:30-32; Jn. 2:1-12; 21:1-14). This is without doubt a major theme of the Gospels. Clearly, we are intended to learn something from this emphasis. The huge focus upon meals and table fellowship which we find in the Gospels clearly carried over in significance to the early church; because having given such emphasis to Christ's open table fellowship in his Gospel, Luke in Acts records how the disciples broke bread with each other in their homes as a sign of their unique fellowship in Christ (Acts 2:42,46). Significantly, it was by eating with Gentiles that Peter openly demonstrated that God had accepted Gentiles (Acts 10,11). In first century Judaism "meals... were principal expressions within Judaism of what constituted purity. One ate what was acceptable with those people deemed acceptable" (1). The Jewish ideas of the first century were partly based upon those of the Old Testament; for there, meals were used to help draw boundaries. In the period in between the Testaments, however, not eating with Gentiles and sinners became an obsession. Judaism became increasingly exclusive. Tobit is told "Give none of your bread to sinners" (Tobit 4:17); the story of Judith tries to teach that table fellowship can make the difference between life and death (Judith 13:6-11); the additions to Esther claim that Esther had always refused to eat at Haman's table nor with the king (Esther 14:17); Sirach urged "Let righteous men be your dinner companions" (Sirach 9:16); bread was not to be shared with the sinner (12:5; 13:17). Jubilees 22:16 warns Jacob to separate himself from table fellowship with Gentiles lest he be contaminated by association with them.

### No Guilt by Association

It was especially important for Rabbis or religious leaders to be seen as only eating with the right types: "The Rabbis would have been chary of intercourse with persons of immoral life, men of proved dishonesty or followers of suspected and degrading occupations at all times, but especially at meals" (2). The way Jesus wilfully invited such people (tax collectors, prostitutes, Mk. 2:15) to His table shows His specific rejection of this idea. The Talmud (*b. Sanhedrin* 23a) records that the righteous Jew wouldn't sit down for a meal until they were sure who their eating companions would be. The open table policy of Jesus was radical indeed. He showed them this welcome to His table in order to lead them to repentance (Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:32). Note too how He ate with Peter in order to prove to him that He had accepted

him, even before any specific repentance from Peter directed to Jesus (Jn. 21:1-14). Again, that meal was characterized by a super abundance of food, 153 fish (Jn. 21:11), pointing forward to the Messianic banquet. Jesus was assuring Peter that he would 'be there' and demonstrated that to Peter by having him at His banquet table. Indeed it has been observed that many of the meal scenes recorded in Luke feature Jesus calling people to be His disciples. He had no fear of 'contamination by communion' (a phrase used in the church of my youth). Rather, His association with sinners in this way was their opportunity to accept His salvation and thereby to be convicted of their sins and repent. In this context it has been remarked: "Jesus is not defiled by his contact with impurity but instead vanquishes it" (3). His holiness was thereby communicable to others rather than their uncleanness being as it were caught by Him. The "sinner in the city" whom He allowed at His table was a cameo of the whole thing; contrary to what was thought, He wasn't contaminated by her, but rather her presence at His table meant she left realizing her forgiveness and acceptance with Him (Lk. 7:36-50).

Exactly because Jesus ate with sinners, He was considered a sinner (Mt. 11:19). This was how strongly the Jews believed in 'guilt by association', and how intentional and conscious was the Lord's challenging and rejection of the concept. The Jews imagined the final messianic banquet at the end of the age (Rev. 19:7-9) to be filled with righteous Jews from all ages and all parts of their dispersion world-wide. But Jesus consciously subverts that expectation by speaking of how *Gentiles* shall come from all over the world and sit down at that banquet on an equal footing with the Jewish patriarchs (Mt. 8:11,12). And He went further; He spoke of how whores and pro-Roman tax collectors would have better places there than religious, pious Jews (Mt. 21:31,32). Not only were the very poor invited by Jesus to eat with Him, but also those most despised- tax collectors were amongst the most despised and rejected within Jewish society, not simply because they made themselves rich at the expense of an already over taxed peasantry, but because of their connections with the Roman occupiers. Sitting and eating with Gentiles and sinners was therefore Jesus showing how every meal of His was a foretaste of the future banquet of the Kingdom. He was calling all those previously barred from the Lord's table to come and eat. This was why the table practice of Jesus was seen as so offensive by the Jews- because it implied that their exclusive view of the future Kingdom being only for religious Jews was in fact wrong. Anyone who opens up boundaries, breaks a circle, removes one side of a triangle, faces the wrath of those within that construct. Christ's 'open table' policy then and now leads to just such anger. For we are to reach out to the most despised of society, the very poorest of spirit, and actually eat with them in conscious anticipation of how this is their foretaste of God's Kingdom.

It's noteworthy that Jesus made no attempt to examine or quantify the repentance of those "sinners" whom He invited to eat with Him. In Judaism, as in many legalistic churches today, there was great importance attached upon making restitution for sin, compensating for sin through some ritual, and only then taking their place 'in fellowship'. The way Jesus invited "sinners", tax collectors and prostitutes to eat with Him was in careful revolution against this idea. One could argue that He knew they were repentant; but the careful omission of reference to this leads us to the conclusion that He ate with them, fellowshiped them, in order to lead them *to* repentance rather than as a sign that He accepted their repentance. It has at times been argued that "sinners" is a technical term used by the Jews to refer to all the 'people of the land', the non hyper religious Jews. But E.P. Sanders has given good reason to think that "sinners" in the Gospels means just that- moral sinners, bad people in moral terms (4). The way Jesus broke bread with Judas is perhaps the parade example of Jesus demonstrating that His table was indeed open to sinners, even impenitent ones- in the hope

that the experience of eating with Him would lead them to repentance (Mt. 26:20-25 cp. Jn. 13:18-30).

## **The Essenes**

John the Baptist clearly had some associations with the Essenes, and yet it was he who prepared the way for Christ. Yet the Lord Jesus seems to have gone out of His way to invert and criticize the exclusivity of the Essenes by welcoming people of all kinds and levels of holiness or sin to His table; He was seeking to clarify that his human support base was in fact quite misguided. The *Manual of Discipline* of the Essenes taught that meals were only to be shared with those of the same level of holiness as yourself; exclusion from eating at table was a punishment for various infringements of law, just as some churches today exclude members from the "table of the Lord" for certain periods because of some 'offence'. The Essenes had the concept of being in 'good standing' with the elders and the community; and only those in good standing could eat at the same table. Table fellowship became something of an obsession with the Essenes- exactly because in sociological terms, it controlled the very definition of the community. It was felt that by eating with those outside the group, the whole group would be defiled: "To eat with an outsider or a lapsed member was a highly serious offence, because it was to eat or drink an uncleanness which then crept into the human sanctuary and defiled it" (5). Jesus and the later New Testament teaching of imputed righteousness contradict this; holiness can be passed on by contact with Jesus, whereas we can't pick up any guilt by association from whom we eat with. The guilt by association mentality was rife in first century Judaism: "The demand for separation was based on a desire to avoid contamination through contact with outsiders" (6). Time and again, Jesus consciously challenges these positions; He welcomed children and the lame and blind who came to Him in the temple (Mt. 21:14), when the Damascus sect of the Essenes didn't permit "the blind, lame, deaf, feeble-minded and under-age... even to enter the community" (7). The Qumran group's interpretation of Ps. 41:9 is significant. The familiar friend "who ate my bread with me" is interpreted in the New Testament as referring to Judas, who fellowshiped with Jesus but betrayed Him. But 1QH 13:23,24 interpret this as meaning that woe is prophesied to any who share table fellowship with sinners and therefore their judgment is just and avoidable if they had only eaten with the righteous. Jesus was aware of this of course and seems to have purposefully fellowshiped Judas, knowing the consequences. His wilful, conscious critique of Essene sensibilities about table fellowship was humanly speaking foolish; because this was the very power base which John had prepared for Him to establish His Kingdom upon. But instead He shunned that and preferred to establish His Kingdom on the basis of tax collectors, the despised, the morally fallen, the irreligious. Even more fundamental was Christian teaching that atonement and forgiveness of sins was to be achieved through the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross and a willing association with His blood, through which His righteousness, which was God's righteousness, was imputed to the believer. Qumran and Judaism generally believed that holiness was "attained by strict devotion to the Law and by conscious maintenance of cleanness from any physical and ethical impurity... [this] was considered an alternative means for atonement" (8). Crudely put, if you sinned, then you atoned for that by keeping distance from sinners. The Lord Jesus taught that forgiveness was from Him, from His death and association with a crucified criminal, and you met together with other sinners to celebrate this by eating together with Him and them. This was so different to the Jewish view.

## **The Symposia Deconstructed**



There was in the first century Mediterranean world a form of banquetting known as the symposium. There was a formal meal, drinking of wine, an address, often of a religious or philosophical nature, and often sexual entertainment. The church at Corinth had clearly turned the breaking of bread meeting into such a symposium. It could be argued that the early church simply adopted the format of the symposium for their communion meetings (9). But there was to be a radical difference- the attendees were of various social classes and races, and men as well as women were to be there [symposia were typically for men, or the women sat separately]. It has been pointed out that the symposia featured "ceremonialized drinking" (10), which helps us see how the breaking of bread meeting instituted by Jesus could so easily have been turned into a kind of symposia. But the symposia were meetings of equals, from the same civic or business association, guild or philosophical college; the idea of the communion service being a gathering of sinful believers in Christ from all parts of society and of both genders, slave and free, was radical. Significantly, Mk. 6:39 describes the huge crowd sitting down to eat with Jesus in *symposia*. He redefined the idea of a symposia. The abundance of food would have reminded the crowds of the descriptions of the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom as having super abundant food. All who wanted to partake were welcome; there was no attempt by Jesus to interview all those men, women and children and decide who was clean or not. Vine comments on the significant fact that the Lord blessed the meal: "According to the Jewish ordinance, the head of the house was to speak the blessing only if he himself shared in the meal; yet if they who sat down to it were not merely guests, but his children or his household, then he might speak it, even if he himself did not partake". His leading of the blessing was therefore a sign that He ate with these people and / or considered them as His own household. Luke's parallel record speaks of the crowds reclining to eat that meal (Lk. 9:14,15 *katakline*)- to invite us to see it as a real banquet. The later feeding miracle occurred on the other side of Galilee to Magdala (Mt. 15:39), suggesting the miracle occurred in Gentile territory, with people present from "far off" (Mk. 8:3; hence the guests "glorified the God of Israel", Mt. 15:31). Surely there were Gentiles present at that meal, and the LXX uses this phrase to speak of how Gentiles from "far off" would come and sit down at the Messianic banquet of the last days (Is. 60:4; Jer. 26:27; 38:10; 46:27). Clearly Jesus intended His meal with that huge crowd to be a foretaste of the future Kingdom. To exclude people from the Lord's table is therefore tantamount to saying they have no place in God's Kingdom. Hence Paul warns that we can eat condemnation to ourselves by not discerning the body of Christ; by excluding some from His table, from the one loaf, we are saying they are not in His body, not possible candidates for His Kingdom; and thereby we exclude ourselves from that body. It's not surprising that the early church, at least in Corinth, allowed the meeting to turn into the kind of 'symposia' they were accustomed to. The church of later ages, including our own, has struggled terribly in the same way. The communion service has tended to become a club, a meeting of equals, and too often it has effectively been said "If he's coming, if she's accepted there in fellowship, then I'm out of here". In essence we are faced with the same temptation that was faced and succumbed to in the earlier church- to turn that table into a sign of our bonding with others of our type, rather than allowing the radical challenge of Christ's table fellowship to really be accepted by us as a radical advertisement to the world of Christian unity. The Jewish sensitivity regarding your table companions has too often been transferred to the church of our day.

### **The Parable of the Great Supper**

The parable of the great supper in Luke 14 really says it all. People were begged to come in, anyone, whoever they were, street people, and those living in the countryside near the city. These people were "drawn from the ranks of those people who live close to the city precincts

because their livelihood depended on the city, but not within the city walls because the nature of their business was too naturally noxious, socially odious or religiously suspect... an assortment of refugee aliens, disenfranchised villagers, run-away slaves, prostitutes, roving beggars" (11). Yet these very people are in the parable invited to the Messianic banquet. The targums on the Old Testament depictions of that feast stressed that it was a feast for righteous Jews who had been despised by the Gentiles in this life. Jesus absolutely contradicts this; "He is toppling the familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its socially constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a scandalous alternative" (12). The radical import of an open table is no less scandalous today in many Christian groups. Hence one of the chief complaints against Jesus was that He welcomed sinners *and ate with them* (Lk. 15:1,2). His answer was that this is but a reflection of the openness of God towards each of us; for we are all, would we but realize it, the irreligious and marginalized. And Jesus wasn't passive in this; He in an outgoing way sought to fellowship with such people. This is our personal comfort, and yet also our challenge insofar as we are to reflect that to others. Note how He invited Himself into the house of Zacchaeus to eat with him, fully aware of the perception that "to stay in such a person's home was tantamount to sharing in his sin" (13).

### Conclusions

We see in the table manners of the Lord Jesus a conscious and wilful outgoing desire to challenge the idea of guilt by association and to reflect the Father's outgoing searching for the repentance of sinners by inviting them to His table. His example incited the anger and hatred of the self-righteous religious right within the people of God at His time. Insofar as the early church carried His example forward, the true church grew and their communion services became showcases to the world of the Christian unity which is so powerful of itself to convert the world. But as they began to tone down the radical table standards of Jesus and turn those meetings into just another 'symposia' of the world around them, meetings between equals of the same background and standing, and even allowing the immoral spirit of those meetings to be replicated in Corinth and Thyatira at least, so the power of their witness was compromised and the church no longer showcased God's accepting, searching spirit towards sinners. Our practicing of the spirit of Christ in this matter of open table will lead us too to crucifixion by our brethren; but we can live no other way than true to Him, and we will in our turn through living out His example in this be a true light to the world, and attract to ourselves and to Him the very men and women for whom He died.

### Notes

- (1) Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (London: Doubleday, 2000) p. 473.
- (2) Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (New York: KTAV, 1967 ed.) p. 55.
- (3) J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (London: Doubleday, 2000) p. 231.
- (4) E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: S.C.M., 1985) pp. 174-211.
- (5) Bilha Nitzan, 'The idea of holiness', in D.K. Falk, F.G. Martinez and E.M. Schuller, *Sapiential, Liturgical and Poetical Texts from Qumran* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) p. 145.
- (6) P.R. Davies, 'Food, Drink and Sects', *Semeia* Vol. 86 (1999) p. 161.
- (7) M.A. Knibb, *The Qumran Community* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1987) pp. 109,110.

- (8) Craig Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness* (Leicester: I.V.P., 2005) p. 81.
- (9) Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist* (MN: Fortress, 2003).
- (10) W.J. Slater, *Dining in a Classical Context* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) p. 7.
- (11) W. Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1995) p. 93.
- (12) J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) p. 550.
- (13) I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) p. 697.

### 16-5-10 Early Christian Doctrine

Above all, it seems to me that it was the very doctrines which they preached which were the real reason for the inexplicable success of Christianity. Those doctrines took hold on the heart and conscience of the *individual*, so that this new religion was likely no other. Because of “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ [who] was rich but for your sakes he became poor, that you might become rich through his poverty”, the Corinthian converts should share their money with their poorer brethren in Jerusalem. Doctrine had a profound and practical import in daily life, quite unlike any other religion. And so it should be with us today. Studies of new religions in the Roman empire have found that they usually fizzled out if the state was opposed to them. Christianity is the one great exception. Rodney Stark concludes: “I believe that it was the religion's particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most sweeping and successful revitalization movements in history. And it was the way these doctrines took on actual flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity” <sup>(1)</sup>. The message of the *love* of God was radically different to that of the pagan religions. “For God so loved the world . . .” would have been a new paradigm. The gods were thought not to care how we treat each other. They could be induced to exchange services for sacrifices. But the idea of *grace* was totally new- that God does something for nothing, even giving His only begotten son. The philosophers regarded grace, mercy and pity as pathological emotions- defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing unearned help or relief, it was contrary to justice, which was the important concept at the time. Cultured human beings had to as it were “curb the impulse” to be kind- to watch the spectacle of men being torn to death by lions was the order of the day. E.A. Judge quotes examples of ancient philosophy which taught that “the cry of the undeserving for mercy [must go] unanswered.” Judge continued: “Pity was a defect of character unworthy of the wise and excusable only in those who have not yet grown up. It was an impulsive response based on ignorance. Plato had removed the problem of beggars from his ideal state by dumping them over its borders” . And yet the Truth declared that “God *is* love”, and He requires His people to manifest the love and outpoured grace which He has shown in the cross.

There was a great thirst for religion at the time of the 1st century, just as there is in our own time. And there were many religions on offer, as today- what E.R. Dodds called “a bewildering mass of alternatives. There were too many cults, too many mysteries, too many philosophies of life to choose from” . And yet against this background, Christianity was exclusive; one couldn't be a Christian and also dabble in the other cults. For there was only one Lord and Master, and one God.

There can be no doubt that early Christian doctrine met the religious needs of society. Isis was a cult which spread at roughly the same time as Christianity. In a study of 22 Graeco-Roman cities, Rodney Stark found: "that I can report a highly significant correlation of .67 between the expansion of Isis and the expansion of Christianity. Where Isis went, Christianity followed". We must ask whether we are meeting the so evident religious need of the world around us- or whether we are mismatched to their needs. People then were desperately interested in religion, and yet disillusioned with it. The excavations of the walls of Pompeii abound in extremely blasphemous graffiti and drawings, some of them very obscene as well, often directed against the gods. It was a world like ours. Although people often appealed to various gods for help, it was not assumed that the gods truly cared about humans- Aristotle taught that gods could feel no love for mere humans. And yet there was growing experimentation and interest in religion. The growth of Christianity shows that early Christian doctrine clearly connected with the needs. It's not that we can change the doctrines of the Truth to make them interesting for our society- rather must we offer them to people in such a way as they see their practical outworking, and they see their own need for salvation revealed to them...and thereby they are attracted.

In the end, as today, it was the unique teachings of early Christian doctrine which attracted men and women to conversion. That God should *love* the world would have been something totally radical to the first century audience. And that He should actually care how we treat one another was likewise a major paradigm break. E.A. Judge<sup>(2)</sup> shows in some detail that the surrounding philosophy regarded mercy and pity as emotions to be avoided by all rational people. "Mercy is not governed by reason...[therefore humans must] curb the impulse...the cry of the undeserving for mercy must go unanswered...pity was a defect of character unworthy of the wise...it was an impulsive response based on ignorance. Plato had removed the problem of beggars from his ideal state by dumping them over its borders". Yet the Truth taught that God is love, He is mercy, and we must respond to His superabounding grace in lives of outlived kindness and mercy toward others. True love must extend beyond natural family to all who call on the Lord Jesus, in whatever place (1 Cor. 1:2). We have spoken of how the example of the early community played a major role in conversion. And so it did. But it was only as the doctrines of Christianity were acted out in daily life that the change in human lives became apparent.

### **A Clear Focus**

The early church had a clear focus; they knew what was core teaching, and they taught it. The 21st century church has become so caught up over interpretation and correct theology that this clarity, the crystal clear focus upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, God's grace in Him and the appropriate human response, has all become sadly muted. Statements of faith within fellowships and denominations tend to get longer rather than shorter as time goes on; bridging documents, clarificatory statements, riders to this clause and that point, just keep on accreting. Until the true Christian church has gone just the way of Rabbinic Judaism, endlessly adding explanations to interpretations, notes in the margin, until one reaches a point where the simple message of the basic Gospel has become shrouded in such obscurity that it takes a long time to teach someone about it. And there is rarely a moment in that long explanation when the person becomes convicted of the personal truth of Christ, and wishes to give their lives to it in the abandon of devotion which characterized the 1st century converts. We need to remember that any 'doctrine' we arrive at is the result of a survey of the Biblical facts and an attempt to coordinate those facts and present them in the form of a doctrine. And it is only an *attempt*. Whilst truth is truth, on the other hand we must hold in mind our

intellectual and spiritual fallibility- and that of whatever doctrinal tradition we have come from. God did not send down from Heaven a set of bullet points, a theology. He gave us instead His Son. And even then, as Job perceived, how little a portion is ultimately heard of God (Job 26:14). At the day of judgment, we will understand how we were faithful in "a very little" (Lk. 19:17). "The truth" is the reality of the Lord Jesus, that He was and is and shall come again; that in Him, in His death and resurrection, we are saved. All else is "a very little". We are saved by grace, not intellectual accuracy or purity of interpretation. Yet we all struggle with being saved by grace; we would far rather we could earn that great salvation. We would prefer if it were available only to those who passed a Bible knowledge quiz or a theology test. We're very good at giving ourselves grace, cutting ourselves some slack; but not so good at accepting the gift of grace from God. The fact that we shall be saved by grace through faith, through child-like trust, "and that not of [ourselves]", not of our intellectual prowess nor depth of understanding, is a huge barrier to so many of our generation. It was less so amongst the illiterate of the first century Mediterranean world.

### **No Division Over Interpretation**

The clear focus upon Jesus and the experience of personal reconciliation with God in Him meant that there was little scope for division over any other matters. Christianity developed out of Judaism, and the early believers were intended to continue attendance at the synagogue until they were cast out (Jn. 16:2). Christian believers are pictured as still attending the synagogue in James 2:2 Gk; the implication of Mt. 5:23 is that Christ's first followers still made offerings, and surely Mt. 17:24 implies they were expected by Jesus to continue to pay the temple tax. But Judaism then and now placed more emphasis on practical living than on what we might call doctrine or theology; it was "not a system and never had a creed" (3) or 'statement of faith'. There were wide variations in how the Bible was interpreted. "With the Pharisees moral theology (*Halachah*) was fixed, but not expository or doctrinal theology (*Haggadah*)" (4). The various Rabbis had different and contradictory interpretations of Scripture- there are very inconsistent interpretations offered throughout books like 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra. The Pharisees believed in a resurrection, Sadducees didn't (Acts 23:8). Because there was no defined 'statement of faith', there were few accusations of heresy in departing from an agreed body of doctrine. What mattered was practical living. It has truly been observed that "It is remarkable how Jewish theology, owing to its lack of system, was able, as it were, to dabble in ideas" (5). This attitude is continued in the New Testament; no statement of faith is presented, no body of doctrine is explicitly set in stone, and false teaching and heresy was nearly always in the context of a false way of life. Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes (John the Baptist's followers) were all converted into Christianity (Acts 6:7; 15:5; 19:1-5). There is no specific statement that they dropped all their previous understandings; indeed Acts 15:5 shows that there were Christians who still called themselves "Pharisees". The uniting and defining feature was their common acceptance of Jesus as Messiah, baptism into Him and commitment to Him. The "one faith" referred to the believers' faith in one and the same person- the one Lord, Jesus (Eph. 4:4-6), rather than only one set of doctrinal propositions about Jesus being "the faith" and all else being apostate. Given the breadth of doctrinal belief within the synagogue system, it's highly significant that the Lord assumed His followers would remain within that system until they were cast out. He established no principle of leaving a community because one disagrees with some of their theological tenets. He in fact taught the opposite; that there is no guilt by association by such things, and His emphasis was on the heart and human behaviour being transformed. It seems to me a romanticizing of the New Testament evidence to suggest that the early church was totally doctrinally united, but was soon fractured by doctrinal declension from a specific set of

doctrines and interpretations which were set in stone by the apostles. Rather the amazing unity of the church was and is remarkable in that it was achieved *despite and in the face of* those differences. What split the church was fleshly behaviour, which in turn utilized doctrinal differences to justify the various divisions. Truly, “Not even within the New Testament is there convincing evidence of a simple, early unity within the church” in theological matters (6). This is not to say that Biblical interpretation is unimportant; there is indeed “another Jesus” whom the New Testament doesn’t know nor preach. My point rather is that there was no fixed statement of faith in the New Testament, no concept that there was “saving truth” in Biblical interpretation, rather was salvation posited in the person and work of the Lord Jesus; and there was not division between those “in Christ” over matters of theological interpretation.

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## Notes

(6) Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism And Belief* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938) p. 210.

(1) Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) p.196.

(2) E.A. Judge in P.T. O’Brien, *God Who Is Rich In Mercy*, Sydney: Macquarrie University Press, 1986 pp. 107-121.

(3) R.T. Herford, *The Pharisees* (New York: Macmillan, 1924) p. 13.

(4) L.E. Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity* (Chicago: Allenson, 1956) p.50.

(5) C.G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (London: Macmillan, 1930) p. 25.

(6) Paul J. Achtemeir, *Paul and the Jerusalem Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) p. 1.

## 16-6 Where Things Went Wrong

We are also helped in understanding why the early preachers were so successful by considering how the Truth stopped growing in the 2nd century. Of course, an apostate Christianity appeared to be growing, but the Truth itself stopped growing. Why was this? Reading through the writings of men like Ignatius and Polycarp, it is apparent that they all pretended to Paul. Yet clearly their writing and preaching lacked the reality and sparkle of the early brethren, quite apart from their doctrinal errors. *And we ask ourselves: has there arisen a mindset in our community which merely aspires to the grandeur of earlier brethren? Is there not a tendency for brethren especially to perceive themselves as the lone champions of Truth, justified in theological gladiatorship with their brethren, the saviours of a generation, after the imagined pattern of those brethren?*

### 16-6-1 Doctrinal Apostacy

The second century writers made everything so abstract- faith became mere ‘belief’, allegiance to a denomination; grace and justification become theology rather than a gratefully, desperately accepted reality as they were in the true ecclesia. The reality of the human Jesus became lost in a mess of theology and vague thinking about Him in an abstract sense. By contrast, the early preachers didn’t see any disjunction between the historical Jesus and the ‘Christ’ in whom they invited faith. Even for those who had never seen Jesus or been

to Palestine, the preachers closed the distance between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. I have shown elsewhere that the four Gospels were transcripts of the preaching of the Gospel; and the preaching of Paul and Peter is saturated with reference to them. They clearly regarded the words and deeds of the historical Jesus, the Man from Nazareth, as crucial to their proclamation of Him. And they earnestly preached the return of this same Jesus who had been taken up from them into Heaven. Reading through second century writings, it seems that no longer was the second coming important because it meant we would see Jesus personally. Instead the focus came to be put on Christ's return being for the reward of the virtuous, and for the punishment of the wicked- a punishment which the virtuous were to gloat over, quite forgetting that God Himself takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. This kind of error is found in things like *The Apocalypse Of Peter*, and lead finally to the nonsense of Dante's *Inferno*, where the most awful torture of the world is imagined as coming at the return of Christ, to be ministered by gloating saints. *And we ask: has our community's focus on prophecy and the evil of this world led us to not love the appearing of Jesus, but rather, to love a day we perceive as our justification and a time when we will express our passive anger against this world? When I hear of brethren rejoicing at how they think we will rush round the world smashing up Catholic churches, I fear I see the same essential mistake. We should eagerly await the Lord's return because we love Him, because the focus of our living is upon that Man, the one who loved us so much more than we love Him...*

### 16-6-2 The Rise Of Traditions

We have said that Christianity began without any *cultus*, without the usual rituals of festivals, musical performances, dances, pilgrimages, inscriptions etc. And yet we have seen that a healthy community identity arose, with the specific 'in-house' usage of terms like *ekklesia*, *Chrestos*, etc. The hard boundaries of the community against the world led to a healthy and strong sense of identity with each other. And inevitably some traditions developed which served to strengthen the community. The following are examples of traditions which developed in the early church:

- It seems that hymns developed, fragments of which are found in the poems of 2 Cor. 1:3-7; Eph. 1:13,14; 5:14; Phil. 2:6-12; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:4.

- There are also other standard acclamations or doxologies which may reflect common phrases used in prayers throughout the early brotherhood- just as there are certain phrases used in prayers throughout the world today. "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" is an acclamation that crops in up in some form or other in 1 Cor. 15:57; Rom. 6:17; 7:25; 2 Cor. 2:14; 8:16; 9:15. Likewise "God...to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen" (Gal. 3:15; Rom. 11:36; 16:27; Eph. 3:21; 2 Tim. 4:18; 1 Tim. 1:17).

- "A holy kiss" seems to have been the way of concluding a meeting, in the same way as Paul ends some of his letters with this (1 Thess. 5:26; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Pet. 5:14).

- I have wondered, and it's no more than me wondering, whether it could be that Rom. 10:9,13; Acts 22:16 and the other references to calling on the name of the Lord at baptism imply that the candidate for baptism made the statement "Jesus is Lord!" after their confession of faith or just before their immersion, and then they shouted the word "Abba!



Father!" as they came out of the water, indicating their adoption as a child of God (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

But over time, these healthy signs of group identity became rituals and traditions which were insisted on, codified and formalized. And this gave way eventually to the abuses of the orthodox churches.

### **Tradition As Authority**

Paul's letters indicate that there was a very wide diversity of opinion in the early churches, on a whole range of practical and theological issues. If the early preachers had insisted upon a higher level of understanding and conformity before baptism, then the church wouldn't have grown as it did. Instead the impression is given that a basic belief in Jesus and His teaching was what was required, and the clarification of anything deeper was left to be later elucidated. And as we know from the epistles, this process often didn't come to completion. As time went on, however, there arose the very human desire for tighter definition of everything- and this is what led to division and the evaporation of that unique spirit of unity and love which characterized the first Christians. In his extensive survey of the post-Apostolic development of doctrine, J.N.D.Kelly observed that "gradually... did the tendency to insist upon precise definition and rigid uniformity assert itself" (1). This desire for uniformity didn't achieve unity, but rather the opposite. For true spiritual unity isn't achieved by uniformity. Further, this desire for precise definition, intellectual accuracy and purity of 'truth' rather than the spirit of Christ, led to an effective distinction being drawn by Clement and Origen between simple believers, who just accepted the Biblical record, and those whom they called 'spiritual men', 'the perfect', who looked beyond the Scriptures to some more esoteric knowledge of God. In all the discussions of doctrine which occurred in the second and third centuries, it became less and less common to appeal purely to Scripture. The decisions of councils of bishops came to define which dogma was right and which was wrong; the average believer was no longer empowered to decide for him/herself, nor were they allowed the autonomy to decide for themselves what they thought the Bible meant. The original source of Christian doctrine wasn't so much the Bible as we know it, but the person of Christ. He and His teachings were what Christian doctrine was all about. But this Christ-based faith became muddled by so much that was extra to it. Truth became defined according to which line of earlier church fathers believed it- thus Clement spoke of "the rule of our tradition" (*Dialogue* 80,3) as being the source of truth. Athanasius used this argument to justify his view of the dogmas that later became enshrined in the Trinity: "Athanasius, disputing with the Arians, claimed that his own doctrine had been handed down from father to father, whereas they could not produce a single respectable witness to theirs... the compilation of lists of fathers of unimpeachable prestige, with select quotations from their writings, became a favourite technique in theological debate" (2). Tradition and the name-dropping of learned men became more important than the basic truths of the Bible. And there's scarcely a church today which hasn't faced this kind of mentality over one matter or another.

### **Notes**

(1) J.N.D.Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine* (London: A. & C. Black, 1968) p. 4.

(2) Kelly *ibid.*, pp. 45,48.

### 16-6-3 Legalism In The Church

The doctrines of the Truth began to be spoken of in a cold, legalistic sense in the church. The warmth, the Christ-centredness, the deep and obvious concern for people which marks the pages of the Gospels and Acts gave way to an aggressive and arrogant battering of the opposition. The breaking of bread was turned into a mystery; the actual waters of baptism were thought to hold the power of forgiveness. In all these changes one sees a retreat from the reality of the fact that baptism and the breaking of bread are our personal encounter with the living Christ. They became shrouded in mysticism and abstraction; their simple power and reality were lost. They became important as rituals in themselves, rather than as being pointers to the real Jesus who is the Saviour. The Jewish basis of the Gospel was likewise downplayed; the solidarity of the New Israel with the old was an embarrassment after the Roman persecution of the Jews. And yet this rejection of “the Hope of Israel” led to the heresies of Gnosticism and Marcionism in the 2nd century. Legalism led to immorality. A series of documents were discovered in 1945 in Egypt, called the Gnostic Gospels. These were writings which had been suppressed as heretical by the early church bishops. One of the repeated themes in them, especially in the scroll known as *The Testimony of Truth*, was that the most legalistic, strict leaders of the church had nearly all fallen into moral error, and this was leading to the spiritual break up of the church- even though numbers of members kept growing<sup>(1)</sup>.

*And we must ask whether we don't have the same tendencies. The personal reality of Jesus tends to be replaced by abstractions; the urgent need for grace and forgiveness has in some quarters been reduced to a mere intellectual acceptance of the faith of our fathers; and legalistic, academic definitions have abounded rather than personal experience and testimony to forgiveness and reconciliation. And the over formalism of some memorial meetings and baptism services suggests we likewise may have become caught up in the ritualism to the exclusion of the real, suffering, saving Christ who lies behind them. And we must ask whether we truly perceive ourselves as the New Israel, a people with no inheritance in this world, wandering as lights in the darkness of a Gentile world...or whether we see ourselves as British, Russian, Indian, American... rather than the Israel of God. Of course, we need true doctrine and must defend it. Once the Christian movement lost a clear doctrinal understanding, the number of true converts of course decreased. But the warnings from the apostacy of the first Christians stand written for us.*

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### Notes

(1) See Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979).

### 16-6-4 Social Tensions In The Church

We have observed that the extraordinary unity between rich and poor in the ecclesias must have been something which arrested the attention of a divided and unhappy world. And yet 1 Cor. 11 shows how things went wrong here- the rich ate huge meals at the breaking of bread, whilst the poor brethren went hungry. Remember that the memorial services were usually held in the home of a wealthy brother. It was common for wealthy people to hold banquets which were occasions for the conspicuous display of social distances, even for the humiliation of the clients of the rich, by means of the quality and quantity of the food

provided to different tables. Pliny describes such a banquet: “The best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories...”<sup>(1)</sup>. So we can imagine a person like Gaius, who hosted the meetings of the Corinth ecclesia, coming to be influenced by the world around him, with the result that the memorial feast became a time of drunkenness for the wealthy brethren and humiliation of the poorer majority. In Corinth, there were a number of households converted (Chloe, Stephanas, e.g.) who came together “in ekklesia” as “the whole church” for larger meetings (1 Cor. 11:20; 14:23). Yet there was tremendous potential here for disunity; each household could remain isolated from the others, even at the larger memorial meetings. And tragically, it seems that the separatist, household culture wasn’t broken down in the long term by ecclesial life as it should have been. The concept of “the household of God” being the all important unit wasn’t allowed to have the practical power which is latent within it. The exclusive nature of baptism should have meant that a totally new identity was formed; Christianity was exclusive in a way that none of the pagan cults were.

*We have to ask whether the divided secular world in which we live is not having its effect upon us; whether there are not real divisions along social, gender and ethnic lines in our meetings; and whether the spirit of the world is affecting how we relate to each other in the ecclesia. Even if we feel this is not the case with us, the Christian community of the 21st century cannot comfortably face the question: Do we allow the memory of the Lord’s sacrifice to bind us together, or are we allowing the very thing which ought to unite us to disunite us? Do family and other groupings still persist amongst us even before the emblems of the Lord’s selfless, all-inclusive sacrifice?*

## Attitude To Women

Just as the freedoms assigned to women enabled the dramatic growth of the early church, so in my opinion the demonization of women by the “church fathers” led to the church ceasing to make real cutting edge conversions in society. There is reason to believe that the Lord’s command to go into the world and preach-and-baptize was understood in the first century as meaning that this was the duty of every one who believed- male or female. Thus Tertullian’s tractate on baptism [Section 17] refers to women baptizing in the early church, and he mentions a sister claiming that the writings of Paul justified her baptizing of people; it was only the apostasy of later times which led to a class of brothers being empowered to administer baptism. Indeed, Tertullian’s writings imply that only at his time [around 200 AD] were sisters deprived of the right to perform baptisms. In my own mission work I have seen the power of encouraging all baptized to in their turn go into their worlds and preach-and-baptize. This kind of working one’s own network was widespread in the first century and was evidently a reason for growth, just as it has been in many areas today; yet once the Tertullians enter and demand that only they have the right to baptize, the dynamism is suddenly lost, and real growth ceases. The early church fathers progressively came to blame Eve and thereby women in general for the present world situation; the uninspired *Gospel Of Peter* makes this point repeatedly, arguing that no women prophets should be allowed. By contrast, Paul’s writings clearly recognized female prophets in the early church. The Syrian *Didaskalia* describes the hierarchy of the established church in the third century disciplining and excommunicating female house churches- the very structures which we have seen were at the root of early Christian growth.

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## Notes

(1) Betty Radice, *The Letters Of The Younger Pliny* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969) p. 63.

### 16-6-5 Wealth In The Church

The early church started undeniably poor, meeting in homes, funded by the few wealthy converts. There was a lay ministry- there is no hint that salaries were paid nor tithes raised from the converts. However, over time, Christianity became more socially acceptable. The overall wealth of the members increased. The socially marginal no longer comprised the majority of congregations. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, churches started to own buildings and then land. Initially of course, Christianity as an illegal religion had no right or opportunity or even desire to own buildings or to meet in a permanent place. Salaries started to be paid to the ministers. Cyprian of Carthage and other writers point out how there developed a dichotomy between the ministers of poor rural areas, who lived on very little, and those salaried church workers of the urban areas, who became very wealthy. They began to spend their wealth on lavish clothing and church buildings, and to flaunt these things, justifying them in the name of Christ's service. There also developed in Syria and Asia Minor especially almost a dogma that one must leave their wealth and property to the church. And thus the churches grew wealthy. And with it came politics, division, doctrinal and moral apostasy, endless concern about church funding issues even though the church had never been richer, and a loss of focus on the man Christ Jesus, who though He was rich became poor [Gk. 'a pauper'] for our sakes.

The Western Christian world cannot deny that all this hits close to home. Those in the poorer world must also beware of where things could develop for them too, if the Lord delays His return. Brother Alan Eyre concludes his classic study *The Protesters* by saying that the Truth has not usually been lost purely and solely by false teachers or wholesale doctrinal apostasy; but rather by the inroads of materialism leading to these things. In *Contra Celsus* we read Origen justifying the Christian church against Celsus' criticisms that it is a church of poor, simple people. That the majority of Christians would be poor and simple was indeed the expectation of both the Lord Jesus and Paul. Yet Origen seeks to justify the Christian church as middle class and respectable, with respected intellectuals amongst its membership. It was and is this desire to be seen as worldly-wise and 'normal' which is the death-knoll for any revival of Christianity. It was this which led to the acceptance of the Trinity; and it is this which robs true Christianity of its radical nature and appeal today. Perhaps in our last days this lesson needs to be learnt as never before. The Lord's picture of the world of the last days is of a household eating and drinking, absorbed with being normal (Mt. 24:38; Lk. 17:27). But the Lord's point is that this very 'normal' behaviour is what He finds so wrong.

## 16-6-6 Worldliness In The Church

Although the boundaries between the believer and the world were very sharply drawn, and this was one of the strengths of the early community, things went wrong when those within the community started to despise those without, and to withdraw from the world to the extent that they failed to be a witness to them, and started to argue internally. Despite the clear teaching of mental separation from the world, there is ample evidence within the NT that the believers were expected to mix with the world in order to be a witness to it. Thus the Lord implied that His followers should remain within the synagogue system [with all its false doctrine and practice] until such time as their witness for Him led to their being expelled from it. Christians in Corinth were free to use the pagan meat markets, and to accept invitations for meals in pagan homes. Paul doesn't say 'Reject the invitation and stay at home...'. He tells them to go out into this world but make their point for Christ in doing so, and not let Him down. He tells those married to unbelievers not to leave them, but, again, to remain with them and seek to make a witness in daily life. The missionary drive of Paul was such that he saw in every outsider a potential insider, rather than merely a person to be separate from. Thus 1 Cor. 14:23 implies that the early ecclesial meetings were open for passers by to casually attend; indeed, the breaking of bread seems to have been used as a means of public witness "to shew [proclaim / preach] the Lord's death" and His coming again. In 1 Cor. 5:9-13 Paul says that he doesn't intend the converts "to get out of the world" but rather to mix with the greedy, robbers and idolaters who are in the world. The Corinthians seemed to think that because they were self-consciously separate from the world, therefore it didn't matter how they lived within the community. It seems they had misunderstood Paul's previous letter about separation from sinful people as meaning they must be separate from the world. But Paul is saying that no, one must mix with the world, but separate from sin within our own lives. However, by the end of the 1st century, 'going out of the world' became the main preoccupation with some Christians, even though they themselves often developed low moral standards as a result of this. It was these ascetic groups who so over analysed some aspects of doctrine- for they had nothing better to do with their time- that they ended up with false doctrine. They converted only from within their groups, so the world was not witnessed to, the fire of love and compassion for humanity that was the hallmark of true Christianity was lost, and thus by the 2nd century the Truth both doctrinally and in practice had been lost.

*There is no doubt at all that this tendency to 'get out of the world' has affected our Christian community. We have without doubt become inward looking, and in some areas of the world there are large numbers of us who convert virtually nobody from the outside world. The result of so much energy focused within can only be fission and disruption. In some places this really does need to be replaced by hearts that bleed for the world of the lost which surround us. It can be that 2nd and 3rd generation converts can no longer relate to the world, they no longer can communicate with other human beings and therefore have no chance of converting them; and thus the true church can no longer be the light of the world, seeing it has put its collective light under the bucket of co-dependency and self interest. And it is from this same group of insular thinkers that over analysis of our faith has brought so much strife about doctrine. And there is also no question that it is often those who decry the evil of the world outside so much who often later have to admit to the most serious moral failures within their own lives, just as happened in Corinth. What happened in the 2nd century really does need to be taken on board as a serious warning to our Western community.*

## 16-6-7 Lost Emphasis Upon Grace

Not only did the early church become harsher in their view of the world; they likewise became graceless in their view of each other. Hermans (*Man.* 4.3.6) wrote: "After the great and holy calling, if a person be tempted by the devil and commit sin, he has one repentance; but if he sin and repent repeatedly, [repentance] is unprofitable". This is in direct conflict with the Lord's teaching about forgiving the repentant sinner 490 times / day, i.e. without limit. Raymond Brown comments: "In the first centuries it was ecclesiastical discipline not to forgive the sins of adultery and apostasy"<sup>(1)</sup>. Soon, the writings of the early church were linking salvation with good deeds- whereas the New Testament clearly links salvation with pure grace. Consider *The Shepherd Of Hermas*, 2.3.2: "You are saved by not having broken away from the living God... if he refrains from every evil lust, he will inherit eternal life" (3.8.4). These graceless attitudes led to hypocrisy, as church leaders had to live in denial of their own humanity and sinfulness. The early Christian leaders such as Paul and Peter constantly alluded to their own weaknesses of faith; and the Gospel records, transcripts of the disciples' own preaching, are shot through with reference to their own weakness of faith and understanding. Tertullian even went so far as to write that "The basis of salvation is fear". This is such a very far cry from the spirit of the New Testament, where John wrote of the perfect love which casts out fear, and the Lord Himself continually comforted His flock: "Fear not".

The lost emphasis upon grace was reflective of how church leaders personally felt no need for it. Sin became effectively defined as crossing the line on a few public, visible issues. The de-emphasis of personal sin and the sins of the heart, of which the Lord spoke so powerfully, was especially seen in the early theologians of the Eastern Roman empire. "Cyprian aside [their theology] precluded the existence of sin among the baptized. Confession had little place in their life or prayer. Confession played no part in their liturgies..." (2). The obsession with fellowship / separation issues has marred the true church. Yet it's evident that Paul and the earliest Christians weren't so hung up about them- thus Paul can refer to non-Christian Jews as his "brethren" (Acts 22:5). His grace-led spirit was inclusive rather than exclusive.

*And despite the unparalleled emphasis upon 'grace' in Christian thinking of our age, it would appear we are heading the same way. 'Sins' involving adultery and divorce are often seen, in practice, as unforgiveable. 'One sin and you're out' became the rule of the early apostate church, despite their theoretical understanding of grace. And there is no lack of evidence that in our own beloved community, leaders likewise have come to live in denial of their own sins, misjudgments and inappropriacies.*

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### Notes

(1) Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982) p. 238.

(2) Carl Volz, "Prayer in the early church", in Paul Sponheim, ed. *A Primer On Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).



### 16-6-8 Loss Of Faith In The Church

As wealth increased in the church, as they turned in on themselves, as they lost their focus upon grace, so in practice the church lost a real, basic *faith*. Reading through church literature about the resurrection of the Lord, it starts to get emphasized that people had touched Him or things connected with Him, and therefore believed. The 2<sup>nd</sup> century *Epistula Apostolorum* 11-12 speaks of how the disciples touched different parts of Jesus' body and also His footprints, and therefore believed; Ignatius in his letter to the Smyrneans [3.2] says that those who touched Jesus were those who believed. This all stands in strange contrast to the way Thomas touched the Lord, in unjustified disbelief, and the Lord then pronounced a blessing on those who would believe *without* touching.

*And we must ask ourselves, whether we today have much real faith, a mere grain of which can move mountains. Is not the temptation to trust in savings, technology etc., rather than in the God above?*

### 16-6-9 Poor Church Leadership

An over emphasis upon eldership, leadership, power and control was another factor in the apostacy. There was an almost desperate attempt to justify dictatorial attitudes by the church leaders. Clement justified this by claiming that Is. 60:17 applied to the church: "I will make your overseers peace, and your *taskmasters* righteousness". And so he reasoned that church leaders could never be anything other than right, and could be taskmasters over the church. Clement led the church to organize itself on the basis of Roman army administration- into districts [dioceses] administered by an overseer [bishop]. These autocratic leaders came to define every deviation from their views as 'heretical'. The church became a one party state. Freedom of thought and personal belief on minor matters was outlawed. Questioning was not allowed. Tertullian advised bishops not to allow the congregation to ask questions, for "it is questions that make people heretics". Consider these quotations from his *Prescription Against Heretics* and reflect whether this extreme attitude has parallels with our church today: "They say that we must ask questions in order to discuss. But what is there to discuss? Believers must dismiss all argument over scriptural interpretation; such controversy only has the effect of upsetting the stomach or the brain... if you do discuss with them, the effect on the spectators will be to make them uncertain which side is right... the person in doubt will be confused by the fact that he sees you making no progress". And we must ask ourselves whether the increasing talk about eldership and leadership in the ecclesia is not part of this same slide into institutionalism...?

There arose in the early church not only poor leadership, but also an over-emphasis on eldership, whereby individual initiative in the Lord's service was squashed, the value of the average person in the church was devalued, and the emphasis came to be upon following the elders rather than a personal following of Christ. Christianity began as a bunch of guys following a Man, and being focused upon Him... breaking bread in their homes together to remember Him, joyfully telling others about their experience of Him. But over the years, this focus changed. And it can so easily for us, too. Consider the writings of Ignatius, only about 50 years after the first inspired New Testament documents were written:

- "It is therefore necessary... that ye should do nothing without the bishop; but be ye obedient also to the presbytery" (*Trallians* 2.2,3)



- Ignatius greets only those who “be at one with the bishop and presbyters” (*Philadelphians* prologue). In his own church, Ignatius insisted that no valid breaking of bread service nor baptism could be held in his absence.

- “Do ye all follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and the presbytery as the Apostles... let no man do aught of things pertaining to the church apart from the Bishop. Let that be held a valid eucharist (*bebaia eucharistia*) which is under the bishop, or one to whom he shall have committed it. Wheresoever the bishop shall appear, there let the people be; even as where Christ may be, there is the universal [*katholike*] church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to hold a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God” (*Smyrneans* 7.2 – 8.2)

- “It becometh men and women when they marry to unite themselves with the consent of the bishop [lest] their marriage be... after concupiscence... I am devoted to those who are under the bishop” [*Epistle to Polycarp* 5.2; 6.2]

- The church building which the Bishop controlled came to be seen as the house of God: “If anyone be not within the precinct of the altar he lacks the bread of God” - i.e. the breaking of bread could only be held within the specified church premises (*Ephesians* 5.2)

- “He that doeth aught without the bishop the presbytery and deacons, this man is not clean in his conscience” (*Trallians* 7.2).

It's clear enough what was developing. The spirit of 'breaking bread from house to house' with which Christianity started had been lost. The command to all Christ's followers to preach-and-baptize had been twisted- only the Bishop and his supporters could do this. And you couldn't just break bread when and where you wanted; it had to be 'in the church'. Worse still, the private consciences of sincere brethren were judged. And worse yet, the Bishop and his supporters were to be given the same respect as the Father and Son and their apostles. I know of sound, experienced missionaries who have been 'forbidden to baptize' by someone who told them that they had not been 'authorized by the committee'. Others are criticized for breaking bread apart from at ecclesia X; they're not allowed to break bread with ecclesia Y or with sister Z, for no good reason, simply 'by the elders'. I even recall breaking bread once on a family holiday, to return home to be told we'd 'set up another table' [quite what that means eludes me to this day!]. There is without doubt the sense amongst many that we have to do what the leaders of the church say, even if it is against our personal conscience. And if we dare venture that our conscience before God is different to theirs... the basic answer is that one has to do what is right before men, rather than what our conscience dictates to be right before God. By 'conscience' I refer to the impulsion to action which our understanding of Scripture and the Spirit of God gives us. German scholars speak of Ignatius as an example of *Fruhkatholisismus*- the beginnings of incipient Catholicism which led to the Roman Catholic church. His attempts to control baptisms, the breaking of bread and serving the Lord according to private conscience, relating directly to Him rather than to Him through a hierarchy of church elders, were all precursors of the collapse of true Christianity. I don't believe I am going too far in perceiving the same *Fruhkatholisismus* going on amongst us today.

One big word which keeps cropping up in Ignatius is the Greek *bebaion*, meaning 'valid'. Ignatius [and others] taught that for service of the Lord to be valid by a believer, it had to be validated through obedience to the church leadership. *They* gave his or her service its validity. "Whatsoever [the Bishop and presbytery] shall approve, this is well-pleasing also to God; that everything which ye do may be sure and valid [*bebaion*]" (*Smyrneans* 8.2). Significantly, Paul addresses this very issue, using the very same Greek word, and in precisely this context- of justifying his service to God even though it was not approved / validated by others who thought they were elders: "He who validates us [*bebaion*], along with you [the ordinary members of the flock]... is God, who also sealed us" (2 Cor. 1:21,22). God has validated and called each of us to His service. We don't need approval / validation / authorization from anybody on this earth. Of course we should seek to work cooperatively with our brethren, for such is obviously the spirit of Christ; neither Paul nor myself are inciting a spirit of maverick irresponsibility. But he *is* clearly saying that the idea of needing authorization / validation from any group of elders in order to minister, preach, break bread and baptize [which is the context of his writing to the Corinthians] is totally wrong.

But before we write Ignatius off as a bad guy, reflect upon one thing. This man was tortured and brutally murdered in a Roman arena for his Christian faith, when he could have taken an easy way out. There must have been some sincerity in the man, to have gone that far. Re-read the above extracts from his letters in that light. Let's assume that he sincerely believed all that he wrote, even if we disagree with it. By sincerely meaning the best for the Christian community [we shall assume that], he sowed the seeds for its self-destruction. What I'm saying is that it was that basic attitude which led to the major apostasy of later Christianity, no matter how well meaning Ignatius was. And those same Ignatius sentiments I believe are alive and well, and growing, in many parts of our community and indeed in many Protestant groups. When I think about it, I 'tremble for the ark', seeing how history is repeating itself. This isn't to say that any who uphold these views which I submit are faulty are themselves wicked or insincere, in the same way as I can't judge [especially from this distance] that Ignatius was himself insincere or plain evil. But the end result of these *tendencies* and this thinking, according to history, will be apostasy and the collapse of true Christianity.

What are we to do about the situation? Surely to promise ourselves to always do what is right before God rather than before men, even if they are the elders of our church; to ever place the huge value upon individual responsibility which the early church and the Lord Himself did; and never to forbid our fellow brethren to follow their Lord's commands relating to baptizing, breaking bread and using our own initiative to spread the Gospel. Of course- and I almost don't need to say it- we should follow every Biblical injunction to 'follow the things that make for peace' and to serve our Lord in such a way as to 'live peaceably with all men', so much as it is our possibility. In all these things we must remember that those called to serve the Lord are called to be slaves of their brethren and not masters. There is but one ultimate Bishop of our souls, one truly good shepherd. Ignatius seems to have overlooked that. Discipleship above all means taking up our difficult personal cross and following the Lord ourselves, without casting our eyes back behind us to ensure that our brethren are falling in line with us personally. Power and the exercise of it are addictive- and the early church became caught up in that addiction. Doubtless they began by thinking they were doing so for the good of others; they would've thought that their insistence upon their worldviews and opinions about church life were necessary for the preservation of the church. Yet they ended up acting as if

those things were vital dogmatic truths from God, the only permissible views, and excluding all who failed to agree with them from the church. They ended up playing God- acting as if they were speaking directly on God's behalf, as if their views were His- as you can see from how Ignatius writes. It wasn't a big step from this to the doctrine of Papal infallibility. And is it such a big step away from Papal infallibility when intelligent brethren reason: 'I don't see what is wrong with brother X or sister Z. But if the elders say they're out, then, they must be. So, be gone X and Z... it's against my better spiritual judgment, but I accept the authority of the elders'.

Our reaction to these issues is a test from God. We are tested as to whether in the very core of our beings, down absolutely in our gut, we believe that to give is better than to receive; to serve is preferable to being served; that we have a direct, personal accountability to God for our behaviour, and that we follow the Lord Jesus far above any human leader; they are a test as to whether we believe that it really is God's grace which sanctifies the individual, rather than membership of and submission to any human organization [for this position is what about every false religion believes]. And they are a test of whether we wish to labour for others to receive that pure grace of God, with no expectation of some kind of personal return for us, be it financial, personal loyalty, submission, respect etc. ... but rather to serve simply because we want to serve, because we know ourselves to be servants, directly accountable servants, of the supreme Servant of the Lord.

### **Mistaken Interpretation Of Unity**

All this talk of obedience to leadership, of rigid control of the congregation... was justified by the argument that this leads to unity. There arose what was called "the norm of ecclesiastical and Catholic opinion... to be identified with what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*) (1). Yet early Christianity was comprised of those who had broken this very world, and come out from families and societies who believed exactly the same- that we must follow the norm, and any break from the norm is seriously wrong. The church's view of unity became that of the world- and their view confuses uniformity with unity. Men like Peter and Paul appealed urgently for individuals to repent and be baptized to receive God's forgiveness in Christ. Later church leaders overlooked this. It all became about power and control and politics and following the bishops- in the name of "unity". The seriousness of sin was de-emphasized, Justin implied that after baptism Christians don't sin, apart from heretics and those who leave the church. Sin became defined in terms of remaining within the church. The 3rd century *Didascalia Apostolorum* taught that "whoever does evil after baptism, the same is condemned to the Gehenna of fire". The daily, unnoticed sins, the inside of the cup, judgmental attitudes... all rated as major sins in the Lord's manifesto of Christianity. But not in the theology of 3rd Century church leaders. All this is a sober warning for today's church, where church attendance and financial donations to the church have been magnified as if they are the ultimate sign of spirituality. The focus became upon the external, whereas early Christianity was about the internal transformation of individual minds and hearts. "The church" was no longer understood as a community of believers; it became synonymous with the visible outward organization. Cyprian taught that "Whatever and whatsoever kind of man he is, he is not a Christian who is not in Christ's church... he cannot have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother". And Church membership depended upon "submission to the bishop... rebellion against him is rebellion against God... the schismatic, however correct his doctrine or virtuous his life, renounces Christ and bears arms against the church" (2).

Individual spirituality and correctness of faith meant nothing; obedience to the leaders was paramount. Cyprian even went so far as to say that "the church is founded on the bishops... held together by the glue of the mutual cohesion of the bishops" (3). This is a glaring contradiction with the Biblical emphasis upon Christ as the only foundation (1 Cor. 3:11), and the body being held together on account of being "in Him", compacted and built up by what "every joint supplies" (Eph. 4:16). This shift from the internal, the spiritual, to the external and visible, the perception of Christianity as a human organization we belong to, has been seen in the lives of many individual Christians, churches, denominations, groups etc. over time. The warning is for us to remain disciples of the Lord Jesus, following Him as it were around Galilee, focused upon Him alone, and finding the unity with others doing the same which will naturally follow.

## Notes

(1) J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A. & C. Black, 1968) p. 50

(2) References in Kelly, *ibid.*, p. 206.

## 16-6-10 Dogmatism And Legalism

The early brethren clearly had a firm and vital grasp on essential doctrine. But this led them into the danger of saying that we are saved by knowledge alone, and this ended up with the perversions of Gnosticism- whereby intellectual knowledge became paramount rather than behaviour. And we run this very same risk. We also see that the early church so valued true knowledge that they sought to codify Christian Truth into creeds. These then became used as a test of orthodoxy, and the result was that instead of being men and women charged with glad tidings, the Christians became arrogant and legalistic and argumentative. I am not against the fact that any church has a statement of faith. But one can only be concerned at the way some of us have added and added to these documents, making their further credal points into tests of fellowship and weapons for aggression. It was exactly because of this that the church which once attracted others to it by its warm love and unity, became famous for its division and strife. The emperor Julian came to observe: "No wild beasts are so dangerous to men as Christians are to one another". And so the 'church' only grew by political machinations and even forced conversions.

The writings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries seem to almost revel in vicious and condemnatory language. The *Apocalypse of Peter* seems to delight in describing the punishment to come upon those Christians who practiced abortion- their children would supposedly confront them in 'hell', tormenting them and torturing the breasts of their mothers. It was as if the 'Christian' community decided that it was perfectly acceptable to vent the anger that is within all of us through vicious condemnation of those whose positions they didn't agree with. And surely there are similarities and warnings here for our own communities. For there's no reason to think that a delight and glory in judgmentalism isn't growing amongst us. Perhaps one of the reasons for apostate Christianity choosing to misunderstand 'hell' [*hades*] as a place of punishment rather than simply the grave, was this desire to justify a vent for human anger against others, delighting in painting as awful a picture as possible of others' condemnation. Psychologically this appears to have been the reason why false doctrine about hell / *hades* / the grave was adopted.

It is no accident that when the early church gave up seeking to convert the Jews, apostasy set in big time. The church came to change its creeds in order to establish the Christian claims in opposition to those of the Jews- rather than, in the spirit of Paul, seeking to be Jews to the Jew that they might win the Jews. And we too, in parts, have given up [pretty well] seeking to convert this world, and looked inwards rather than outwards. This has also resulted in an ever-increasing desire to codify God's Truth, the covenant of grace, and then to yet further sub-divide against those of our number who cannot 100% subscribe to the new additions. Let's remember that we as a community started [and start] where the early brethren were on the day of Pentecost. We have the same basic Gospel. The same love of its glorious propositions, and the same desire to gladly testify to it, rigorously argue for it, persuade others of it...and yet we are tempted to let it go just the same way as the 1st and 2nd century believers did- into endless codifying of it, aggressive and self-justifying argument with it, heaping condemnation upon those who can't agree with us... and this could likewise lead to the Truth being lost by our very efforts to preserve it. To preserve it, preach it. This is the undoubted message of the 1st century. What happened then in the 1st century can happen now. A handful of ordinary men and women, with everything against them, walked out against the wind and turned their world upside down for Christ. This, to me at least, is the insistent challenge and inspiration that cannot end. It is easy to tire of being a misfit in a generation going in a different direction to that which we have chosen. And yet in considering our first century brethren we have the human inspiration to carry on. We face the same problems, but in essence we have the same means for success available to us. It is possible that our community could mushroom as did theirs. We have the same Gospel. There is no hint that God simply enabled things to spread more in those days than in ours. He earnestly wishes the salvation of men and women through His Son, then as much as now. So we are driven to the hard conclusion: that it depends upon us, as to whether we will truly follow the pattern of our early brethren in their experience of the Gospel of the Kingdom and the changing, saving power and person of Jesus.

The early Christian community was above all a witnessing community. Personal testimony, the example of radically transformed lives, heroic sacrifices... all this combined to enable the rapid growth of the church. The community was comprised of first generation converts, who spread the word with all the insistence, urgency and persuasion of those in first love with the Father and Son. But as time went on, the community inevitably began to inbreed, internal debates and issues assumed more importance than the vital task of saving others. We've commented how women were at the forefront of spreading the message through the social networks and households they were part of. The freedom and dignity afforded to women was a major attraction of Christianity. And yet it wasn't long before the anonymous *Didascalia Apostolorum* was warning women not to preach, lest "The Gentiles... hear the word of God not fittingly spoken... all the more in that it is spoken to them by a woman... she [the female preacher] shall incur a heavy judgment for sin" (1). I saw this history repeat itself amongst a group of Russian speaking sisters, who were some of the most dynamic preachers I was ever privileged to know in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They baptized a few hundred people in the remote towns in which they lived; and then, were informed that women who baptized others were liable to condemnation at the judgment, and their baptisms weren't valid as they were performed by women. And so the amazing spread of the Gospel in that area came to a standstill. Ramsay MacMullen likewise concluded that the mass gatherings and evangelization of the first century soon ceased, and the focus of Christian preaching was increasingly upon raising children in the faith rather than on actively propagating it to non-believers (2). And we obviously ask ourselves, whether in our personal and collective lives, we've not fallen into the same overall pattern. Where is our initial post-conversion

enthusiasm to spread the word to all? Do we still have it? Where did it go? And all too often, communities and ecclesias go through that same sad cycle. And yet that cycle isn't inevitable; history doesn't inevitably repeat itself. It remains written for our learning, that we might break the mould and even invert the cycle.

## Notes

(1) R. Hugh Connolly, ed., *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) pp. 132,133.

(2) Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing The Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

*“If I believed what you Christians believed I would crawl across England on my hands and knees, if need be, to tell men about it”*

*General Booth*