

From Milk to Meat

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Spiritual Growth: A Personal Perspective

1.1 " If any man be in Christ..."

1-1-1 What It Means To Be In Christ

We are all aware, at least theoretically, that at our baptism we became " in Christ" . Through that act we obeyed all the Lord's invitations to believe " in Him" , or as the Greek means, to believe into Him. We believed into Him after we heard the Gospel, by baptism (Eph. 1:13). We are now connected with the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ; we are treated by God as if we are His Son. His supreme righteousness is counted to us; we have a part in His redemption and salvation, because we are in Him (Rom. 3:24). In God's eyes, we became newly created people, because we were in Christ by baptism (2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 1:16,17). He made in Himself a new man (Eph. 2:15). But do we appreciate what it means to be " in Christ" as well as we might? The richness of His character, the wisdom and knowledge of the Father that is in Him, is there for our eternal discovery (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:27; 2:3). We were baptized into His death; He had a cup to drink of (His death) and a baptism to be baptized with (His burial) which we now become united with (Rom. 6:3,4; Col. 2:10-12). As such great attention was focused upon that suffering Son in His death, as such lavish, almost senseless extravagance of care for His burial: all of this becomes lavished on us as we become in Him. All that is true of Him becomes in some way true of us; as He is the seed of Abraham, so we become; and so the list could go on. Every stage of His being is applicable to we who are in Him:

- At the beginning of the world, when He was yet in the Father's plan, we were in Him (Eph. 1:4)
- Even the language of His virgin birth is applied to us (Jn. 1:13)
- Only the firstborn was saved at the Passover. We are the church of firstborns (Heb. 12:23 Gk.), a paradox as it stands written. For there can be only one firstborn. A whole community can't be "firstborns". But we are, through being in Christ.
- God sent forth Christ to save the world, and likewise we are sent forth in witness (Gal. 4:4 cp. Mt. 9:38; 22:3; Acts 13:4). The Saviour Himself said that as He was sent into the world, so He sent us (Jn. 17:18).
- As He witnessed in His ministry, so must we (Rom. 2:19 cp. Mt. 4:16)
- As He witnessed before Pilate, so must we witness (1 Tim. 6:12,13)

- As He prayed for those who spitefully used Him, and blessed and cursed not as the thieves did, so must we (Mt. 5:44; 1 Pet. 3:3)

- Baptism commits us to a life of sharing His death and resurrection. When John fell at the Lord's feet "as dead", the Lord responded by saying: 'I too was dead, but no more; I'm alive for evermore, and as I died with you and for you, so I live with you and for you, and you do the same for me' (Rev. 1:17,18).

- The description of the believer as a "living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1) alludes to the scapegoat, the only living sacrifice, which was a type of the risen Lord (Lev. 16:10 LXX = Acts 1:3). As the Lord ran free in His resurrection, bearing away the sins of men, so we who are in Him and preach that salvation can do the same. As Christ bore away our iniquities (Is. 53:11), so "we then that are strong ought to bear the iniquities of the weak" (Rom. 15:1).

- We died, rose and in a spiritual sense even ascended with Him to heavenly places in Him, and even sit with Him there (Eph. 2:6).

- We build our spiritual house upon the rock, and He does just the same; we work together with Him in this, because we are in Him (Mt. 7:24; 16:18).

Those seminal promises to Abraham hinged around what would be realized in, not "by", his seed. I emphasize again: all that is true of the Lord Jesus is now true of us, in that we are in Him. Often the promises about the seed in the singular (the Lord Jesus) are applied to us in the plural (e.g. 2 Sam. 7:14 cp. Ps. 89:30-35). Baptism is not an initiation into a church. It isn't something which just seems the right thing to do. And even if because of our environment and conscience, it was easier to get baptized than not- now this mustn't be the case. We really are in Christ, we are born again; now we exist, spiritually! And moreover, we have risen with Him, His resurrection life, His life and living that will eternally be, is now manifest in us, and will be articulated physically at the resurrection. All the outward forms will slowly fade and pass away ... but the essence will remain. And the essence is that we are in Christ, we are His, not this world's, and the life we have in Him will eternally continue.

We are covered with His righteousness, and therefore have a share in His victory; and yet it also means that we must act as He did and does. Paul felt so truly and absolutely forgiven that he could say that he was "pure from the blood of all men" (Acts 20:26). Yet as he said that, he must surely have had the blood of Stephen on his mind, trickling out along the Palestinian dust, as the clothes of the men who murdered Stephen lay at Paul's feet as a testimony that *he* was responsible for it. But he knew his forgiveness. He could confidently state that he was pure from that blood. Righteousness had been imputed, the sin covered- because he was in Christ. Yet we must "walk in Him" in the same way as we first entered into Him at baptism (Col. 2:6). We were created "in Christ unto good works" (Eph. 2:10). If we keep His commandments, we remain "in Him" (1 Jn. 3:24). We cannot be passive to being "in Christ". The Greek of 2 Cor. 5:17 is tellingly ambiguous; the sense is both: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature", or, "If any man be in Christ, let him be a new creature". The fact of becoming in Christ through baptism means that we are new creations potentially, and therefore must work towards being new creations. We must go on further than just being baptized into Christ. John wrote unto them that had believed into the name of the Son of God (a reference to baptism into His Name), "that ye may believe into the name of the Son of God" (1 Jn. 5:13). He wanted them to go further; to live out in practice what they had done in

status and theory by baptism into Christ. Because in theory we have 'put on the new man', "put on, therefore...mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind", i.e. bring forth in yourself the characteristics of Jesus, seeing you have 'put Him on' in baptism (Col. 3:10,12). Clothe your personality with Him, submerge yourself within Him, seeing you 'put on' Christ in baptism. Consider some examples of how our being in Christ means we must actually do something:

Firstly. Paul uses the fact that we are all "in Christ" as the basis of His appeal for true unity amongst the believers- with all the patience, forbearing etc. which this involves. By baptism into Christ, we are baptized into the same body of Christ as many others (Rom. 12:5). Therefore we "sit together...in Christ" (Eph. 2:6; 1:10). He has made in Himself one new man, so making peace between all those in Him (Eph. 2:15). This is why division between those in Christ is ultimately an impossibility. Christ is not divided (1 Cor. 1:10).

Secondly: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit [as being] in the Lord" (Col. 3:18). Leaving on one side the question of what exact behaviour Paul has in mind here, the motivator for it is that our married life must reflect the fact that we are those "in Christ". The golden rule is to act as He would do. Because both Paul and Philemon were "in Christ", Paul felt bold enough to appeal to him to act towards Onesimus as Christ would have acted (Philemon 8). The attitude of children to parents is governed by the fact that they are "in the Lord [Jesus]"; indeed, we are baptized into Christ in order that we may live the new life (Rom. 6:4). The whole purpose of being in Him is in order to live as He did and as He would. No wonder that "in Christ" is Paul's great spiritual battlecry.

Radical Implications

The whole idea of conversion and changing, even transforming, one's basic personality was deeply unpopular in the culture against which the Gospel was first preached in the first century. Ben Witherington comments: "Ancients did not much believe in the idea of personality change or development. Or at least they did see such change- a conversion, for example- as a good thing; it was rather the mark of a deviant, unreliable person... Greco-Roman culture valued stability and constancy of character... the virtuous Stoic philosopher was one who 'surmises nothing, repents of nothing, is never wrong, and never changes his opinion'" (1). Of course, this mindset was attractive because human beings never like changing- we're incredibly conservative. And whilst we may live amidst an apparent mindset that 'change is cool', we all know how stubborn we are to changing our basic personality, or even seeing that we need to be transformed. And yet, despite the cultural background, the Gospel of conversion and radical personal change spread powerfully in the first century. The radical change in Saul / Paul's life was proclaimed by him as programmatic for all who truly are converted (1 Tim. 1:16)- and for him, this involved a radical re-socialization, seeing the world in a quite opposite manner, losing old friends and considering former enemies his beloved family. Quick, radical, 180 degree change was especially unpopular in the first century- Proselytes, e.g., had to go through a lengthy process to become such. Yet Paul presents the change in him as being dramatic and instant on the Damascus road. Perhaps he alludes to how skeptically this was received by others when he answers the charge that he is an *ektroma*, a miscarriage, one born too quickly (1 Cor. 15:8,9). And he says that indeed, this had been the case with him.

(1) Ben Witherington, *The Paul Quest* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1998) p. 75.

1-1-2 Witnessing For Christ

And then there is the matter of preaching. Paul takes a prophecy concerning how Christ personally would be the light of the whole world (Is. 49:6), and applies it to himself in explanation of why he was devoted to being a light to the whole world himself (Acts 13:47). Paul even says that this prophecy of Christ as the light of the world was a commandment to him; all that is true of the Lord Jesus likewise becomes binding upon us, because we are in Him. Note that Paul says that God has commanded us to witness; it wasn't that Paul was a special case, and God especially applied Isaiah's words concerning Christ as light of the Gentiles to Paul. They apply to us, to all who are in Christ. We too are lights in the dark world (Mt. 5:14; Phil. 2:15), because we are in Christ, the light of the world (Jn. 9:5). As the Lord was the light of those that sat in darkness (Mt. 4:16), so Paul writes as if all the believers are likewise (Rom. 2:19). The light of Christ lightens every man who is born into the spiritual world (Jn. 3:9), with the inevitable effect that he too becomes the light of the world for others (Mt. 5:14). The inevitability of witness is developed further in *We're All Preachers*. And there is an old question relating to the parable of the sower which is relevant here: who is the sower? The preacher, or the Lord Jesus? Some Greek texts read "a sower" (followed by the AV), others "the sower" (cp. the Diaglott). Perhaps the Lord said both: 'A sower, the sower, went out...'. Surely the sower is the Lord Jesus, but in our work of witness we are His witnesses. For we represent Him to the world. This is why "the Spirit (the Lord the Spirit, Jesus) and the bride (the ecclesia) say, Come"; ours is a united witness with Him. As He was the lamb of God sent forth for the salvation of men, so those in Him are sent forth with that same Gospel, as lambs (Lk. 10:3). Men heard Paul's preaching and 'clave' unto him, as they did to other preachers (Acts 17:34; 5:13); but conversion is a cleaving unto the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:23; 1 Cor. 6:17 Gk.). Thus Paul "spoke boldly in the Lord [Jesus], which gave testimony unto the word of his grace" (Acts 14:3). To this extent does the preacher manifest his Lord, to the extent that Paul's preaching amongst the Galatians was a placarding forth of Christ crucified (Gal. 3:1 Gk.). God "was pleased to reveal his son in me, that I might preach him" (Gal. 1:16). And thus Paul could conclude by saying that he bore in his body [perhaps an idiom for his life, cp. the 'broken body' of the Lord we remember] the stigmata of the Lord Jesus. He was so clearly a slave belonging to the Lord Jesus that it was as if one could see the marks of the nails in his body. Preaching is a revealing to men of the Christ that is within us; this is what witnessing in Christ is really about, rather than pushing bills or placing press adverts or writing letters. Not that any of these things are to be decried, but the essence is that we from deep within ourselves reveal Christ to men. This is why those who witness to Him, as only those in Him can, testify to His especial presence in this work. The promise that "I am with you always" was in the context of being near the preacher as he or she witnesses.

It is significant that Paul takes a passage from one of Isaiah's servant songs and applies it to us. The servant who suffered and witnessed to the world was evidently the Lord Jesus. And yet Isaiah is also explicit that the servant is the whole seed of Abraham, "Jacob", the slowly-developing people of God (Is. 41:8; 44:1). There are many connections within Isaiah between the servant songs, and the descriptions of the people of Israel into which the songs are interspersed. The saviour-servant was to bring out the prisoners from the dungeons (Is. 42:7), so was every Israelite "to let the oppressed go free...loose the bonds", and to "undo the bands of the [heavy] yoke" (Is. 58:6) as Christ did (Mt. 11:28,29); His work of deliverance is to be replicated by each of us in our witness. Whoever is in Him will by this very fact follow Him in this work. In Isaiah's first context, the suffering servant was King Hezekiah. Yet all Israel were to see themselves as 'in' him, as spiritual Israel are to see themselves as in Christ. "He

was oppressed”, as Israel at that time were being “oppressed” by Assyria. As they were covered in wounds and spiritual sickness (Is. 1:5,6), so the suffering servant bore their diseases and rose again in salvation victory.

Other parts of the servant songs are quoted concerning us. The Lord’s servant being called from the womb (Is. 49:1) was applied by Paul to himself (Gal. 1:15), as it was likewise true of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5). Or take Is. 49:8,9: “In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee [quoted about us in 2 Cor. 6:2 in the context of us being preachers, labouring with God]: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to raise up the land, to make them inherit the desolate heritages; saying to them that are bound, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves” (RV). This is the language of the Lord’s preaching, which freed men from the prison house (Is. 61:1,2). Yet because we are in Him, we too have His ministry; our words too can make men inherit the Kingdom, and free men from their bondage. As the Lord in Isaiah’s servant songs was the suffering, saving, atoning servant, lifted up to give salvation world-wide- so are we. For we are in Him. Paul explained his life of devotion to world-wide witness by saying that the fact his Lord was a saving witness to all men was de facto a command to him, as one in Christ, to do likewise (Acts 13:47). This is why the concept of the Name of Christ is sometimes put for ‘the work of preaching His Gospel’, so definite is the connection between baptism into His Name and the work of witness which this naturally entails (Mt. 19:29; Acts 9:16; 15:26; 3 Jn. 7).

If they persecuted Him in His preaching, they will persecute we who, as in Him, preach as His representatives. Paul placarded Him forth as crucified to men through the example of his own life of death and resurrection, daily, with his Lord (Gal. 3:1). The wicked and adulterous generation to whom the Lord witnessed were given the sign of the prophet Jonah- that after three days, the Lord would re-appear. But that sign was only given to them through the preaching of the apostles- that generation didn’t see the risen Lord Himself (Mt. 16:4). But the witness of the disciples was as good as- for in their witness, they represented the Lord. And even in the Millenium, the basis of our witness to the world will be that we are in Christ. Thus Micah’s description of how “the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the Lord, as the showers upon the grass” (Mic. 5:7) is consciously alluding to the then-famous Messianic prophecy of Ps. 72:6: “He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth”. The blessings Messiah brings are to be articulated through the witness of those in Him.

Not only must we preach because our Lord preached. We must witness as He witnessed. When Paul wrote that “the servant of the Lord must not strive” in his preaching ministry (2 Tim. 2:24), he was alluding back to how the servant song described the Lord Jesus in His preaching as not striving or lifting up His voice in proud argument (Is. 42:2 cp. Mt. 12:19). And Paul goes on: “...but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing...”. This is all a pen picture of the Lord’s witness to men in Galilee. And yet it is applied to us. “Apt to teach” is surely an allusion to the way in which the Lord taught the people “as he was wont” (Mk. 10:1). So it’s not just that we should witness because the Lord, in whom we are, was the “faithful and true witness” (Rev. 1:5; 3:14); because we are in Him, we must witness as He did, with something of that same ineffable mixture of candour, meekness and Divine earnestness for man’s salvation. As the Lord was sent into the world, so He sends us into the world [Jn. 14:12; 17:18; 20:21 – this is perhaps John’s equivalent of the great commission]. Jesus ‘came down’ to this world in the sense that He was the word of the Father made flesh, and ‘all men’ saw the light of grace that was radiated from His very being.

And that same word must be flesh in us, as it was in the Lord. We are to be a living epistle, words of the Gospel made flesh, “known and read of all men” (2 Cor. 3:2). Earlier the Lord had sent out His men as lambs (Lk. 10:3)- as those in Him, the Lamb of God. It was written of the Lord’s preaching that He would not “strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice [raised up in this way] in the streets”. And for this reason He asked His converts not to “make him known” in this way; He wanted them to witness as He witnessed (Mt. 12:16,19).

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

A Shared Witness

The apostles bore witness to the Lord Jesus (e.g. Acts 26:22; 1 Cor. 15:15 s.w.), and He in turn bore witness to the [preaching of] the word of his grace (Acts 15:8). In their witness lay His witness. Revelation begins with John witnessing / testifying to the Word [made flesh, i.e. Jesus], and concludes with Jesus testifying (Rev. 1;2 cp. 22:20 s.w.). The witness of the Lord and of His disciple were one and the same. And had not John earlier written of how the witness on earth was a reflection of that in Heaven (1 Jn. 5:6,7)? The whole purpose of the Lord’s life was that He should “bear witness” unto the Truth of the Father (Jn. 18:37). But John also records the Lord’s expectations that all in Him should likewise “bear witness” (Jn. 15:27). And as John recounted the Gospel [of which the Gospel of John is a transcript], He stresses that by doing so he is ‘bearing witness’, living out the work of the Lord who lived as the faithful and true witness to men (Jn. 3:11; 19:35; 21:24 cp. 18:37).

1-1-3 The New Creation

"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation... all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). As a new born baby sees a chair, a table, a brother or sister, for the very first time, so do we after baptism. It is so hard for us to appreciate the newness of everything to a baby or small child. "All things are become new" in our attitude of mind after baptism. Yet we live in newness of

life (Rom. 6:4), as if this process of birth is ongoing throughout our spiritual lives. After baptism, therefore, we set out on a life in which we should be gazing, in wide eyed wonder, at new spiritual concepts and realities. How patient we should be with others who are in this position. "Old things are passed away" at baptism, just as the old world order will "pass away" at the Lord's return (Rev. 21:5). The dramatic change that will come upon this planet in the Kingdom should therefore be paralleled in our new spiritual vistas after baptism, and throughout the process of being re-born and becoming a new creation. Nothing exists in the same light as it did before baptism. Yet we would all admit that this is not totally true of how we see or saw things after baptism. The reason is because at baptism, the life of newness just began; we were born, but we must grow now to maturity. The challenge goes out to us all our mortal lives to more zealously and fundamentally allow God's word to make us new.

Israel's passing through the Red Sea was an undoubted type of baptism and the new creation (1 Cor. 10:1). God brought them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea baptism, "and brought you unto myself" (Ex. 19:4). It was as if God was waiting for them there, in the wilderness; as He waits to receive every man or woman who passes through the waters of baptism. Time and again they were bidden look back to their exodus/ Red Sea experience. In times of dire spiritual failure or sluggish indifference to their God, as well as at their pinnacles of faith, the Spirit in the prophets directed their minds back to these things- either by explicit statement, or by indirect allusion. We too, as the baptized new Israel, ought to likewise look back to our baptism with an ever-increasing appreciation.

The Red Sea was parted by a great wind, or Spirit, from God- pointing forward to how the path to baptism is created by the work of the Spirit in a person's life, so that we are born of water and Spirit (Jn. 3:3-5). The new creation is modelled on the natural creation, again brought about by God's Spirit. But much of the creation record doesn't actually talk about God creating things out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. Rather did He create situations where life and growth was possible. Thus the light was *revealed*, the waters were gathered together to reveal dry land, and we read that "the earth brought forth..." and not something like "God caused the plants to grow". The earth as it were cooperates with God to bring forth fruit. The same is true in the spiritual creation- God doesn't force spiritual growth, rather does His Spirit enable the environments for it to occur; in another figure, He does all that could be thought of so that His vineyard brings forth good fruit (Is. 5). We of course may be tempted to doubt this, considering that if only this or that situation in our lives were different, we would be enabled to grow spiritually. But God knows best, and His Spirit works in various ways to provide [by 'providence'] the best situation for our growth and new creation. There is a very positive feel in the record of the natural creation- each creative action is concluded with the comment "And it was so"- literally, "it was Yes" (Hebrew). This same positive upward spiral will be found in lives which submit to God's new creation.

Old Testament Types

The New Testament principles outlined above are founded in several Old Testament types.

Israel crossing the Red Sea is one of the most well-known types of baptism / the new creation (1 Cor.10:1). They were being chased by the Egyptians, and were trapped against the sea. The only way of escape was for that water to open and allow them to go through it. If any Israelite had refused to go through, there would have been no salvation. Going further, it is evident that the people of Israel as a body were going through the death and resurrection

experience of the Lord Jesus, through the process of the Passover and Exodus through the Red Sea:

Israel	Abib	Jesus
Ate Passover (Ex. 12:6)	14th	Died on the cross as Passover lambs slain
Left Egypt the next day (Num. 33:3)	15th	
Journeyed three days (Ex. 8:27)	15th-17th	Jesus three days in the tomb
Came through the Red Sea	17th	Resurrected

As we come out of the baptismal water, we really are united with the resurrected Lord- a new creation. His newness of life, His deliverance and successful exodus from the world- all this becomes ours. Israel were slaves in Egypt, and then after the Red Sea baptism became slaves of God. Ps. 68:18 pictures them as a train of captives being led out of Egypt, merging into the image of a train of a captivity led into a different captivity. Romans 6 powerfully brings home the point: we were slaves of sin, but now are become slaves of righteousness.

Noah entering the ark (representing Christ; 1 Pet. 3:21) is equally powerful; it was no use standing near the ark when the rain came. The only way of escape was through being inside the ark.

Col. 2:11 speaks of circumcision as another type of baptism, in that only the circumcised were in covenant with God. "The uncircumcised...that soul shall be cut off from his people" (Gen. 17:14). We either "cut off" the flesh, or God will cut us off. He who would not accept Jesus as Messiah in Messiah were to be "destroyed from among the people" (Acts 3:25), using a very similar phrase to the LXX of Gen. 17:14, where the uncircumcised man was to be "cut off from his people".

Tit. 3:5-7 implies that the priests washing in the laver also typified baptism: "They shall wash with water, that they die not" (Ex. 30:20). All God's people are priests, in a sense (1 Pet. 2:5,9); the washing of baptism is an absolute necessity before we can be God's priestly people.

Outside Christ

These Old Testament types were related to entering into covenant with God. Having crossed the Red Sea, God sealed His covenant with Israel at Sinai. After emerging from the ark, God made a covenant with Noah. And circumcision was the entry point of covenant relationship with God. The record of these Old Testament occurrences also brings out the converse- what happened to all those who were not in covenant with God, who had not received the typical 'baptism'. The unbaptized Egyptians were "cut off" (Ex. 9:15); "all flesh" that was not baptized into the Christ-ark was "cut off" (Gen. 9:15). "The uncircumcised man child...that soul shall be cut off" (Gen. 17:14). The New Testament matches this by the oft repeated teaching that outside of Christ, there can be no salvation.

Being outside Christ does not mean that we are just in spiritual limbo; our sins provoke the wrath of God. We are "saved from wrath" through being in Christ (Rom. 5:9). Before baptism we were "the children of wrath", "having no hope, and without (any relationship with) God" (Eph. 2:3,12). The enmity and alienation which there was between us and God is only ended by becoming "in Christ" (Eph. 2:13-16). There is a constant, unending hatred and conflict between the seed of the serpent, and that of the woman (Gen. 3:15,16). Without baptism, we are the seed of the serpent. We are in the Biblical devil, the man of the flesh. Through baptism into Christ, our real spiritual selves are "not in the flesh, but in the spirit" (Rom. 8:9). We are then allied with the seed of the woman; and the conflict between us and Christ ceases. Of course, by nature, we are still in the flesh. Our natural mind will always have violent enmity with the man Christ Jesus which is growing within us. But by baptism into Christ, the fundamental enmity between us and Christ has been breached; there has been a reconciliation, an at-one-ment.

The Surrounding World

Many new converts express confusion at how to treat the world and especially, the surrounding religious world; 'Shouldn't we kind of feel more in fellowship with them than the others in the world?', it is asked. Grasping the importance of baptism will help us have the correct attitude to those who are unbaptized. We will see them as out of Christ; to court or fellowship them is so illogical! Instead, we are driven to pity them, seeing the urgency of our task- to help them to baptism. In the Old Testament types, our attitude to the unbaptized is typified by the relationship God intended between Israel and the Egyptians and the Canaanite tribes, and between Noah and his surrounding world. Israel were intended to be a missionary nation, witnessing to the world around them, as they did to the Egyptians. Noah preached to the world around him. God desired Israel and Noah to be very clear in their minds as to who was in the world and who was not. There was no blurring at the edges.

Unless a person has believed the true Gospel and been baptized, they have no relationship with God. Being a "nice" person by the world's (so-called) standards is irrelevant to how God sees them. For those in Christ to openly declare themselves 'in love' with one who is in the world is therefore highly obnoxious to the Lord Jesus. We cannot love God and love the world. If we do love the world, we hate God, we are again at enmity with Him. James 4:4 is painfully clear about this. This shows that God counts us as one with those whom we love and fellowship. If we fellowship those who hate God, He counts us as hating Him. If we fellowship with the darkness of apostasy, we share the same relationship with God as they do.

Realizing the true position of the unbaptized world helps us to be better motivated in being separate from worldly organizations and politics. Abstention from voting is an obvious example. But being part of any worldly group should be avoided as much as possible. Any intimate linking of ourselves with other human beings who are alienated from God should be something we come to subconsciously sheer away from.

In these matters we must be very careful that we do not become self-righteous, and that we do not try to separate ourselves from the world in the wrong ways. We must be ever mindful that "the world" is right inside our very natures; John defines "all that is in the world" as the inherent lusts of our very natures (1 Jn. 2:16 cp. Ecc. 3:11). And we need to be aware that unless we are "in the world" to some extent, we will not be able to save them. Christ went right into the world, He mixed with all types of people, but He did not allow them to corrupt his own understanding of God. We must do the same. We must go forth with true spiritual

love into this God-forsaking world, just as God does with the Gospel. By learning how other people think, why they refuse to accept the real Christ, we will be better able to present our message. The parables of Jesus show that He was a man who had carefully reflected upon the everyday experience of his fellow men, and brought true spiritual values to bear upon their crises and situations in life.

The Brotherhood

Recognizing others as being "in Christ" imparts an altogether higher quality to our relationships. The cynicism and negativity which we naturally bring to many inter-personal encounters is taken away by a deep recognition that our brethren are indeed in the Lord. Having noted that the Galatians did not any longer "believe the truth", Paul can say that he has "confidence to you-ward in the Lord" (Gal. 5:10 RV). Because they were "in the Lord", he could hope against all human indications, that they would indeed rise up to an imitation of the Lord in whom Paul believed them to be. And so we have to ask ourselves, whether we indeed have that "confidence" about others, because we know them to be "in the Lord"? Or do we judge them after the flesh...?

1-2 Flesh And Spirit

In the above section, I've put the negative side first. There is so much that is gloriously positive about baptism and the whole long road of the new life in Christ. At baptism, we experience a new birth. "If any man (become) in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). We are born "out of" (Jn. 3:5 Gk.) the water as we emerge from the river, swimming pool or bath. Something was created at baptism in the sense that something was born. "Christ is [created in] all [who believe] and in all [places of the world]" (Col. 3:11 Bullinger). It is the common experience of this new creation which binds us together as one body and spiritual nation world-wide. That thing which was created and born at baptism, the Bible calls "Christ", or "the Spirit". If we are in Christ, He must be in us; it's a mutual relationship. We are not in the flesh now, but in the Spirit (Rom. 7:5), in the sense that the new Spirit-man has been created in us, even though we are still "in the flesh". We are familiar with the idea of "the devil" being a personification for the evil man of the flesh which is within us. Yet there is an even larger personification to be found in the pages of the New Testament; that of the man of the Spirit, "the man Christ Jesus" which is within us. It is this figurative "man" which was born at baptism. At baptism, we are saved in prospect, just as Israel were when they crossed the Red Sea (Jude 5). We are saved in prospect in the sense that God now looks upon us as if we are Christ. He looks at that new man Christ Jesus within us, and relates to that, instead of to our man of the flesh. These two 'men' within us will naturally become locked in mortal conflict. Ultimately, the 'devil' man will only be destroyed by death (Rom. 6:23). Yet 'he' can overpower and destroy the spiritual man within us, unless we feed and cultivate the man Christ Jesus within us. This had clearly happened to some in the Galatian ecclesias. Thus Paul speaks of travelling in birth again "until Christ be formed (again) in you" (Gal. 4:19). His converts had to "learn Christ" (Eph. 4:20); thus he speaks of "Christ" as meaning the Christ-like attitude of mind which is personified as Christ.

The Old Testament frequently speaks of man as having two "sides" to his character; one that wished to serve God, and the other which was rebellious. Ecc. 10:2 shows how that the spiritual man is not only aware of this, but he consciously acts to control these two sides: "A wise man's heart is at his right hand; but a fool's heart at his left". This kind of self-

knowledge is sadly lacking in most human beings. Proverbs 7,8 likewise has the picture of two women, personifying the flesh and spirit (7:12 cp. 8:2,3). Against this Old Testament background, there developed a strong Jewish tradition that the right hand side of a man was his spiritual side, and the left hand side was the equivalent of the New Testament 'devil'. The Lord Jesus referred to this understanding when He warned: "Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth" (Mt. 6:3)- implying that the good deeds of the spiritual man would be misused by the 'devil', e.g. in using them as grounds for spiritual pride.

Schizophrenia

Let's consider some more illustrations of there being two opposing 'people' within the believer:

- "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). We will later comment upon how our real spiritual man is not outwardly apparent. Despite the entropy of our lives, in every sphere of our ambitions as well as in our physical health, we can rejoice that our real spiritual self is growing, in newness of life, daily.
- The soul and spirit are both personified as people. This may be explicable in terms of the 'soul' sometimes referring to the man of the flesh, and the 'spirit' to the man Christ Jesus within us. We are told to deny ourselves (Lk. 9:23). We cannot destroy the man of the flesh, but our real spiritual self can deny that we know him, can shun him and disown him.
- We must "put off the old man" (Eph. 4:22); and yet "ye have put off the old man" (Col. 3:9). Have we, or haven't we? In God's eyes we have, in that the new man has been created, and the old man died in the waters of baptism. But of course we are still in the flesh; and the old man must yet be put off. What happened at our baptism must be an ongoing process; of laying the old man to rest in death, and rising again in the newness of life. The Gospel 'instructs us to the intent that, having once and for all put away ungodliness (i.e. in baptism) and worldly lusts, we should live in a holy manner' (Tit. 2:12 Gk.). Having put these things off in baptism, we must live a life of putting them off.
- We know that we sadly oscillate between the flesh and the spirit. And yet Scripture abounds with examples of where God sees us as in a permanent state of either sin or righteousness. We are fountains that bring forth good water, and therefore by that very definition cannot occasionally bring forth bitter water; we are good fruit trees or bad ones. We aren't a little of both, in God's sight. This is surely because He sees us on the basis of the fact that we are in Christ, clothed with His righteousness, rather than as individuals who sometimes act righteously and sometimes not during the course of a day. Thus God saw Samson as a lifelong Nazarite (Jud. 13:7), although we know there were times when he broke the Nazarite vow by, e.g., touching dead bodies and having his hair cut. The challenging thing is to behold our brethren as having the "in Christ" status (for we can't impute anything else to them, lest we condemn them), and not to see them from the point of view of people who sometimes act righteously and sometimes don't.
- 1 Cor. 2:14,15 speaks of the natural man not being able to understand spiritual things, in contrast to the spiritual man, who can easily comprehend them. Against this background we must read 1 Cor. 2:11: "What man knoweth the things of a (natural) man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no (spiritual) man, but the spirit of God". These 'men' within us are here associated with a spirit- of either man or God. Paul is

saying that within each of us, there are two 'spirits' or attitudes of mind, each personified by a 'man'. There is no common ground between these two attitudes of mind; they do not know each other. This perfectly explains the frustration our spiritual side feels with the natural side or 'man' within us. 'I just don't understand myself. How could I have done such a horrible thing!', we have all lamented at times. And Paul likewise: "That (sin) which I do, I allow (Gk. understand, s.w. to be aware of) not" (Rom. 7:15). Because of this lack of understanding between flesh and spirit, Paul says that the fact his conscience is clear does not necessarily justify him (1 Cor. 4:4 R.S.V.); the spiritual man cannot accurately report to us about the state of the natural man. The very existence of this lack of understanding between flesh and spirit is sure encouragement to us that we do have a spiritual man; and therefore we are heading in the right direction. Schism between brethren is a work of the flesh because it means that somehow, the spiritual man within a brother is not seeing or understanding the spiritual man within the other. One (or both) of them are seeing the fleshly man in the other; and the spirit and flesh are opposed to each other. Likewise, there should be an instant opposition between us and those in the world, who have no spiritual man at all, seeing they have not experienced the spiritual birth of baptism. Notice that Paul styles the spiritual man "he himself" (1 Cor. 2:15); as if the real, fundamental self of the true believer is the spiritual man, notwithstanding the existence of the man of the flesh within him. Likewise Paul calls his spiritual man "I myself" in Rom. 7:25. He now felt that when he sinned, it was no longer "I", his real, personal self, who was doing so (Rom. 7:17).

- Jude 19 has the same 'two person' idea in mind: "These be they who separate themselves, sensual (same word as "natural"), having not the Spirit" (i.e. the spiritual man). We are all sensual, having the natural man, but if we are in Christ, we will also have the man of the Spirit within us.

- This enables us to understand better why the temptations of Jesus are recorded as they are. We know that Jesus had our sinful nature, the devil, the man of the flesh, within him. Yet we know that He supremely separated himself from it. The only way to describe the presence of that 'devil' within Jesus is to personify it as a being outside him, which was totally contrary to the real Jesus. We submit that only by understanding the personification of flesh and spirit as two separate beings can we understand how Christ's temptations were internal, and yet spoken of figuratively as occurring externally. Gal. 5:18 speaks of flesh and spirit as being directly opposed to each other. The occurrence of the devil and spirit in the context of Christ's temptations must be significant. He was led of the spirit to be tempted of the flesh/devil (Mt. 4:1). I would suggest that "the spirit" here may refer to his spiritual mind. It has been suggested that "the spirit" which led Jesus was an Angel. Whilst there is not enough evidence to totally discount this, it must be pointed out that "a spirit" would be more appropriate. Mt. 4:1 describes the devil leading Christ into the wilderness, whilst Mk. 1:12 says that it drove Him there; this is hard to apply to one personal being like an Angel. The ideas of temptation, flesh/devil and spirit occur again in Mt. 26:41: "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak". Surely the Lord is warning the twelve that they were now in a position similar to his during the wilderness temptations. In their case, the spirit clearly refers to their spirituality rather than to an Angel.

- It is perhaps for this reason that Ps. 22:17 speaks of Jesus as if He is somehow out of his body, looking on at his suffering body: "I may tell all my bones; they look and stare upon me". This is understandable, seeing that on the cross, our Lord totally separated himself from the mind of the flesh, the natural man and sinful flesh of his body.

- Understanding the existence of these two 'people' within us helps to explain the paradoxes of our own nature. For example, we cannot be righteous, we seem unable to do the things we would like to (Gal. 5:17); yet in Christ, we cannot sin (1 Jn. 3:9). This must mean that if our real self is identified with Christ, God will count us as if we are Christ, and He did no sin. Our natural man, the devil, is a personification of sin. He cannot be reformed; he can only be destroyed by death. "The wages of the sin: death" (Rom. 6:23 Diaglott) seems to suggest that Rom. 6:23 is not saying that we die for each specific sin we commit (you can only die for one sin anyway, because we only have one life); rather is it saying that the end of the natural man, "sin", the devil within us, is death. Therefore we must associate ourselves with the man Christ Jesus, both in baptism and in our way of life, so that the personification of Christ within us will be clothed with a glorious bodily form at his return. This should in no way be read as countenancing the existence of an 'immortal soul' which survives death. Such a monstrosity is well outside the pages of Scripture.

Changing Masters

These two men within us are spoken of in Rom. 6 as slave owners. Christ becomes our new master, having bought us from the service of sin, 'the devil'. At our baptism, sin no longer has dominion over us. The Greek for "dominion" is kurios, normally translated "lord". At baptism we declare Jesus is our Lord, our kurios, He has dominion over us, not the devil. Confessing Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:10-13) therefore does not just refer to saying 'I believe in Jesus'. It means that we really commit ourselves to renouncing the old lord of sin, and accepting the Lord Jesus as the Lord of our real, inner self. "Sin hath reigned unto death" (Rom. 5:21) implies that "death" was the state we were in before baptism. Now we are under Christ, the state we are in is "eternal life", as opposed to eternal death, which was the wages of the sin man which once dominated us. We were receiving the wages of sin, i.e. death, in an ongoing sense; "sin...working death in me" (Rom. 7:13). Now, under our new master, we are receiving eternal life in an ongoing sense too. In the same way as we had not physically received the wages of death when we were under sin, so now we have not physically received eternal life, the result of following Christ. But our present experience of living "in Christ" is a sure proof that we are on the road towards it. It is impossible to serve two masters (Lk. 16:30). Therefore we must accept that at any moment in time, we are either in Christ, or in the devil. We ought to know whether we are in Christ, whether we are real "brethren in Christ" in God's eyes, or else we declare ourselves to be reprobates (2 Cor. 13: 5).

Paul: Working Model

Paul is in many ways a working model of how we should be aware of the two people within us. In writing to Corinth, he was highly sensitive to the danger of sinning by justifying himself as he needed to. To overcome this problem, he speaks (through the Spirit) as if he is two quite different people; the fleshly man, and the spiritual man. 2 Cor. 11 is full of statements concerning himself, which he makes "as a fool". His frequent usage of this word "fool" points us back to the Proverbs, where a "fool" is the man of the flesh. Ecc. 10:2 says that a fool has a 'left handed' mind, which we saw earlier was a reference to the "man of the flesh" of the N.T. There are a number of apparent contradictions between passages in 2 Cor. 11, 12 which are explicable once it is appreciated that Paul is speaking firstly "in the flesh", and then concerning his spiritual man. Thus he insists that he is not a fool (11:16; 12:6), whilst saying that he is a fool (12:11). He says he will not boast about himself, but then he does just that. He claims to be among the greatest apostles, and in the same breath says he is nothing (12:11). His boasting was "not after the Lord", i.e. the man Christ Jesus within Him

was not speaking, but the fool, the man of the flesh, was speaking (11:17). The supreme example of this separation of flesh and spirit in Paul's thinking is shown by 12:2: "I knew a man in Christ (who heard great revelations)...of such an one will I glory, but of myself will I not glory". But 12:7 clearly defines this "man" as Paul: "lest I should be exalted...through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh". The "man in Christ" of whom Paul spoke was his own spiritual man, who was "in Christ". It is interesting that here Paul defines "myself" as his natural man, whereas in Rom. 7:25 he speaks of "myself" as his spiritual man. The point is made that at different times we identify ourselves either with the man of the flesh, or with the spiritual man within us. In 2 Cor. 11,12, Paul consciously chose to identify himself with the natural man, in order to boast to the Corinthians. It is worth noting that "fourteen years ago" takes us back to the Council at Jerusalem. The revelations given to Paul then were probably confirmation that the Gospel should indeed be preached to the Gentiles. This was the "third Heaven" dispensation. The wonder that Paul would be used to spread the Gospel world-wide so mentally exalted Paul that he needed a thorn in the flesh to bring Him down to earth. Yet, for the most part, we seem to shrug our shoulders at the wonder of our preaching commission.

1-2-1 The Hidden Man

1 Pet. 3:4 speaks of the spiritual man within us as "the hidden man of the heart...a meek and quiet spirit". This confirms that this "man" is the personification of a spirit, or attitude of mind. Thus our real spiritual person is "hidden". The world therefore cannot understand us, or be truly close to the believer who has the spiritual man utmost in their heart. The Gospel itself is a "mystery" (something hidden), yet this hidden mystery is the dynamic power in our "hidden man" of the Spirit. All that is hidden will be openly revealed in the Kingdom (Mt. 10:26). The inward man of Rom. 7:22 is what is so important; yet the LXX in Lev. 3:14-16 uses the same word to describe the fat surrounding the intestines, which God appeared to so value in the sacrifices. It was not that He wanted that fat in itself; but rather He saw that fat as representing a man's essential spirituality, that which is developed close to the heart, unseen by others, but revealed after death.

The real spiritual self which we are developing now will be revealed openly when the Lord comes, both to ourselves and also to our brethren. It is crucial to appreciate that God will not turn us into spiritual beings after the judgment seat. The spirituality which we now have will then be manifested in physical, bodily terms. This is why Rom. 8:11 encourages us that if we have this spiritual man within us, then "If the spirit of Him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he...shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his spirit that (now) dwelleth in you". Our life is now "hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3), and will be made manifest at his glorious appearing. Even after we die, our 'spirit', our essential spiritual personality, is still actively recollected by God (cp. Heb. 12:23). It is our spiritual man which is hidden; it is here called "our life" because it is the guarantee of our eternal life. What higher motivation could we require than to here and now develop the spirit of Christ? "Greater is he that is in you (i.e. your spiritual man, Christ Jesus), than he that is in the world" (1 Jn. 4:4). If the spiritual man is within us, we must surely win our spiritual conflict, ultimately!

Rom. 2:28 continues this theme of our real spiritual self being hidden, by saying that the true believer will "inwardly" (same word translated "hidden" in 1 Pet. 3:4) circumcise his heart. The works of the flesh are "manifest", but by inference those of the Spirit are hidden (Gal. 5:18,19). Mt. 6:4,6,18 gives triple emphasis to the fact that God sees in secret. He alone truly and fully appreciates our spiritual self. This is sure comfort on the many occasions where our

spirituality is misunderstood, both in the world and in the ecclesia. Yet it also provides an endless challenge; moment by moment, our true spiritual being is known by the Almighty, "Thou whose eyes in darkness see, and try the heart of man". The spiritual man which God now knows ("sees") and relates to, will be what He sees at the day of judgment. God dwells in "secret", i.e. in the hidden place, as well as seeing in "secret". God is a God who hides Himself (Is. 57:17) due to human sinfulness. If we fail to see the spiritual man in our brethren, this must be due to a lack of real spiritual vision in us. It is human sin which is somehow getting in the way.

" Our secret sins..."

Those disfellowshipped by the Ephesus ecclesia had committed their sins "in secret" (Eph. 5:11,12 cp. Rev. 2:2), i.e. in the hidden man. This is the arena of sin; in the heart. God will therefore judge the "secrets of men" at the last day (Rom. 2:16). It is in this context that Rom. 2:28 stresses the importance of being spiritually circumcised "inwardly" (same word as "secrets"). It is our real spirituality which will then be judged, and made open for all to see. There is enough Biblical hint that this fact will result in some surprises. Many that are first shall be last. That principle will prove true in many cases at the day of judgment; not just a few odd balls who the rest of the ecclesia misjudged. Because of the evident impossibility of our truly knowing the spiritual state of others, we need to be so careful of forming any opinion of others, apart from firmly believing that they are "in Christ" if their doctrine and lifestyle live up to this. There must be so much hidden spirituality in others which we do not appreciate. "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts" (1 Cor. 4:5). There are some instructive parallels here:

" Bring to light"	" Make manifest"
" The hidden things of"	" The counsels of"
" Darkness"	" The hearts"

The hidden man is therefore "the counsels" of the heart. How we speak and reason to ourselves in our self-talk, this is the indicator of the hidden man. This will be 'made manifest' to the owners of those hearts, the Greek implies. "All things are naked and opened" unto God anyway; the second coming will reveal nothing to Him. The making manifest of our hidden man will be to ourselves and to others. The purpose of the judgment seat is therefore more for our benefit than God's; it will be the ultimate self-revelation of ourselves. Then we will know ourselves, just as God knows us (1 Cor. 13:12). Through a glass, darkly, we can now see the outline of our spiritual self (1 Cor. 13:11,12), although all too often we see this picture in the spiritual mirror of self-examination, and then promptly forget about it (James 1:23,24).

Self-knowledge

But then we will experience self-knowledge of a kind quite beyond our present possibilities. Then we will appreciate the seriousness of sin, and also the significance of the spirituality we have developed. The Lord must have had this in mind when He told the parable of the virgins. The faithful grab their lamps, their spiritual selves, and see for the first time during their lives of waiting the real state of their oil. They can see for themselves whether they are fit to meet their Lord or not. The fact that we can examine ourselves now, and know whether we are in Christ (2 Cor. 13:5), shows that we can have a foretaste of the judgment seat even

now. But is that what our all too hasty and ad lib self-examination sessions are like? Paul rebuked Corinth for their inability to know whether they had the Christ-man developed within them: " Know ye not...that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (1 Cor. 3:16). We must reckon ourselves dead to sin (Rom. 6:11). The Greek for " reckon" is that translated " impute" or " count" , and which often appears in the surrounding chapters in Romans, speaking of how God " counts" us to be perfect. We must reckon ourselves as God reckons us.

The Christ-man is first born at baptism, but it is quite possible for it to lie dormant or even die unless it is nurtured. Almost all of us have discovered the presence of our real spiritual man some time after baptism. The spiritual self is begotten by the word, leading to the birth at baptism (2 Cor. 5:17; James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23); yet it is the word which makes the " man of God" perfect or mature (2 Tim. 3:16,17). Note that the " man of God" here probably refers to our inner spiritual self, rather than just being an epithet for a believer. In this case, 1 Tim. 6:11 records Paul speaking to Timothy's spiritual man: " Thou, O man of God, flee these things" . " Man of God" was a term used to describe the Old Testament prophets; it is as if Paul is addressing himself to the word-developed man within Timothy. We must likewise relate to the spiritual man within our brethren.

" That which is not corruptible"

We must not look at the outward man, either in ourselves or in others, " but at the things which are not seen (which) are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18). These are parallel with the things of the " inward man" which will not perish as our body does, but which are eternal (2 Cor. 4:16). Here again we have encouragement that our spiritual character is eternal; in some way it is preserved in God's mind/Spirit beyond our death. " The hidden man...a meek and quiet spirit" is not corruptible (1 Pet. 3:4), surely alluding to the description of our spiritual treasures as eternally lasting in Heaven, where there is no corruption (Mt. 6:19,20). Our future inheritance is described by Peter as " incorruptible" (1 Pet. 1:4), yet he also speaks of God's word which creates the new man, as also being " incorruptible" (1 Pet. 1:23), as is the hidden man which it develops (1 Pet. 3:4). This teaches us that the new man created within us here and now by the action of the word, is in fact strongly related to the future " incorruptible" inheritance we will receive at the second coming.

" The spirits of just men..."

It is this sense that having a spiritual mind now associates us with the spirits / spiritual characters of just men of the past (Heb. 12:23). Where our treasure is, there our heart, our spiritual man, is also; and that treasure of a spiritual character is reserved in Heaven, to be physically manifested at Christ's return. That inheritance in Heaven is incorruptible; that spiritual man cannot be destroyed (1 Pet. 1:4); this is our spiritual house in the Heavens which will remain when our earthly house of this mortal body returns to dust (2 Cor. 5:1,2). Hence the persecuted believers of the first century, faced with death, committed their souls (their spiritual being) to God, to be kept by Him (1 Pet. 4:19). Paul uses similar language in his swansong (2 Tim. 1:12). Perhaps this is the solution to Rev. 6:9,10, which speaks of the souls of the faithful under the Christ altar, continuing to exist in some sense after their physical death. This is perhaps one of many allusions in the Apocalypse back to the Gospels; this time to Mt. 10:28: " Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul" . These persecuted souls appear again in Rev. 20:4, where the " souls of them that were beheaded...lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" .

The point is being made that the spiritual man within us in this life is still recognized by God after our death, and in the Kingdom this spiritual man will be given a glorified bodily form. Of course it is evident that we personally are not conscious after death. It is God who is conscious of us, not the other way round. In this same sense 1 Tim. 6:19 speaks of our good works being stored up until the judgment day. It was a spiritually discerning hymn writer who penned: " Those characters shall firm remain / their everlasting trust...when (all other things) have mouldered into dust" . Because of this, the fact we have the spiritual man within us now is a sure guarantee that we will be in the Kingdom (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5). It is the spiritual aspect of our characters which will continue to know and relate to each other in the Kingdom age. The spiritual aspects of our friendships within the ecclesia are eternal. No wonder there is such joy of fellowship possible for us now! The closeness of spirit after a moving Bible study or exhortation, the intense unity of fervent collective prayer, these are expressions of that interlocking of spiritual character which will continue eternally. By contrast, if our relationships are based around human similarity, these will " perish" along with the outward man. The same is true of marital and family relationships.

1-2-2 The Spiritual Man

Because of these principles, Paul speaks to his readership (even in dodgy Corinth) as if they are all sanctified and acceptable in Christ. Faithful elders will " watch for your souls" (Heb. 13:17); not for your physical life, but they will look carefully at the spiritual man within the people who comprise their flock. Because of the fact that " our earthly house of this tabernacle" will soon be " dissolved" , whilst our spiritual house or " man" will last eternally, Paul concluded: " Henceforth know we no man after the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:1,16). All he saw was the spiritual man within a person.

He continues: " though we have known Christ after the flesh, henceforth know we Him no more" ; i.e. because Jesus has now been glorified, He no longer has a flesh man for us to know. God was manifested in the flesh of Christ, but now Christ is living " in the Spirit" , thus justifying God's righteousness (1 Tim. 3:16). He was " put to death in the flesh, but quickened by (on account of) the Spirit" , the Spirit-man within Him (1 Pet. 3:18). Thus Christ's sacrifice was acceptable by reason of his " eternal Spirit" (Heb. 9:14); his perfect spiritual character was what enabled his physical blood and death to win our salvation. His resurrection was due to his " spirit of holiness" (Rom. 1:4). We can only relate to Him now as a spiritual being. We can not now know Him after the flesh. Now his mortal flesh has been destroyed, He is " the Lord the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18 R.V.); He is called " the Spirit" in Revelation because the spiritual character He developed in his mortal life is now what He is. However, it must be stressed that this does not mean that Christ is without a body; a " Spirit" or spiritual man can only exist in a bodily form. His spiritual being is manifest and personified in the spiritual man within each of his brethren. Therefore we should only relate to them as Christ, as the spiritual man Christ Jesus which is within them.

The manner of inspiration reflects how God sees His servants. Often the Spirit caused the Bible writers to portray God's children in an extremely positive way. Thus Lk. 22:45 says that the disciples fell asleep from sorrow, when in reality this was due to their lack of spiritual awareness and sense of spiritual urgency. Likewise, Lk. 1:18 records only a few (apparently harmless) of the many words which Zacharias doubtless said, not without strong disbelief, during the abnormally long time he remained in the temple. These examples illustrate how God looks so positively upon His children.

" Cannot commit sin" - ?

The fact that God looks at us so positively, as if we are actually Christ, in that we are " in Him" , means that in this sense we cannot sin (1 Jn. 2:1), in that Christ cannot now sin. Our spiritual man is now " saved" in prospect. The devil is now dead in Christ, and sin is likewise dead in us too, insofar as we are " in Christ" (Heb. 2:14; Rom. 8:3). " The old man" of sin has been destroyed in our association with the death of Christ, so that " the body of sin" might be destroyed at the judgment seat (Rom. 6:6). Sin is dead without law (Rom. 7:8), and yet sin is described, in the same context, as being dead in us (Rom. 6:11; 8:3); this is because we are not under any legal code. Salvation is by grace, through our faith that God really is giving it to us. And if we truly have faith, then we will show that faith in a life of conformity to the spirit of Christ. We are " free from sin" (Rom. 6:22), in the sense that we are not now under any legal code which could impute sin to us (Rom. 5:13). The spiritual man is born of God, and therefore " cannot commit sin" (1 Jn. 3:9). God " will not" (in the present and in the future, the Greek implies) impute sin to those in Christ (Rom. 4:8). As it is impossible for God to see men as righteous outside of Christ, so He finds it impossible to see them as sinners when they are truly counted as in Christ (Rom. 6:20 cp. 22). " Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (Jn. 8:34), but those in Christ are counted as not being the servants of sin, but of Christ (Rom. 6:17). The connection with Jn. 8:34 makes this tantamount to saying that they are reckoned as not committing sin.

It is worth following through Paul's argument in Romans. Chapters 1-5 convict all of sin, demonstrating that works can in no way save us. Chapter 6 then outlines how we can be saved; through association with Christ through baptism and a life " in Christ" , which will result in God seeing us in the exalted way He does. Chapter 7 basically goes on to say 'But, of course, you'll still sin, even though chapter 6 has explained how God doesn't look at that side of you if you truly try to live " in Christ" '. Paul says many things about his life in Rom. 7 which seem to consciously connect with his description of life before baptism in Chapter 6 (e.g. 7:13 = 6:23; 7:14 = 6:17; 7:23 = 6:12,13; 7:24 = 6:6; 7:25 = 6:16,17). The reason for this is that after baptism, we have two people within us; the man of the flesh, who totally dominated our pre-baptismal life, is still within us; but (as Chapter 7 so graphically shows) he is now in mortal conflict with the man of the Spirit, with whom we identify our real selves. Chapter 8 then goes on to encourage us that despite this conflict, sin is dead in Christ, and if we are in Him, then this is really how God sees us. Therefore Rom. 8 stresses that our state of mind is so crucial; if we are led of the Spirit-man, then we are assured of salvation at that point in time. Rom. 9-11 then appeals specifically to Israel to accept the glorious truth of all this, and then Chapters 12-16 show the practical response we should all make. Recognizing the existence of the new and old men within him, Paul can speak in Rom. 7 as if he is two different people; "I myself serve the law of God", but "my flesh" serves sin. Likewise David asked God not to hide his face from him, David personally, (Ps. 27:9; 69:17; 102:2; 143:7), but to hide His face from David's sins (Ps. 51:9). And one wonders whether the way the records of the Lord's temptations are written implies some similar recognition by the Spirit of the two 'men' within the Lord.

Heb. 10:18,26 states that Christ only made one sacrifice for sin, implying that the sins of those in Christ were atoned for at one moment in time. He will not make another sin offering each time we sin, and therefore we should not sin wilfully, because that assumes that he will once again sacrifice for sin. Thus we will be crucifying Christ afresh (Heb. 6:6). The sacrifice of Christ can make us perfect in God's sight, so that " once purged" we should have " no more conscience of sins" (Heb. 10:1,2). This does not refer to " conscience" as the guilty streak

within us. Paul is saying that our spiritual man ought to have no more guilt for our sins, which are now forgiven. But if we allow sin to be the governing principle in our lives, we can no longer be reckoned as sinless (Rom. 6:12; 1 Jn. 3:8). This struggle to allow the Christ man to guide our lives rather than the flesh man is what spiritual life is all about. The evident 'benefits', if we may use so weak a word, from being 'led of the Spirit' are worth reflecting on daily, for they must surely motivate us.

Flesh v. Spirit

We need to learn to look at each other as God looks at us. Men judge after the fleshly side of a person, whilst God judges according to our spiritual man (1 Pet. 4:6). Paul's statement that "old things are passed away" at baptism, leaving only the new man, is in the context of telling Corinth that Paul did not know any man "after the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16,17). In other words, he reflected on the fact that they were baptized, that they were in Christ, and that therefore in the eyes of God, their old man had been destroyed. We must realize that these two men exist, rather than just treat people as the person they appear to be on the outside. The Hebrews were encouraged to appreciate that God's word really does divide asunder soul and spirit, the two people within us (Heb. 4:12). This recognition is vitally necessary, for with differing motives, the flesh and spirit men within us are quite capable of doing the same external works. We need to realize more the fundamental opposition which there should be between flesh and spirit within our minds. "Though we walk in the flesh (cp. Paul's recognition of his fleshly side in Rom. 7)...the weapons of our (mental) warfare are not carnal (of our fleshly man), but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds". These strong holds which are pulled down are defined in v.5 as "imagination...every thought" which have to be 'cast (cp. 'pulled') down'. Those strong holds exist in the recesses of our natural minds. Rom. 6:13 encourages us not to yield our minds as weapons of sin, but as weapons of God (Rom. 6:13 AVmg.). Our thinking is a weapon, which both sides in this conflict can use. The sinful man within us is "warring against the law of my (spiritual) mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin" (Rom. 7:23). Yet 2 Cor. 10:5 describes our spiritual man as overthrowing our carnal man, and bringing those thoughts into captivity to the Christ man. The impression is created of constant attrition, with victories for both sides. In Rom. 7 the impression is given that the carnal man is winning; whilst 2 Cor. 10:2-5 paints the picture of the Christ man triumphant. To get this picture over, perhaps the Spirit used a spiritually depressed Paul in Rom. 7, and a triumphant Paul at the time of writing 2 Cor. 10?

The Unity Of The Spirit

The natural man cannot possibly understand the love of Christ, but the Spirit "in the inner man" can fully comprehend it (Eph. 3:16-19). This failure of the natural man to understand the things of the spirit is the basic reason for all division between genuine brethren. Time and again we are reminded of the fact that our fellowship with each other is due to the fact that we both have the spiritual man inside us (Eph. 2:18; 4:3,4; Phil. 1:27;2:1). Our spiritual man is not limited by the bonds of space. Thus Paul was bodily absent from Corinth, "but present in spirit" (1 Cor. 5:3), i.e. his spiritual man was present with them. It was the same with Colosse: "I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit" (Col. 2:5). When our spiritual man groans, Christ groans too in Heaven, an infinite distance away (Rom. 8:23 cp. 26). There is no time barrier, either. Thus our spiritual man is in close fellowship with "the spirits of just men made perfect", having died many years ago (Heb. 12:23). This is the glorious unity of the Spirit; we are not just connected with all living saints, wherever they may be, but with the spiritual characters of all true saints throughout history.

So we stress that it is our spiritual men who are in fellowship. We need to remember that we each have, potentially at least, this spiritual man within us. The letters of John reason that having Christ within us is parallel with having love within us. For some, it is difficult to believe that they have any love in them. The circumstances of life seem to have driven this out completely. But through baptism and continual feeding on the word, the man of love really is developed within each of us. We need to appreciate the truth of this for ourselves, and also for others in Christ. We need to constantly remember that the spiritual man is there, surely, within all those with whom we come into contact in the ecclesia. " Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 Jn. 5:1). Our spiritual man is what is born of God. All true believers are here spoken of as if they are their spiritual man. All true believers in Christ therefore have a spiritual man within them, which we must seek out, even imagine at times, and with which we should fellowship.

1-2-3 The Certainty Of Salvation

1 Jn. 4 and 5 brim over with certainty that we readers really will enter the Kingdom. There is a question which cuts right to the bone of each of us; right through the debates and semantics which increasingly shroud our Christian lives. 'Can we be completely certain that should Christ return now, we will be in the Kingdom?'. Posing this question provokes widely different response- from 'Of course not! How presumptuous!', to that of the present writer: 'By God's grace- yes!'. We can't say ultimately because we may fall away in the future- but we should be able to assess the spiritual state we are in at this present point in time. If we cannot do this, then our salvation is very much at risk; as Paul bluntly told Corinth: " Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" (2 Cor. 13:5). They sought proof that Christ was in Paul (2 Cor. 13:3), yet he challenges them to know whether Christ is in them personally. The implication was that if they could not judge that, they were in no position to ask whether Christ was in Paul- or any other. This is vintage Paul; the logic is irresistible.

In Christ

By baptism into Christ, we are counted by God as if we are as morally perfect as Christ was. There is now the certainty of salvation . Just as surely as He rose from the dead to eternal life, so will all those in Him. So we ask 'Are we in Christ?'. Surely we should know the answer to that. We should know whether we are in covenant relationship with God or not. The " mercy and truth" , or " covenant mercy" which we experience under the New Covenant is not something which is exercised towards us just in the few moments when we pray for forgiveness. We live in this covenant of mercy, it is constantly shown to us. Faith in Christ does not only refer to believing in his historical existence and knowing the correct exposition of the atonement through Him. Real faith in Christ means appreciating the extent of his perfection, and really believing that God has imputed this to us. This is the hardest yet most vital thing to have faith in.

Some time, have a glance through John's first epistle. Almost every other verse brims over with the certainty of the true believer. If we are not intended to be 100% certain of receiving salvation, the language of this letter is hard to comprehend: " Truly our fellowship is with the Father...now are we the sons of God...the children of God are manifest...we know that we have passed from death unto life...we know that we are of the truth...we know that He abideth

in us...we are of God...we have known and believed the love that God hath to us...he that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself (in his own conscience?)...God hath given to us eternal life...ye may know that ye have eternal life" .

Reckoning Ourselves...

Already I can feel a sense of discomfort creeping over us. We are all intensely aware of our gross spiritual weakness. We feel much more at home with Paul's matchless confession of his innate tendency to sin, so strong that " When I would do good, evil is present with me...how to perform that which is good I find not" . Yet it is no accident that this dire recognition of the seriousness of our spiritual position in Romans 7 should lead straight on to Romans 8, one of the most positive passages in all Scripture. It is instructive to trace the parallels between these two chapters. For example, Paul's lament " I am carnal" (7:14) is matched by " To be carnally minded is death" (8:6). His argument in Romans 6-8 runs along these lines: 'We are all carnally minded by nature; but Christ had our sinful nature, yet achieved perfection. If we are in Christ by baptism and by His spirit/disposition being seen in us, then God will count us as Christ, and will therefore raise up our bodies to immortality, as His was'. The fact we still retain the old nature in this life means that we will be aware of the tremendous conflict within us between flesh and spirit. " If Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin" (Rom. 8:10). Paul obviously didn't mean that we would not have the power of sin active in our natures any more- the preceding chapter 7 makes that crystal clear. The obvious connection with Rom. 6:11 explains the point: " Reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin" . The apostle recognized his own innate sinfulness and spiritual failures which were solely his own fault (" When I would do good..." , Rom. 7), yet he was confident of salvation (Rom. 8). This was because he intensely believed in Christ's perfection, and that he was in Christ, and that at baptism he had received the condemnation of death which he deserved. " There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). There is the certainty of salvation.

The Totality Of Truth

We live in a world which is increasingly uncertain in its day to day existence, its thinking and philosophy. The Gospel of Christ and the personal knowledge of God which this leads to, is " the truth" . " Truth" is a concept which is alien to our surrounding world. To say that we are in God's covenants of truth, that we " know the truth" , that we speak forth " the truth of God" in our preaching, all requires faith. A correct appreciation of " the truth" is not based on blind dogmatism or unthinking continuation of dearly held traditions. A staid, tradition-based reverence for the doctrines of truth will not generate faith in salvation; and neither will any school of thought which reasons that doctrine is unimportant. God's word is truth, and that word develops faith. The spiritual attribute of faith is not unrelated to " the faith" in terms of the set of true doctrines which comprise this. It is on account of them, as revealed in " the word of truth" , that we develop faith. As faith increases, so will our certainty in the truth of those basic doctrines, and therefore we will the more clearly see doctrinal error for what it ultimately is- faith destroying. Mysticism is a feature of all false religion; major false doctrines such as the impersonality of God, the trinity, the devil, the immortal soul, are all couched in terms of 'mystery' (cp. Rev. 17:5). They are so popular because they allow a profession of belief without demanding real faith. Truth and faith are related. For this reason it is meaningless to hold up orthodox Christians as examples of real 'faith' in Biblical terms.

Because of our sinfulness, we constantly struggle with the problem of certainty. Are we really in Christ? Are God's promises really going to be fulfilled to us? Is our doctrinal basis really the truth? Because the word is truth, Christ our Lord is the truth, the covenants of God are the truth, we should be able to have a humble certainty in our salvation. We will be in a position whereby we can examine ourselves and know whether Christ is in us. Such faith is fundamentally rooted in a study and appreciation of "the faith". As we hear those basic doctrines repeated from ecclesial platforms, they should be a dynamic force within us. They will not be a weariness to our ears, even if repeated in the same format.

If ecclesias were comprised of members who each had a firm faith that they are fully acceptable with God at this point in time, what a community we would be! What zeal to communicate our faith to each other and the world, what properly motivated zeal for the purity of the one faith, what great fellowship in joyful worship and praise! Indeed, what a foretaste of the future Kingdom which we firmly believe we will share in. Through our faith that we will certainly receive that great salvation, we will even now "walk...as (if we are) in the day" of Christ's Kingdom (Rom. 13:12,13).

The Truth Of The Cross

As he beheld the cross of the Lord Jesus, the idea of ultimate truth filled John's mind: "He that saw it bear record, and his record is true; and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe" (Jn. 19:35). 'I know this is the truth, and I know I'm saying the truth because it is the truth'. This could seem a bit of a tautology; but what John is doing, under Spirit guidance, is to express to us the great sensation of truth which came into his very being as he watched the death of the Son of God. The Spirit filled him with this sense; he comments on this in 1 Jn. 5:6: "This is he that came by water and blood (on the cross)...And it is the Spirit that beareth witness (through John), because the Spirit is truth". The Centurion "and they that were with him" felt likewise: "Truly this was a righteous man. Truly this was the Son of God". So our beholding of the Son of God now ought to inspire us with a similar realization of the glorious truth which there is in our spiritual position. Paul upbraids the Galatians because they did not "obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you" (Gal. 3:1). Like us, they had not stood at the foot of the cross. But they had learnt something of the spirit of the crucified Christ from the apostle's words, and he is saying that this ought to have inspired their love of the truth, their belief of it, their real acceptance of the certainty of salvation by the great grace of Christ. And so the same is so true of us too. Through His death, Christ confirmed the promises of God, which are often referred to as His "mercy and truth" in the Old Testament. Having spoken of how Christ on the cross displayed a spirit of true love for all God's children, Paul says that "Jesus Christ (on the cross, in the context) was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers" (Rom. 15:8). This explains further the connection between truth and the death of Christ. Those promises to Abraham of eternal inheritance, of being able to become in Christ, these truly are now made to us.

One small point in conclusion. In teaching His people how to pray, the Lord nowhere invited us to constantly ask the Father: 'Please, may I be in the Kingdom'. Instead the first and major request of the model prayer is: 'Thy Kingdom come'. It is hard to have this as the master passion of our lives and praying if in fact we are unsure whether we will be accepted into it or not. Surely the Lord is asking us to assume, to firmly believe, that in His grace we will surely be there, and on the basis of that certainty of salvation, we eagerly beseech for the day of physical realization of it all to soon come.

1.3 The New Covenant

By baptism, you became part of the seed of Abraham, an heir of the promises to him, and therefore you entered the new covenant. The promises to Abraham constitute the new covenant, and they were made relevant to you through your baptism. It's this aspect of baptism which we want to consider now in rather more detail. First of all, consider what it means to be in covenant relationship with God. It means that He sees us always in that position, as always in Christ- unless we break that covenant. Therefore God does not see us as in covenant with Him as (e.g.) we sit and read our Bibles, and then out of covenant with Him as we (e.g.) snap at our wife. God pleads with Israel over 20 times in Jeremiah to simply return unto Him, to come back to covenant with Him, rather than stop committing sins A, B and C, and start obeying commandments 1,2, and 3.

We read of the new covenant that was made with us by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Heb. 8 proves that we are under the new covenant by quoting from Jer. 31, which is a prophecy of how in the future, Israel will repent, and will enter into the new covenant. Twice the Spirit uses Jer. 31:31 to prove to us that we are under the new covenant now (see Heb. 8:6-13 and 10:16-19); yet Jer. 31 is a prophecy of how natural Israel in the future will enter into that covenant, after their humiliation at the hands of their future invaders. So we are being taught that our entering of the covenant now is similar to how natural Israel will enter that covenant in the future. The point is really clinched by the way the Spirit cites Jer. 31 as relevant to us today. The reasoning goes that because Jer. 31:34 speaks of sin forgiven for those who accept the new covenant, therefore we don't need sacrifices or human priesthood now, because Jer. 31:34 applies to us. So therefore God writing in our hearts is going on now, too. This is confirmed by Paul's allusion to Jer. 31 in 2 Cor. 3:3. God wrote with His Spirit on our hearts, He made a new covenant on the covenant-tables of our heart. Likewise 2 Cor. 1:22: " Who hath also sealed us, and given us the earnest of the spirit in our hearts" . There are several prophecies which speak of Israel entering that new covenant, and what it will mean to them. All of them, in some sense, apply to us who are now in the new covenant. All of us should be earnestly seeking to appreciate the more finely exactly what our covenant with God means, exactly what covenant relationship with God really entails.

Us Today, Israel Tomorrow

But firstly, I just want to prove beyond doubt that we are intended to read the Old Testament prophecies of Israel's entrance into the new covenant with reference to ourselves.

Israel in the future under the new covenant

" Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean" (Ez. 36:25)

" This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days...I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts

Us today under the new covenant

Cp. Christian baptism; " Let us draw near...having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22)

" The Gentiles (believers) shew the work of the law written in their hearts
" (Rom. 2:15; 2 Cor. 3:3)

and will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33)

This describes our present relationship with God under the new covenant (1 Pet. 2:10; 2 Cor. 6:16)

Is. 55:1-3 prophesies Israel's future acceptance of the new covenant: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters... come unto me...and I will make an everlasting covenant with you"

These words are alluded to by Christ in His appeal to us: "If any man thirst, let him come unto me" (Jn. 7:37,38)

"I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant" (Ez. 37:26)

The covenant of peace was the priestly covenant (Mal. 2:5)

"I will ransom them from the power of the grave...O death I will be thy plagues, O grave I will be thy destruction" (Hos. 13:14)

We are now the spiritual priesthood under the new covenant (1 Pet. 2:5)

This will be our experience too; the description of Israel's national resurrection is quoted about our personal resurrection (1 Cor. 15:55).

A New Heart

Paul in 2 Cor. 3:16 reasons that when Israel's heart shall turn to the Lord Jesus, then the veil that is on their heart will be taken away. But now, through the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, we each with unveiled face can behold the glory of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18 RV). The clarity of vision concerning Christ which Israel will eventually come to should be ours now; our hearts should turn to Christ now, as theirs will do. The Old Testament gives us much information as to how Israel's heart will turn to Christ.

There is a repeated theme that Israel's entry into the New Covenant will be associated with God doing something to their hearts, confirming their own change of mind. In other words, the covenant is largely a matter of the mind. This new state of mind is in fact fundamentally part of being in covenant relationship with God: "This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel...I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts..." (Jer. 31:33). This leads us to the paramount need for us to develop genuine spiritual mindedness, the thinking, the breathing of God's Spirit in our minds. So God will act upon Israel's heart directly, using the medium of His word to do so. The initiative is God's; He will write His word upon their hearts. He is not passively offering people the opportunity to do it to themselves; He will do it to Israel. The same heart-swop operation is described in Ez. 36:25,26: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness...will I cleanse you (cp. our baptism into the new covenant). A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you...I will put my spirit within you (note the double emphasis), and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them". Being in the new covenant is therefore characterized by having a new spirit, a new mind, and therefore a new way of life. And so Heb. 10:20 calls the new covenant "a new and living way", a new, living way of life. Jer. 31:33 said that God would place His laws in Israel's heart; in Ez. 36 we read that He will place His Spirit in their hearts. So the way in

which God will give Israel a new heart will be through their response to the word. Thus they too will enter the new covenant.

Dry Bones

The prophecy of Ez. 36 is expanded by Ez. 37. The description of Israel receiving a new heart, being spiritually re-created, is taken up in earnest in this chapter. It describes the bones coming together, the Spirit of God entering into them through the prophecy of the Son of man (Ezekiel), and their resurrection. This is all couched in the language of Adam's creation; firstly as a body, and then the spirit being breathed into him [\(1\)](#). 2 Cor.5:17 describes us after entry into Christ at baptism as a "new creation" .

What all this means is that under the new covenant, we really do experience God acting upon our hearts, through His word. The very least we can do, once we are aware of this, is to read the word daily, and think upon it. As we read those words, God is writing upon our hearts, our inward parts, the handwriting of God Himself is being placed on our innermost beings. When you think of it like that, there really can be no excuse for not reading the word daily. Rom. 6:4 says that after baptism we walk in "newness of life", the "new and living way" of the new covenant (Heb. 10:20). Sometimes we can see a very dramatic change in someone at the time of their baptism. Yet spiritually, mentally, that great degree of change should be going on and on and on, so that as the years go by we should become almost unrecognizable when compared to our former selves. There are some in the churches today of whom this is true. Sometimes you meet the parents of a brother or sister, parents who are not in Christ. You can scarcely believe that the brother is their son! His tone of voice, intonation, mannerisms, his gait as he walks...he's from a different family. And so for each of us, this newness of life should just keep on and on. And as we grow newer and newer, we ought to be growing closer to others who are growing in the same way, forming a new family identity. How wonderful it is to see an ecclesia made up of converts whose natural families are not in Christ, and to see them becoming bound closer and closer together as they grow in sharing the spiritual family likeness.

No More Fading

Some fear, quite rightly, that we can easily go wrong in our thinking about the Spirit of God. They fear that we will end up saying that God just forces us to be spiritual without our freewill effort. Such an idea is of course quite wrong. What we do know is that God will lead us closer to Him if we draw nigh unto Him. That this work is done by His Spirit cannot be doubted (for how else does He work?). Spiritual growth is a mystery in this sense. As we don't know how the bones grow in the womb, so we don't know the ways of God; and this passage from Ecclesiastes is picked up by the Lord in Jn. 3- the process of being born again by the Spirit cannot be defined. Even the Lord himself, in matchless intellectual humility, said that He as the sower didn't understand how the little seed of the Gospel turned into the plant of spiritual maturity. Think of the contrition of heart which Israel will have in the last days, weeping for their part in the crucifixion, as a man mourns for his only son (Zech. 12:10), before they can enter the new covenant. That intensity of repentance must be ours. This certainly requires freewill effort. And yet we must also bear in mind that the giving of this new heart to Israel is not purely in response to their effort; often God says that such massive spiritual help from Him is not really proportionate to the effort Israel will make. He will do it for His holy Name's sake, and for the sake of the patriarchs. And ditto for us.

" And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob...this is my [new] covenant with them, saith the Lord; My Spirit that is upon thee, and my words (notice the parallel between Spirit and word) which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth...for ever" (Is. 59:20,21). In other words, the sense of Spiritual strength from God which Israel will have will not just diminish into nothing, it will not just fade away. I think this is one of the saddest aspects of our present spiritual experience. You see a keen young brother emerge from the waters of baptism, entering the new covenant, throw himself into the study and preaching of the word, he grows spiritually....and then he slips, slips and slips, until he slides down the slippery path into the world. We go to a Bible study, a Bible school, we read the word of the new covenant together in intense fellowship. And then it all slips away, we lose the reality of our calling, we're strong for the next day, perhaps the day after, and then back to base level. But then we will spiritually run and not faint, walk in the new and living way and not be weary. This is surely one of the most wonderful aspects of the Kingdom life; constant growth, no regrets, no looking back over our shoulder, no sense of spiritual anti-climax. No more fading away spiritually, instead the energy of constant growth.

Real Repentance -?

But here we are in this life, getting on with the job of keeping ourselves buoyed up, driving ourselves onwards and upwards in appreciating the covenant we are in. The memorial service is a physical reminder and a personal re-statement of the fact that we really are in this new covenant. We take to ourselves the cup of the new covenant which is made with us in the blood of Christ which we see symbolized in the wine (Lk.22:20; 1 Cor.11:25). We must seriously ask ourselves whether we are repenting as we ought to be, whether our contrition is as deep as it should be, whether we really see the seriousness of sin, whether we really repented at baptism, or just went through with it because we saw it as the logical thing to do in the light of what we understood from the Bible.

It would be a foolhardy Christian who answered 'Yes' to those sort of questions. Sin is a deceiver, Paul says. We've all been through the experience of committing a sin, one we've not done before; we repent, very deeply, and believe firmly in God's grace toward us in this matter. But then we do it again, say the next week. And we are sorry, we have regret, but not the same intensity of feeling. And then we do it daily, it becomes part of our life, we shrug it off, we make excuses. Sin is a deceiver. Let's remember that. This is why James speaks of confessing our faults to each other, really being serious about our problem of sin, talking about it with each other after the meeting.

But the more serious we are about this, the more firmly we will believe and appreciate that we have been given forgiveness. Under the new covenant, Israel will all " Know Yahweh...for (because) I will forgive their iniquity" (Jer. 31:34). So being under the new covenant means that we will know Yahweh, on account of our sins being forgiven. We will be certain of their forgiveness, not just hoping for the best. As we face the cross, as we face up to our own sinfulness, we should be really moved. We should know Yahweh, know His saving grace, know our sins are forgiven. Israel will shed rivers of tears as they come to realize what the new covenant really means for them. Do we? Have we shed a tear at the breaking of bread, or as we consider what our covenant means to us, as we consider how deeply we have sinned? Have we? Perhaps we have, but perhaps we don't do so now, or not so often. Perhaps that's explicable in terms of just getting older. Perhaps we're slipping. The clear connection between Israel's contrition on accepting the new covenant and ours is a real

difficult challenge to take on board. We really are being asked to go a long way down the road of self knowledge and self realization. And if we can do this, then there is the sure comfort that the Spirit will take away our heart of stone and give us a soft heart, patterned after the gentleness and grace and sensitivity of the Lord Jesus. For this is what the new covenant is all about. So we must realize that naturally we are hard hearted, self-centred, cold as stone to the warmth of God's love. But He really is changing us away from this. So let's not be hard hearted as the world is, let's not share their looks, the hard, pert lips of the modern girl of today, that sort of macho indifference of the modern man. Let's be soft, not sloppy and turning a blind eye, but let's let the gentleness of spirit of the Lord Jesus really work in us, let's allow God to write in our hearts.

Notes

(1) As Adam received the breath / spirit of life, stood on his feet and was then placed by God in the garden of Eden, so Israel go through the same process, being placed instead in the land of Israel (Ez.36:27,28; 37:14). There are reasons galore for identifying Eden with Israel (see The Last Days).

1.4 Newness Of Life

The Genesis record invites us to at least try to imagine the scene at the creation; matter created from nothing (Heb. 11:3), and then about 6000 years ago that matter was organized into our present world; fundamental chemical elements reorganized and restructured, new life forms appearing from apparent chaos. " Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen (in this present creation) were not made of things which do appear" (i.e. of pre-existing matter). The power of this creation is ascribed to God's spoken word. And now comes something even harder to conceive of: " If any man be in Christ (by baptism), there is a new creature (creation)" (2 Cor. 5:17 RV mg.). In other words, the cataclysmic power of creation is unleashed upon the believer in the newness of life which comes after baptism. Something totally, fundamentally new is created in the human brain. Yet this is a process; the six days of creation typify the work of God on the believer throughout his life. As tired Christians worldwide pull out their Bibles, it is hard to believe that the power of God is so powerfully working upon us. Yet God is at work in us, powerfully and mightily; " the word of God ...effectually worketh ...in you that believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). God is a creative God, restless in His desire to create, revelling in newness of life; He is His Spirit power, manifest through His word.

When we become " a new creature, old things are passed away; behold (i.e. realize this!), all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). These words are picked up in Rev. 21:5, where we read that at the second coming, all things will be made new and the old things of this life will be forgotten. The connection between these passages suggests that in prospect, we have passed out of this life into the Kingdom's newness of life; the dramatic change that will be seen physically on this earth when the Kingdom is established ought to be seen within the brain of the believer in this life.

Breaking Away...

The idea of old things passing away and being replaced by new things should be read against the context of 2 Cor.4, which speaks of how the Mosaic system had been ended. Elsewhere in the New Testament, " old things" refers to the elements of the Law (Lk. 5:39; Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:14; Heb. 1:11; 8:13; 2 Pet. 1:21); likewise the idea of 'passing away' refers to the

passing away of the Mosaic dispensation (Mt. 5:18; 24:35; 2 Pet. 3:10). Yet clearly 2 Cor. 5:17 refers to the mental newness of thinking and newness of life which should be experienced by the convert to Christ. So, why is there also the allusion to the changeover from the Mosaic to Christian dispensation? Surely this is to show us that the struggle experienced by the early Jewish converts to break their ties with Judaism is a pattern for us, in our efforts to sever our connections with the old way of thinking- whether it be a string of past relationships, mentally dominant parents or priests, Western capitalism, atheistic Communism or African superstition. We all have to make major breaks with our natural way of thinking and environment. The account of the struggle of the first Christians to break their ties with the surrounding Judaism, intellectually, socially and emotionally, is the burden of much of the New Testament. This is not therefore just incidental history; according to 2 Cor. 5:17, the way they broke away from Judaism is our pattern in breaking away from our various backgrounds. For we live the same "newness of life". The early Gentile converts likewise broke away from their surrounding world. Take the Thessalonians. They accepted the Gospel as being truly the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13), whereas generally, the people of Thessalonica despised the Gospel (Acts 17:11).

Newness Of Life

The words of Rom. 6:4 were probably read at our baptism, or taught to us beforehand: "That like as Christ was raised from the dead...even so we also should walk in newness of life". Newness of life teaches that our whole life after baptism is in the spirit of freshness, after the pattern of Christ's resurrection. This idea of newness should impart some element of excitement to our lives, the newness of new creation and coming to life should be an ongoing experience. Yet our lives in the flesh are so repetitious, so lacking in freshness. The newness of life of Rom. 6:4 has some connection with the "newness of spirit" spoken of in Rom. 7:6; it is a newness experienced within the human brain. The God who spoke His word of creation in Genesis has shined in our hearts, our inner minds (2 Cor. 4:6). It is quite possible that like some in the early church, familiarity with the new life can breed contempt; we forget that we were purged from the old life (2 Pet. 1:9), through "the cleansing from (our) old sins" (RV), i.e. baptism; the wonder of it all can be lost on us. Even in the Old Testament, the idea of living in a spirit of newness of life is to be found. David six times invites us to sing with him "a new song" (Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1 cp. Is. 42:10). Invariably these songs are associated with the experience of God's redemption (cp. Rev. 5:9). Obviously those 'new songs' were intended to be repeatedly sung. Our regular experience of forgiveness and redemption should urge us onwards in the spirit of 'newness of life'. Like Paul we die daily with the Lord, and the power of His resurrection life likewise daily breaks out in us.

We have shown that the newness of life we experience after baptism is something mental, something intellectual in that it pertains to the intellect rather than our physical life. The outward man will get weaker and weaker as the inward man grows (2 Cor. 4:16). It is highly significant that apostate Christianity puts so much emphasis on God healing our physical infirmities, thus obscuring the good news of the new mental creation which God is making- with the same cataclysmic expenditure of power as He used at the creation of this earth. For example, "the spirit" in Rom. 8 refers to the new mental disposition produced by the new creation, but this is often misapplied to the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. The experience of newness of life is first of all internal and mental, within each believer.

1-4-1 Christianity And The Greek Language

This new mental life is reflected in the way the Bible uses language. The New Testament particularly introduces concepts which were utterly foreign to the way of thinking in the contemporary world. Because of this, Christianity had a significant effect upon the Greek language. Several words were given a totally new depth of meaning. For example, the Christian idea that death is only a sleep gave rise to the Greek word for 'cemetery', which literally means 'a dormitory'. The Greek word used in the NT for inspiration, *theopneustos*, apparently occurs nowhere else in Greek literature. The idea of God breathing His word into men was in this sense a unique concept- as unique as the Bible. The Greek language had one word which meant 'Woman'; there was no word which meant 'married woman' because the idea of a woman not getting married was just impossible to conceive in the Greek mind. Women always got married. So there was a word for 'little girl' and one for 'woman'. Yet Paul, through the Spirit, introduced the idea of a woman consciously deciding not to get married so as to devote herself to the Lord (1 Cor. 7:34). He speaks of "she that is unmarried" (RV). This would have sounded very confusing in first century Greek; the radicalness of the idea is almost lost on us. The point is, God was presenting to the Christian believers a totally new intellectual concept which even their own Greek language could not adequately express.

Or take the influence of Christianity on the Greek language of humility. The Lord taught that the leaders, the great ones, in His Kingdom, would be the humble servants (Mt. 20:27). Christ spoke of himself as a humble King, which would have been a contradiction in terms to the first century Greek mind. Consider the following commentary by another writer: "The ancient Greeks had no time for humility. In fact, their language didn't even have a word for it until well into the first century....the early Christians evidently had to coin a word for it. It's a clumsy, long word, made by sticking together the Greek word 'low-down' and the Greek word 'mentality'. The sudden appearance of this new word in Greek literature during the first century is generally attributed to the influence of the early church" [\(1\)](#).

Or take the influence of Christianity on the Greek language of love. We can "know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge" (Eph. 3:19), we can get a handle on a spiritual concept which is beyond our natural knowledge, we can know what is unknowable. Likewise we can experience peace that passes understanding (Phil. 4:7). The Greeks had various words for love, *agape* (a rather general word, used in the LXX); *eros* (referring to the physical aspect) and *phileo*, referring (for example) to the love of parents for children. These terms had loose definitions and are almost interchangeable in their OT (LXX) and NT usage. But then Christ introduced a whole new paradigm: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love (agape) one another; as I have loved you" (Jn. 13:34). To love as Christ loved was something fundamentally new, and He chose one of the available terms and made it into something else. Christ chose a rather colourless word in the Greek language: *agape*, and made it refer specifically to the love of God and Christ towards us, and also to the love which their followers should show to each other. This is *agape*, He says: this is my redefinition of that word, which must enter your new vocabulary. It is true that *agape* and *phileo* are interchangeable in the NT in some places; but the Lord's redefinition of love, His placing of new meaning into old words, still stands valid. Not only does the Lord give 'love' a new flavour as a word. He above all showed forth that quality of love. He turned man's conception of love on its head. Thus He plugged in to the Pharisee's debate about who could be identified as their neighbour- by showing, in His Samaritan parable, that we must make ourselves neighbours to others.

Or take the influence of Christianity on the Greek language of grace. We have spoken elsewhere about this (2). The idea of totally undeserved favour, pure grace of the kind God shows us, is quite foreign to our human experience and thinking. Or take God's view of justice, totally alien to ours. We are bidden praise God for smiting the firstborn babies of Egypt, because this is a sign of His eternal mercy (Ps. 138:10 cp. 143:12). This is proof enough that His view of mercy and ours are quite different.

Not only was language re-interpreted by the Christians. Whole concepts were reoriented. Holiness in the sense of separation from the unclean had been a major theme in the Mosaic Law, and it figured largely in the theology of the Pharisees. But the Lord quoted "Be holy because I, Yahweh your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2) as "Be ye therefore merciful, even as your father in heaven is merciful" (Lk. 6:36). To be merciful to those who sin is now the true holiness- not merely separation from them and condemnation of their ways. Note, too, how He invites us to interpret the Yahweh as "father", rather than transliterating the Name.

A New Language

So we are thinking in a new mental language, the alphabet of which starts and finishes with Christ, the alpha and omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Rev. 21:6). This is the kind of language we speak with each other. This explains why we can meet other believers and not speak their human language, and yet still sense a great level of communication. We are citizens of spiritual Israel, we have left our old nationality and are living the new life under a new King in a new Kingdom with a new language. Of course, we still live in the flesh, and yet the more we appreciate these things, the more we will realize as we move around in this world that we are as far above this life as the heavens are above the earth; we are in Heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 2:6). We cannot expect the world to understand our mental position. But we are in good company. People genuinely thought Mary Magdalene, Peter and the apostles, Paul, even the Lord Jesus, were medically insane. They just could not enter into the new mind which existed in those people. Paul commented from much experience of this: "Whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God...I speak as a fool...as a fool receive me...we are fools for Christ's sake". We need to meditate upon the import of some of the Lord's sayings before we realize the extent of the break between us and the world's way of thinking. It is, e.g., quite instinctive to seek to preserve our lives. But the Lord taught that whoever will save his life must first of all lose it (Mt. 16:25). His standards are fundamentally and almost aggressively different to those of the world in which we live. To offend one of the little ones meant having a millstone tied around the neck, and being cast into the sea (Mt. 12:6). This was a common way of executing criminals in the Sea of Galilee. The Lord's hearers would immediately see that He was saying that to offend a weak believer is, in His books, one of the worst criminal offences. But it is something the world hardly notices, let alone judges or condemns.

If we grasp the spirit of all this, it will not be necessary to make lists of practical changes which should be seen in the life of the convert to Christ. The things about which we have written are in some ways abstract, and yet if properly grasped they will have a fundamentally practical effect upon us, in an artless and natural way.

Notes

(1) Alan Hayward, *The Humble King*, 'The Bible Missionary' No.131, January 1994.

(2) See 'Humility and preaching'.

1.5 Worlds In Collision

1-5-1 Separation From The World

Conflict, active conflict, with 'the world' is, Biblically, inevitable. And not only inevitable, but a vital stage in our redemptive process. We must come out from the world and only then can we be received by God (2 Cor. 6:17). The act of baptism is a saving of ourselves not only from our sins, but also from "this untoward generation" in which we once lived (Acts 2:40). Without holiness (separation), no man will finally see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). The Lord died in order to separate us out of this world, as a new people and nation that lives under His leadership rather than that of the world (Tit. 2:14 cp. Ex. 19:5). This is how important it is. The Hebrew word frequently translated 'cut off' throughout the Law is the same translated 'to make / cut a covenant'. Covenant relationship with God involves a severing, a separation from the world and the flesh. James puts it as plainly as could be: friendship with the world means you are an enemy of God. Nobody, not even an atheist, would say he hated God. But this is how God sees our friendship with the world. The seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent are by their very nature in opposition to each other. There is an essential opposition between a man and a snake; there's no third road of compromise between the two. The subsequent necessity for 'Separation from the world' can become such a familiar cry that it loses meaning, and takes on a negative overtone; and it has to be said that it has all too often been associated with tokenistic separation rather than the separation God seeks. We must also be aware that it's all too easy to be separate from the world in ways which are just convenient to us. We may not like, e.g. the café culture, or cinemas; we may not be good at personal relationships... and so we can justify all this as 'separation from the world', whereas in fact our hearts are not separated unto the things of God. Yet the early believers were separated from the world in a radical sense. Tertullian mentioned that the Christians were referred to as a "third race", after the Romans and Greeks [the first] and the Jews [the second]. They were recognized for what they were- another nation.

From...unto

'Holiness' means both to be separated from and separated unto. Separation isn't only something negative; it's more essentially something positive. We are separated from this world because we are separated unto the things of God's Kingdom; the separation from is a natural, unpretended outcome of our involvement in the things of God's Kingdom. It's not part of a cross which the believer must reluctantly, sacrificially bare. Like all spiritual growth, it is unaffected; the number of hours spent watching t.v. goes down (to zero?) naturally; the friendships with the world naturally frizzle out, the way we dress, the things we hope for and talk about... all these things will alter in their own time. Israel were brought out from Egypt through the Red Sea (cp. baptism) that they might be brought in to the land of promise (Dt. 6:23). Abraham was told "Get thee out..." of Ur; and obediently "they went forth to go into the land of Canaan: and into the land of Canaan they came" (Gen. 12:1,5). This must be the pattern of our lives, until finally at the Lord's return we are again called to

go out to meet the bridegroom; and we will go in with Him to the marriage (Mt. 25:6,10). The New Testament preachers urged men to turn “from darkness to light, and from the power of satan to God” (Acts 26:18); from wickedness to God, to the Lord (Acts 3:26; 15:19; 26:20; 9:35; 11:21). In Nehemiah’s time, the people “separated themselves from the peoples of the lands unto the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters...they clave to their brethren” (Neh. 10:28,29). Close fellowship with one’s brethren arises from having gone out from the surrounding world, unto the things of God’s word. That, at least, was the theory. In reality, those exiles who returned found this separation very difficult. In fact, the account of Judah’s separation from the surrounding peoples reads similar to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged, and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by 10:11 likewise; then they separate (10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Neh. 9:2; 13:3. They obviously found it extremely difficult to be separated from the surrounding world unto God’s law (Neh. 10:28).

This separation from the world unto the things of God is brought out in the way Ps. 45:10.16 alludes to the Mosaic laws about a Gentile woman forgetting her father’s house. Indeed the Psalm appears to have relevance to Solomon’s marriage to a Gentile [and note the allusions to Joseph’s marriage to a Gentile]: “Forget also thine own people, and thy father’s house [this is the ‘separation from’ the world]...instead of thy fathers shall be thy children, which thou mayest make princes in all the earth [land- of Israel]”. The emotional pain of separation from her father’s world would be offset by her bringing forth Godly children within the hope of Israel

FOOTNOTE: Submission To Authorities In Romans 13

We must remember that the Romans 13 passage about submission to human authority was written before Nero's persecution of Christians. It seems to be written on the assumption that justice is being done by officialdom. Romans seems to have been written around AD60. The background situation in Rome, to which Paul was speaking, needs to be understood if we are to understand Paul in his context. In AD58 there were major revolts in Rome against the taxation system (as recorded in Tacitus, *Annals* 13.50,51). Jews were exempt from paying some taxes (they were allowed to pay them to the temple in Jerusalem); and Roman citizens also were exempt. There was therefore a huge amount of resentment from the Gentile, non-Roman citizen population who had to pay heavy taxes (1). It could well be that some of the Roman Christians were tempted to share in this unrest; and Paul is instead urging them to obey those who had the rule over them, in the sense of paying their taxes, rendering tribute to whom tribute was due. Ben Witherington, one of academic scholarship's most well known and learned students of Paul, significantly doesn't see in the Romans 13 passage any suggestion that Christians should therefore bear arms, as this would contradict Paul's teaching about *non-violent* response to evil in the same section of Romans; rather does he understand the teaching about submission to authorities as being specifically in this taxation context (2).

(1) Tacitus, *Historiae* 5.5.1, Josephus, *Antiquities Of The Jews* 16.45,160-161; references in Ben Witherington, *The Paul Quest* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1998) p. 180.

(2) Ben Witherington, *The Paul Quest* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1998) pp. 178-184. He comments that "most ancient persons [took] it for granted that governing authorities have their authority

from God" (p. 181). When Paul writes this to the Romans, he could well be quoting a well known maxim- and thus using it in order to persuade the Roman Christians to pay their taxes.

1-5-2 Will " All men" Be Saved?

God is believer-centric; to Him, His 'world' is the believers. He speaks of " Macedonia and Achaia" as meaning 'the believers in Macedonia and Achaia' (Rom. 15:26). "Samaria...received the word of God" (Acts 8:14)- not everyone in Samaria, but those who did are counted as "Samaria" to God. The field of the ecclesia is "the world" to God; and note how the Corinth ecclesia were "God's field" (1 Cor. 3:9 Gk.). Often Scripture speaks as if " all men" will be raised. Rom. 2:6-9 speaks of " every man" being judged at the second coming. We know that literally " all men" will not be. There is ample Biblical evidence that the question " Will " All men" Be Saved?" has to be answered negatively. Just think of what the Lord said about Judas. But the believers are " all things" to God and Christ. " All things" is a title of the church in Ephesians and Colossians, and " any man" evidently means 'any believer' in 1 Cor. 8:10. Christ said that He did not pray for the world, but for " all mine...them which thou gavest me out of the world" . There are times, too, when Paul speaks as if " all" who are raised will be saved. Again, we know that this is not true. But once we appreciate that he saw " all" men as referring to the faithful, problems disappear. In like manner, Rom. 3:19 (A.V.mg.) defines " all the world" as those " subject to the judgment of God" - which is only the responsible. The Lord Jesus took away the sin "of the world", but the Jews died in their sins; "the world" whose sins were taken away is therefore the world of believers. " Every knee shall bow to me...every tongue shall confess...so then every one of us shall give account" (Rom. 14:11,12) is another example- 'all men', 'every man' means 'every one of us the responsible'. " The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men" (Tit. 2:11)- certainly not to every human being that has ever lived; but to the " all men" of the new creation. For not " all men" will be saved. The Lord tasted death " for every man" (Heb. 2:9)- for every one who has a representative part in His sacrifice through baptism. Christ " reconciled the world" in that He obtained forgiveness for us (2 Cor. 5:19)- we are " the world" which was reconciled, we are the " all things" purged by His blood (Heb. 9:22). 1 Cor. 4:9 seems to make a difference between " the world" and " men" , as if Paul is using " the world" here as meaning 'the world of believers'. The Lord was " a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:6), although it was only us, the redeemed, who were ransomed by Him out of sin's slavery (Lk. 1:68; Tit. 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18; Rom. 8:13; Rev. 5:9; 14:3,4). The "all flesh" upon whom the Spirit was poured out in the first century was clearly enough a reference to those who believed and were baptized (Acts 2:17). Will " All men" be saved? No. So the " all flesh" here refers to those who believe.

Is. 60:2 speaks of the sun rising upon Zion- as if Zion was the whole earth to God. Ps. 89:12 shows how God reckons the points of the compass with reference to Jerusalem: " The north and the south thou hast created them: Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice" . Likewise " the sea" is often used to show that the west is intended, the Mediterranean being to the west of Jerusalem (Num. 2:18; Josh. 16:5,6; Ez. 42:19). " The east" is put for Persia, Media and the lands east of Jerusalem (Ez. 25:4; Mt. 2:1); " the south" for Egypt, south of Canaan (Jer. 13:19; Dan. 11:5), or for the Negev, the hill country south of Jerusalem (Gen. 12:9; 13:1,3; Ez. 20:46,47); " the north" is put for Babylon (Jer. 1:13-15 etc.).

Will " All men" Be Saved?

The Lord died so that the world may have life (Jn. 6:51); but only those who eat His words and assimilate the true meaning of His cross will share this life; therefore "the world" refers to all who would believe. It is for them (us, by His grace), not even for those who respond but ultimately fall away, that the Lord gave His all. We are "the world" to Him. Let's not dilute the specialness of His love and the wonder of our calling to these things. We ought to be deeply, deeply moved by the fact that we have been called into God's world, into His sphere of vision. He even created the different types of meats "to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth" (1 Tim. 4:3); they were made for us, not the world, and therefore we ought to give thanks for our food with this realization.

The "all men" of our 'world' who will be saved should therefore be limited to those who constitute God's world, as here defined. If we are "all things" to God, He and the things of His Truth must be "all things" to us. They must be the very atmosphere we breathe, the guide in our every decision. Where we live, how accessible it is to other believers, where and what we study, how much time we spend working for those extra, unnecessary things in life... if the Truth is our "all things", the perspective of God's Kingdom will quite naturally overshadow all our ways in this world.

Remember in all this that all things are for our sakes. The whole world geopolitics are arranged by God in accordance with the needs of His people and in response to their prayers. Thus the amazing fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s was surely so that the Gospel could spread more strongly there. Likewise, Egypt was given into the hand of their enemies so that Judah might learn something from this (Jer. 44:29).

Footnote: Universal Salvation

I find this theory to not really have the Biblical ground it needs to be valid. The references to "all" being saved seem to be limited by the context- and "all" rarely means 'every single one', e.g. "all" Jerusalem went out to hear John the Baptist and were "all" baptized by him. I don't suppose the city was left deserted.

The only passage which appears to have some bearing is Rom 11:32: "For God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all". But the context speaks of how both Jews and Gentiles will be saved- not every Jew and Gentile that's lived, but those who accept the Gospel. And how does God have mercy? The preceding verse clarifies: "even so have these also now been disobedient, that by your mercy they also may now obtain mercy" (Rom 11:31).

Surely the mercy we show to the Jews is preaching the Gospel of God's mercy to them. Their obtaining mercy depends upon our mercy. Because God chooses to work through us as His witnesses. The Jews must obtain salvation in the same pattern as the Gentiles do: "For as ye in time past were disobedient to God, but now have obtained mercy by their disobedience..." (Rom. 11:30). As Gentiles crossed over from disobedience to obedience to the Gospel, so must the Jews. And in the last days, this will happen: "...and so all Israel shall be saved: even as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer; He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom. 11:26). This turning away of ungodliness from Israel is required before "all"- i.e. the redeemed from both Jews and Gentiles- can be saved. But the turning away of ungodliness surely implies a repentance of some Jewish people; God won't just save them regardless, they must turn away from ungodliness.

There are plenty of very clear Bible passages which outline the crucial difference between

belief and unbelief, acceptance and rejection of the Lord Jesus; he who believes and is baptized will be saved, he who doesn't believe will be condemned (Mk. 16:16).

1-5-3 “Condemned with the world...”

However, there is a strong and powerful corollary to all this. Those among God's people who break their covenant with Him, He sees as the world. Thus Moses prophesied of an apostate Israel: " They have dealt corruptly with [God], they are no longer his children because of their blemish; they are a perverse and crooked generation" (Dt. 32:5 RSV). These very words are used by Paul regarding the Gentile world (Phil. 2:15). Apostate Israel are spoken of as the pagan world; and therefore at the day of judgment the rejected of the new Israel will be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:32); assigned their portion “with the unbelievers” (Lk. 12:46). God will mock and laugh at the Gentile nations who come against Him in the last day (Ps. 2:4), and yet He will do just the same to those of Israel who refuse wisdom’s voice (Prov. 1:26). If we are not separate from this world now, we will not be separated from them when the judgments fall. We will be “Condemned with the world...”. If we don’t come out from Babylon, we will share her judgments (Rev. 18:4). This is foreshadowed by the way apostate Israel were treated like the surrounding Gentile world in the time of their judgments (Jer. 4:7). Israel worshipped the Babylonian gods, and so they were sent along with Bel their idol to Babylon, where their hearts were. And so they were “Condemned with the world...”. Likewise in the ‘judgment day’ of AD70, the ‘rejected’ Jews were sent back into Egypt as slaves. Their condemnation was expressed in terms of an undoing of the redemption from the world which they once experienced. The disciples were to shake off the dust of their feet against unbelieving Israel (Mt. 10:14; Mk. 6:11; Acts 8:51), in allusion to the Rabbinic teaching that the dust of Gentile lands caused defilement. Israel who rejected the Gospel were thus to be treated as Gentiles. Indeed, John’s immersion of repentant Israelites would have recalled the way that Gentiles had to be likewise dipped before being accepted into the synagogue. He was teaching “that all Israel were Gentiles in the eyes of God” (1). Time and again the prophets describe the judgments to fall upon Israel in the same terms as they speak of the condemnations of the surrounding nations. The message was clear: rejected Israel would be treated as Gentiles. Thus Joel describes the locust invasion of Israel in the language of locusts covering the face of Egypt (Joel 2:2,20 = Ex. 10:14,15,19). Israel’s hardness of heart is explicitly likened to that of Pharaoh (1 Sam. 6:6); as the Egyptians were drowned, so would Israel be (Am. 9:5-8). As Pharaoh’s heart was plagued (Ex. 9:14), so was Israel’s (1 Kings 8:38); as Egypt was a reed, so were Israel (1 Kings 14:15). As Pharaoh-hophra was given into the hand of his enemies, so would Israel be (Jer. 44:30). She would be “Condemned with the world...”.

Even if we are separated from this world externally, we can still act in a worldly way, and share the world’s condemnation. The Lord taught that the believer who makes his brother stumble should have a millstone hung around his neck and be cast into the sea (Lk. 17:2). This is exactly Babylon’s judgment (Rev. 18:21). The unloving in the ecclesia will be treated like the unloving world whose spirit they share. In all these things, we have a choice: to fall on the stone of Christ and be broken, or live proudly in this life without breaking our fleshly ways at all, until at the Lord’s coming we are ground to powder (Mt. 21:44). This is an obvious allusion to the image of the Kingdoms of men being ground to powder by the Lord’s return. The Lord was saying that if we won’t be broken now, then we will share the judgments of the world, and be broken by Him then by being “Condemned with the world...”.

1-5-4 " The kingdoms of this world"

Throughout Scripture, the opposition between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God is highlighted. After the establishment of the first ecclesia in Jerusalem, the Acts record seems to emphasize the pointed conflict between the ecclesia and the world. Being " of one accord" was a hallmark of the early brethren (Acts 1:14; 2:1,46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25); but the world were in " one accord" in their opposition to that united ecclesia (Acts 7:57; 12:20; 18:12; 19:29). The two women of Proverbs both have surface similarities; folly parodies wisdom. Thus the words of the adulteress drip honey and oil (Prov. 5:3), just as those of wisdom do (Prov. 16:24). Rabshakeh promised the Jews an Assyrian Kingdom where everyone sat under their own vine and fig tree- consciously parodying Micah's contemporary prophecies of God's future Kingdom (Is. 36:16 cp. Mic. 4:4). The Assyrian Kingdom was set up as a parody of Solomon's, which was the Kingdom of God (1 Kings 4:25; 2 Chron. 9:8). A glance through the descriptions of the beasts- the Kingdoms of this world- reveals that they are all set up in terms of the Lord Jesus and His Kingdom. The opening vision of Rev. 1 presents the Lord in His post-resurrection glory; but elements of that description occur throughout Revelation in portraying the beasts. The point is, they are all false-Christ's. The Lord has a voice as the sound of many waters (Rev. 1:15), but the serpent, on the surface, speaks with just the same voice (Rev. 12:15). The four empire-beasts of Dan. 7, the kingdoms of this world, are a parody of the four living creatures of the cherubim (Rev. 4:6). The rejected man who built greater barns, such was his blessing, would have thought that he was receiving the blessings of righteousness (Prov. 3:10). There was a cruel and subtle confusion between the wicked and righteous. Israel actually fell for this; they came to describe the Egypt they had been called out from as the land flowing with milk and honey (Num. 16:13). And so we have the same tendency to be deceived into thinking that the kingdoms of this world, the world around us, is effectively the Kingdom of God, the only thing worth striving after.

Beasts

- The dragon has Angels (Rev. 12:9)
- He figuratively comes from heaven to earth (12:10)
- Speaks of us day and night before God's throne (12:10)
- Has a name in his forehead (13:2)
- Given power, throne and authority (13:13)
- Does great miracles and signs (13:13)
- Faithful followers have mark in their hands and foreheads (13:17; 20:4) and are " sealed" (13:16)
- All the world worships the beast (13:12)
- Followers as numerous as sand on the sea shore (20:8)
- Their followers have one mind (17:3), and are world-wide
- The woman clothed with a blood red robe and a cup (17:4)
- The beast is, was and will be (17:8-11); an allusion to the Yahweh Name

Likewise Babylon is set up as a fake Christ and Kingdom of God:

Babylon

- Had proselytes and prophets (Jer. 50:36,37)

- A mountain (Jer. 51:25)
- A spreading tree giving much fruit to all who took refuge under it (Dan. 4:21); these words are used by the contemporary prophet Ezekiel (17:23) in describing the true Kingdom of God, as if to point the choice available to Israel: a part in the Kingdom of God, or that pseudo-Kingdom of this world.
- "The golden city" (Is. 14:4) with a thick, embellished wall (Jer. 51:58); springs and rivers within her (Jer. 51:36)
- "He that ruled the nations" with an iron rod " ...that did shake kingdoms" (Is. 14:6,16)
- The morning star (Is. 14:12)
- "The praise of the whole earth" (Jer. 51:41)
- Desired to be exalted above the Angels in Heaven (Is. 14:13)
- "The king of Babylon, my servant" (Jer. 25:9)
- "Whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down" (Dan. 5:19)
- The Kingdom of Babylon was a sight gazed at by all the earth (Dan. 4:11), comprising people from every nation, language and tongue (4:1)
- The laws of the kings of Babylon, Media and Persia altered not (Heb. passed not, were eternal), Dan. 6:8.
- Gave Israel a King they named 'Zedekiah'. 'Yahweh our righteousness'- a false Christ, who is Israel's true "Yahweh our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6)
- Babylon was "raised up" by God (Hab. 1:5,6)
- Arrayed in fine linen (Rev. 18:16)
- "Thou...that sayest in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me" (Is. 47:8)
- Has the voice of harpers and trumpeters, as does God's Kingdom (Rev. 14:2 cp. 18:22)

The Lord Himself was surely aware of this theme when He spoke in His model prayer of the Kingdom, power and glory being ascribed to His Father; for these are the very terms in which Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon was addressed by (Dan. 2:37). The Lord is taking that form address and applying it solely to His Father- implying that Babylon's Kingdom was but a fake replica of the one true Kingdom of the one true God.

The point is, there are two possible Kingdoms in which we can have a part: the the kingdoms of this world, or the Kingdom of God. The Lord presented the manifesto of His Kingdom in terms which consciously parodied the Roman empire which surrounded Him. Augustus had used the Greek word for 'gospel' / good news, and applied it to the new world order which his reign represented [\(2\)](#). He declared himself a God and instituted rites of worship. But the Lord offered citizenship in an altogether different Kingdom, defined albeit in similar terms, where humility and self-crucifixion were the signs of true leadership. His stress on the Kingdom of Heaven or of God in itself set up what He was offering in conscious contradistinction to the kingdoms of men. The world around us, especially through the medium of advertising, presents this world as the true Kingdom. If you buy this insurance policy, there will be true peace...if you smoke this cigarette, there will be a truly blessed life. We are pressurized more than we know to resign the true Kingdom for the fake one all around us, the various the kingdoms of this world. The wicked can even appear as the righteous, to the undiscerning. Thus the man who had such blessings that he needed to build bigger barns- for his barns overflowed- was experiencing apparently the blessings of the righteous (Prov. 3:32 NIV). But there is coming a time when the two worlds, the two Kingdoms, will experience their inevitable collision in the return of Christ. The stone will smite the image, and grind those kingdoms to powder. God's anger will come up in His face

against this world (Joel 3:2,13,16; Ez. 38:18-22; 39:17,20); and the world will be angry with God and His people in an unsurpassed way. The nations will be angry, and the wrath of God also will rise (Rev. 11:18). When their iniquity has reached a certain level, then judgment will fall (cp. Sodom and the Amorites, Gen. 15:16). This means that there will almost certainly be some form of persecution of God's people by the people of this world in the very last days. The tension between the believer and the world will rise. The final political conflict in the land of Israel will be the ultimate and inevitable collision of flesh and spirit, of the serpent and the woman. As the kingdoms of this world will be gathered together to their day of threshing (Rev. 16:16), so will the responsible be (Mic. 4:12; Mt. 3:12). The burning up of the nations will be the same punishment as the rejected believers receive- they will in some sense go back into the world they never separated from, and share it's destiny. This principle is clearly enough taught (although how in reality it will be articulated at the day of judgment is something that needs thinking about).

This should provide enough negative motivation to separate from the kingdoms of this world, fast heading as it is to its final collision with God's Kingdom. But as we said at the start, we are separated more positively unto God's Kingdom. The separation which is being achieved in us is fundamentally a separated, holy way of thinking. And yet there are times when the ways of this world push themselves upon us. We are forced into situations where we have no choice but to appear as members of the Kingdoms of men. Indeed, the whole nature of being human means that we must live in this world, although we are not of it. Consider how Daniel's friends wore turbans (Dan. 3:21 NIV), how Moses appeared externally to be an Egyptian (Ex. 2:19), and how the Lord Himself had strongly Jewish characteristics (Jn. 4:9). Or how Naaman bowed down in the idol's temple, helping his master in worship (2 Kings 5:18). And imagine all the difficult situations Joseph must have been in, as Prime Minister of Egypt, married to the daughter of the pagan High Priest. Or John the Baptist's soldier converts, told to do their jobs without using violence (Lk. 3:14); or Cornelius returning to his post as Centurion. It seems almost certain that these men would all have tried to engineer their way out of their positions. Think of Daniel. He rose to be one of the leading ministers in Babylon; but then, some years later, nobody seems to have heard of him. He is again vastly promoted; and then some years later again, nobody seems to have heard of him. Surely the point is that he got himself out of compromising situations; he allowed himself to slip out of the limelight. And so for the student invited to a doubtful party, the brother invited to go out drinking at a family funeral, the office worker asked to do a shady cover-up for a colleague, the wife whose unbelieving husband expects her to accompany him into the dens of this world... somehow, seek the way of escape. Like Daniel, slip away, whatever the career or apparent wealth you may forfeit. Avoid compromising situations. Get yourself out of them. Visiting (in the Hebrew sense of coming near to) the fatherless and widow in the ecclesia is associated with being unspotted from the world; our closeness to the world of the ecclesia in itself will keep us separate from the pull of the kingdoms of this world (James 1:27).

And God will confirm you in this coming out from the world. He told His people to flee from Babylon, to come out of her and return to His land and Kingdom (Is. 48:20; 52:7; Jer. 50:8; Zech. 2:7). Babylon offered them a secure life, wealth, a society which accepted them (Esther 8:17; 10:3), houses which they had built for themselves (Jer. 29:5). And they were asked to leave all this, and travel the uncertain wilderness road to the ruins of Israel. They are cited in the NT as types of us in our exit from this world (2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:4). Those who decided to obey God's command and leave Babylon were confirmed in this by God: He raised up their spirit to want to return and re-build Jerusalem, and He touched the heart of Cyrus to make decrees which greatly helped them to do this (Ezra 1:2-5). And so the same Lord God

of Israel is waiting to confirm us in our every act of separation from the kingdoms of this world, great or small; and He waits not only to receive us, but to be a Father unto us, and to make us His sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:18).

Notes

(1) David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991) p. 25.

(2) C.S. Lewis, *God in The Dock: Essays On Theology And Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) p. 84.

1-6-1 The Meaning Of Holiness

Conflict, active conflict, with ‘the world’ is, Biblically, inevitable. And not only inevitable, but a vital stage in our redemptive process. We must come out from the world and only *then* can we be received by God (2 Cor. 6:17). The act of baptism is a saving of ourselves not only from our sins, but also from "this untoward generation" in which we once lived (Acts 2:40). Without holiness (separation), no man will finally see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). The Lord died in order to separate us out of this world, as a new people and nation that lives under His leadership rather than that of the world (Tit. 2:14 cp. Ex. 19:5). This is how important it is. The Hebrew word frequently translated ‘cut off’ throughout the Law is the same translated ‘to make / cut a covenant’. Covenant relationship with God involves a severing, a separation from the world and the flesh. James puts it as plainly as could be: friendship with the world means you are an enemy of God. Nobody, not even an atheist, would say he hated God. But this is how God sees our friendship with the world. The seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent are by their very nature in opposition to each other. There is an essential opposition between a man and a snake; there’s no third road of compromise between the two. The subsequent necessity for ‘Separation from the world’ can become such a familiar cry that it loses meaning, and takes on a negative overtone; and it has to be said that it has all too often been associated with tokenistic separation rather than the separation God seeks. We must also be aware that it’s all too easy to be separate from the world in ways which are just convenient to us. We may not like, e.g. the café culture, or cinemas; we may not be good at personal relationships... and so we can justify all this as ‘separation from the world’, whereas in fact our hearts are not separated unto the things of God. Yet the early believers were separated from the world in a radical sense. Tertullian mentioned that the Christians were referred to as a “third race”, after the Romans and Greeks [the first] and the Jews [the second]. They were recognized for what they were- another nation.

From...unto

The meaning of ‘holiness’ is both to be separated *from* and separated *unto*. Separation isn’t only something negative; it’s more essentially something positive. We are separated *from* this world because we are separated *unto* the things of God’s Kingdom; the separation *from* is a natural, unpretended outcome of our involvement in the things of God’s Kingdom. It’s not part of a cross which the believer must reluctantly, sacrificially bare. Like all spiritual growth, it is unaffected; the number of hours spent watching t.v. goes down (to zero?) *naturally*; the friendships with the world *naturally* frizzle out, the way we dress, the things we hope for and talk about... all these things will alter in their own time. Israel were brought out from Egypt through the Red Sea (cp. baptism) that they might be *brought in* to the land of

promise (Dt. 6:23). The Nazarite was separated *from* wine, because he was separated *unto* the Lord (Num. 6:2,3). Dt. 4:19 warns Israel not to worship the stars, because God has shared them with “all the peoples under the whole heaven” (RV)- but He Has shared Himself only with Israel. Because of this unique and awesome entrance into their lives by God, they ought to have naturally separated themselves from any other god. The positive separation *unto* naturally resulted in the negative separation *from*.

Abraham was told “Get thee out...” of Ur; and obediently “they *went forth* to go *into* the land of Canaan: and *into* the land of Canaan they came” (Gen. 12:1,5). This must be the pattern of our lives, until finally at the Lord’s return we are again called to *go out* to meet the bridegroom; and we will *go in* with Him to the marriage (Mt. 25:6,10). The New Testament preachers urged men to turn “*from* darkness to light, and *from* the power of satan to God” (Acts 26:18); *from* wickedness to God, to the Lord (Acts 3:26; 15:19; 26:20; 9:35; 11:21). In Nehemiah’s time, the people “separated themselves *from* the peoples of the lands *unto* the law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters...they *clave to* their brethren” (Neh. 10:28,29). Close fellowship with one’s brethren arises from having gone out *from* the surrounding world, *unto* the things of God’s word. That, at least, was the theory. In reality, those exiles who returned found this separation very difficult. In fact, the account of Judah’s separation from the surrounding peoples reads similar to that of the purges from idolatry during the reign of the kings. They separated / purged, and then, within a few years, we read of them doing so again. Initially, the exiles separated from the peoples of the land (Ezra 6:21); by 9:1 they are in need of separating again; and by 10:11 likewise; then they separate (10:16), only to need another call to separation by the time of Neh. 9:2; 13:3. They obviously found it extremely difficult to be separated *from* the surrounding world *unto* God’s law (Neh. 10:28).

This separation from the world *unto* the things of God is brought out in the way Ps. 45:10.16 alludes to the Mosaic laws about a Gentile woman forgetting her father’s house. Indeed the Psalm appears to have relevance to Solomon’s marriage to a Gentile [and note the allusions to Joseph’s marriage to a Gentile]: “Forget also thine own people, and thy father’s house [this is the ‘separation from’ the world]...instead of thy fathers shall be thy children, which thou mayest make princes in all the earth [land- of Israel]”. The emotional pain of separation from her father’s world would be offset by her bringing forth Godly children within the hope of Israel. The whole process of separating from and yet also separating *unto* seems to me to create a kind of synergy from the whole dialectic. It’s by separating *from* the world that we go back into this world in service and witness and caring concern. And if we don’t find ourselves ‘separated *unto*’ those things- have we actually separated *from* this world in the way God intends?

1-6-2 God’s World

God is believer-centric; to Him, His ‘world’ is the believers. He speaks of “Macedonia and Achaia” as meaning ‘the believers in Macedonia and Achaia’ (Rom. 15:26).

“Samaria...received the word of God” (Acts 8:14)- not everyone in Samaria, but those who did are counted as “Samaria” to God. The field of the ecclesia is “the world” to God; and note how the Corinth ecclesia were “God’s field” (1 Cor. 3:9 Gk.). Often Scripture speaks as if “all men” will be raised. Rom. 2:6-9 speaks of “every man” being judged at the second coming. We know that literally “all men” will not be. But the believers are “all things” to

God and Christ. "All things" is a title of the church in Ephesians and Colossians, and "any man" evidently means 'any believer' in 1 Cor. 8:10. Christ said that He did not pray for the world, but for "all mine...them which thou gavest me out of the world". There are times, too, when Paul speaks as if "all" who are raised will be saved. Again, we know that this is not true. But once we appreciate that he saw "all" men as referring to the faithful, problems disappear. In like manner, Rom. 3:19 (A.V.mg.) defines "all the world" as those "subject to the judgment of God" - which is only the responsible. The Lord Jesus took away the sin "of the world", but the Jews died in their sins; "the world" whose sins were taken away is therefore the world of believers. "Every knee shall bow to me...every tongue shall confess...so then every one of us shall give account" (Rom. 14:11,12) is another example- 'all men', 'every man' means 'every one of us the responsible'. "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men" (Tit. 2:11)- certainly not to every human being that has ever lived; but to the "all men" of the new creation. The Lord tasted death "for every man" (Heb. 2:9)- for every one who has a representative part in His sacrifice through baptism. Christ "reconciled the world" in that He obtained forgiveness for us (2 Cor. 5:19)- we are "the world" which was reconciled, we are the "all things" purged by His blood (Heb. 9:22). 1 Cor. 4:9 seems to make a difference between "the world" and "men", as if Paul is using "the world" here as meaning 'the world of believers'. The Lord was "a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:6), although it was only us, the redeemed, who were ransomed by Him out of sin's slavery (Lk. 1:68; Tit. 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18; Rom. 8:13; Rev. 5:9; 14:3,4). The "all flesh" upon whom the Spirit was poured out in the first century was clearly enough a reference to those who believed and were baptized (Acts 2:17).

Is. 60:2 speaks of the sun rising upon Zion- as if Zion was the whole earth to God. Ps. 89:12 shows how God reckons the points of the compass with reference to Jerusalem: "The north and the south thou hast created them: Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice". Likewise "the sea" is often used to show that the west is intended, the Mediterranean being to the west of Jerusalem (Num. 2:18; Josh. 16:5,6; Ez. 42:19). "The east" is put for Persia, Media and the lands east of Jerusalem (Ez. 25:4; Mt. 2:1); "the south" for Egypt, south of Canaan (Jer. 13:19; Dan. 11:5), or for the Negev, the hill country south of Jerusalem (Gen. 12:9; 13:1,3; Ez. 20:46,47); "the north" is put for Babylon (Jer. 1:13-15 etc.).

The Lord died so that the world may have life (Jn. 6:51); but only those who eat His words and assimilate the true meaning of His cross will share this life; therefore "the world" refers to all who would believe. It is for them (us, by His grace), not even for those who respond but ultimately fall away, that the Lord gave His all. We are "the world" to Him. Let's not dilute the specialness of His love and the wonder of our calling to these things. We ought to be deeply, deeply moved by the fact that we have been called into God's world, into His sphere of vision. He even created the different types of meats "to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth" (1 Tim. 4:3); they were made for us, not the world, and therefore we ought to give thanks for our food with this realization.

The "all men" of *our* 'world' should therefore be limited to those who constitute *God's* world, as here defined. If we are "all things" to God, He and the things of His Truth must be "all things" to us. They must be the very atmosphere we breathe, the guide in our every decision. Where we live, how accessible it is to other believers, where and what we study, how much time we spend working for those extra, unnecessary things in life... if the Truth is our "all things", the perspective of God's Kingdom will quite naturally overshadow all our ways in this world.

Remember in all this that all things are for our sakes. The whole world geopolitics are arranged by God in accordance with the needs of His people and in response to their prayers. Thus the amazing fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s was surely so that the Gospel could spread more strongly there. Likewise, Egypt was given into the hand of their enemies so that Judah might learn something from this (Jer. 44:29).

1-6-3 “Condemned with the world...”

However, there is a strong and powerful corollary to all this. Those among God's people who break their covenant with Him, He sees as the world. Thus Moses prophesied of an apostate Israel: " They have dealt corruptly with [God], they are no longer his children because of their blemish; they are a perverse and crooked generation" (Dt. 32:5 RSV). These very words are used by Paul regarding the Gentile world (Phil. 2:15). Apostate Israel are spoken of as the pagan world; and therefore at the day of judgment the rejected of the new Israel will be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:32); assigned their portion “with the unbelievers” (Lk. 12:46). God will mock and laugh at the Gentile nations who come against Him in the last day (Ps. 2:4), and yet He will do just the same to those of Israel who refuse wisdom’s voice (Prov. 1:26). If we are not separate from this world now, we will not be separated from them when the judgments fall. If we don’t come out from Babylon, we will share her judgments (Rev. 18:4). This is foreshadowed by the way apostate Israel were treated like the surrounding Gentile world in the time of their judgments (Jer. 4:7). Israel worshipped the Babylonian gods, and so they were sent along with Bel their idol to Babylon, where their hearts were. Likewise in the ‘judgment day’ of AD70, the ‘rejected’ Jews were sent back into Egypt as slaves. Their condemnation was expressed in terms of an undoing of the redemption from the world which they once experienced. The disciples were to shake off the dust of their feet against unbelieving Israel (Mt. 10:14; Mk. 6:11; Acts 8:51), in allusion to the Rabbinic teaching that the dust of Gentile lands caused defilement. Israel who rejected the Gospel were thus to be treated as Gentiles. Indeed, John’s immersion of repentant Israelites would have recalled the way that Gentiles had to be likewise dipped before being accepted into the synagogue. He was teaching “that all Israel were Gentiles in the eyes of God” [\(1\)](#). Time and again the prophets describe the judgments to fall upon Israel in the same terms as they speak of the condemnations of the surrounding nations. The message was clear: rejected Israel would be treated as Gentiles. Thus Joel describes the locust invasion of Israel in the language of locusts covering the face of Egypt (Joel 2:2,20 = Ex. 10:14,15,19). Israel’s hardness of heart is explicitly likened to that of Pharaoh (1 Sam. 6:6); as the Egyptians were drowned, so would Israel be (Am. 9:5-8). As Pharaoh’s heart was plagued (Ex. 9:14), so was Israel’s (1 Kings 8:38); as Egypt was a reed, so were Israel (1 Kings 14:15). As Pharaoh-hophra was given into the hand of his enemies, so would Israel be (Jer. 44:30).

Even if we are separated from this world externally, we can still act in a worldly way, and share the world’s condemnation. The Lord taught that the believer who makes his brother stumble should have a millstone hung around his neck and be cast into the sea (Lk. 17:2). This is exactly Babylon’s judgment (Rev. 18:21). The unloving in the ecclesia will be treated like the unloving world whose spirit they share. In all these things, we have a choice: to fall on the stone of Christ and be broken, or live proudly in this life without breaking our fleshly ways at all, until at the Lord’s coming we are ground to powder (Mt. 21:44). This is an obvious allusion to the image of the Kingdoms of men being ground to powder by the Lord’s return. The Lord was saying that if we won’t be broken now, then we will share the judgments of the world, and be broken by Him then in condemnation.

Notes

(1) David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991) p. 25.

1-6-4 Worlds In Collision

Throughout Scripture, the opposition between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God is highlighted. After the establishment of the first ecclesia in Jerusalem, the Acts record seems to emphasize the pointed conflict between the ecclesia and the world. Being "of one accord" was a hallmark of the early brethren (Acts 1:14; 2:1,46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25); but the world were in "one accord" in their opposition to that united ecclesia (Acts 7:57; 12:20; 18:12; 19:29). The two women of Proverbs both have surface similarities; folly parodies wisdom. Thus the words of the adulteress drip honey and oil (Prov. 5:3), just as those of wisdom do (Prov. 16:24). Rabshakeh promised the Jews an Assyrian Kingdom where everyone sat under their own vine and fig tree- consciously parodying Micah's contemporary prophecies of God's future Kingdom (Is. 36:16 cp. Mic. 4:4). The Assyrian Kingdom was set up as a parody of Solomon's, which was the Kingdom of God (1 Kings 4:25; 2 Chron. 9:8). A glance through the descriptions of the beasts- the Kingdoms of this world- reveals that they are all set up in terms of the Lord Jesus and *His* Kingdom. The opening vision of Rev. 1 presents the Lord in His post-resurrection glory; but elements of that description occur throughout Revelation in portraying the beasts. The point is, they are all false-Christ's. Their worlds are in collision with God's. The Lord has a voice as the sound of many waters (Rev. 1:15), but the serpent, on the surface, speaks with just the same voice (Rev. 12:15). The four empire-beasts of Dan. 7 are a parody of the four living creatures of the cherubim (Rev. 4:6). The rejected man who built greater barns, such was his blessing, would have thought that he was receiving the blessings of righteousness (Prov. 3:10). There was a cruel and subtle confusion between the wicked and righteous. Israel actually fell for this; they came to describe the Egypt they had been called out from as the land flowing with milk and honey (Num. 16:13). And so we have the same tendency to be deceived into thinking that the world around us is effectively the Kingdom of God, the only thing worth striving after.

Beasts

The dragon has Angels (Rev. 12:9)

He figuratively comes from heaven to earth (12:10)

Speaks of us day and night before God's throne (12:10)

Has a name in his forehead (13:2)

Given power, throne and authority (13:13)

Does great miracles and signs (13:13)

Faithful followers have mark in their hands and foreheads (13:17; 20:4)
and are "sealed" (13:16)

All the world worships the beast (13:12)

Followers as numerous as sand on the sea shore (20:8)

Their followers have one mind (17:3), and are world-wide

The woman clothed with a blood red robe and a cup (17:4)

The beast is, was and will be (17:8-11); an allusion to the Yahweh Name

Likewise Babylon is set up as a fake Christ and Kingdom of God:

Babylon

Had proselytes and prophets (Jer. 50:36,37)

A mountain (Jer. 51:25)

A spreading tree giving much fruit to all who took refuge under it (Dan. 4:21); these words are used by the contemporary prophet Ezekiel (17:23) in describing the true Kingdom of God, as if to point the choice available to Israel: a part in the Kingdom of God, or that pseudo-Kingdom of the world.

" The golden city" (Is. 14:4) with a thick, embellished wall (Jer. 51:58); springs and rivers within her (Jer. 51:36)

" He that ruled the nations" with an iron rod " ...that did shake kingdoms" (Is. 14:6,16)

The morning star (Is. 14:12)

“The praise of the whole earth” (Jer. 51:41)

Desired to be exalted above the Angels in Heaven (Is. 14:13)

" The king of Babylon, my servant" (Jer. 25:9)

" Whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down" (Dan. 5:19)

The Kingdom of Babylon was a sight gazed at by all the earth (Dan. 4:11), comprising people from every nation, language and tongue (4:1)

The laws of the kings of Babylon, Media and Persia altered not (Heb. passed not, were eternal), Dan. 6:8.

Gave Israel a King they named 'Zedekiah'. 'Yahweh our righteousness'- a false Christ, who is Israel's true " Yahweh our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6)

Babylon was " raised up" by God (Hab. 1:5,6)

Arrayed in fine linen (Rev. 18:16)

"Thou...that sayest in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me" (Is. 47:8)

Has the voice of harpers and trumpeters, as does God's Kingdom (Rev. 14:2 cp. 18:22)

Clearly this is all a case of worlds in collision. The Lord Himself was surely aware of this theme when He spoke in His model prayer of the Kingdom, power and glory being ascribed to His Father; for these are the very terms in which Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon was addressed by (Dan. 2:37). The Lord is taking that form address and applying it solely to His Father- implying that Babylon's Kingdom was but a fake replica of the one true Kingdom of the one true God.

The point is, there are two possible Kingdoms in which we can have a part: the Kingdoms of men, or God. The Lord presented the manifesto of His Kingdom in terms which consciously parodied the Roman empire which surrounded Him. Augustus had used the Greek word for 'gospel' / good news, and applied it to the new world order which his reign represented [\(1\)](#). He declared himself a God and instituted rites of worship. But the Lord offered citizenship in an altogether different Kingdom, defined albeit in similar terms, where humility and self-crucifixion were the signs of true leadership. His stress on the Kingdom *of Heaven* or *of God* in itself set up what He was offering in conscious contradistinction to the kingdoms *of men*. The world around us, especially through the medium of advertising, presents this world as the true Kingdom. If you buy this insurance policy, there will be true peace...if you smoke this cigarette, there will be a truly blessed life. We are pressurized more than we know to resign the true Kingdom for the fake one all around us. The wicked can even appear as the righteous, to the undiscerning. Thus the man who had such blessings that he needed to build bigger barns- for his barns overflowed- was experiencing *apparently* the blessings of the righteous (Prov. 3:32 NIV). But there is coming a time when the two worlds, the two Kingdoms, will experience their inevitable collision in the return of Christ. The stone will smite the image, and grind those kingdoms to powder. God's anger will come up in His face against this world (Joel 3:2,13,16; Ez. 38:18-22; 39:17,20); and the world will be angry with God and His people in an unsurpassed way. The nations will be angry, and the wrath of God also will rise (Rev. 11:18). When their iniquity has reached a certain level, then judgment will fall (cp. Sodom and the Amorites, Gen. 15:16). This means that there will almost certainly be some form of persecution of God's people by the people of this world in the very last days. The tension between the believer and the world will rise. The final political conflict in the land of Israel will be the ultimate and inevitable collision of flesh and spirit, of the serpent and the woman. As the nations will be gathered together to their day of threshing (Rev. 16:16), so will the responsible be (Mic. 4:12; Mt. 3:12). The burning up of the nations will be the same punishment as the rejected believers receive- they will in some sense go back into the world they never separated from, and share it's destiny. This principle is clearly enough taught (although how in reality it will be articulated at the day of judgment is something that needs thinking about).

This concept of worlds in collision should provide enough negative motivation to separate from the Kingdom of men, fast heading as it is to its final collision with God's Kingdom. But as we said at the start, we are separated more positively *unto* God's Kingdom. The separation

which is being achieved in us is fundamentally a separated, holy way of *thinking*. And yet there are times when the ways of this world push themselves upon us. We are forced into situations where we have no choice but to appear as members of the Kingdoms of men. Indeed, the whole nature of being human means that we must live *in* this world, although we are not of it. Consider how Daniel's friends wore turbans (Dan. 3:21 NIV), how Moses appeared externally to be an Egyptian (Ex. 2:19), and how the Lord Himself had strongly Jewish characteristics (Jn. 4:9). Or how Naaman bowed down in the idol's temple, helping his master in worship (2 Kings 5:18). And imagine all the difficult situations Joseph must have been in, as Prime Minister of Egypt, married to the daughter of the pagan High Priest. Or John the Baptist's soldier converts, told to do their jobs without using violence (Lk. 3:14); or Cornelius returning to his post as Centurion. It seems almost certain that these men would all have tried to engineer their way out of their positions. Think of Daniel. He rose to be one of the leading ministers in Babylon; but then, some years later, nobody seems to have heard of him. He is again vastly promoted; and then some years later again, nobody seems to have heard of him. Surely the point is that he got himself out of compromising situations; he allowed himself to slip out of the limelight. And so for the student invited to a doubtful party, the brother invited to go out drinking at a family funeral, the office worker asked to do a shady cover-up for a colleague, the wife whose unbelieving husband expects her to accompany him into the dens of this world... somehow, seek the way of escape. Like Daniel, slip away, whatever the career or apparent wealth you may forfeit. *Avoid compromising situations*. Get yourself out of them. Visiting (in the Hebrew sense of coming near to) the fatherless and widow in the ecclesia is associated with being unspotted from the world; our closeness to the world of the ecclesia in itself will keep us separate from the pull of the world (James 1:27).

And God will confirm you in this coming out from the world. He told His people to flee from Babylon, to come out of her and return to His land and Kingdom (Is. 48:20; 52:7; Jer. 50:8; Zech. 2:7). Babylon offered them a secure life, wealth, a society which accepted them (Esther 8:17; 10:3), houses which they had built for themselves (Jer. 29:5). And they were asked to leave all this, and travel the uncertain wilderness road to the ruins of Israel. They are cited in the NT as types of us in our exit from this world (2 Cor. 6:17; Rev. 18:4). Those who decided to obey God's command and leave Babylon were confirmed in this by God: He raised up their spirit *to want* to return and re-build Jerusalem, and He touched the heart of Cyrus to make decrees which greatly helped them to do this (Ezra 1:2-5). And so the same Lord God of Israel is waiting to confirm us in our every act of separation from this world, great or small; and He waits not only to receive us, but to be a Father unto us, and to make us His sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:18). Time and again, God's servants were asked to do what was not worldly-wise in their relationships with their surrounding world. It seems from Jer. 51:59-64 that Zedekiah made a visit to Babylon, along with his entourage, presumably to make some peace with Nebuchadnezzar before the final invasion. And yet Jeremiah takes the opportunity to send a prophecy of the doom of Babylon along with Seraiah, one of Zedekiah's officers who accompanied him. This was scarcely politically expedient; indeed, the whole message of Babylon's impending destruction must have been extremely hard to distribute at that time, for a whole number of reasons. Jeremiah later had to do the same kind of thing when he and the refugee Jews arrived in Egypt. When refugees arrive in a host country, totally at the peoples' mercy, they scarcely start condemning the people. But Jeremiah had to inform Egypt that Nebuchadnezzar would soon "pick clean the land of Egypt like a shepherd picking lice from his clothing and then depart unmolested" (Jer. 43:12). Our position with this world, and our message to it, is no different in essence.

Paul appeared to lay the law down to the Corinthians about separation from the world- and they complained. His comment is that their sense of 'limitation' or being 'cramped' [Gk.] was not due to what he'd said, but more because of their own consciences as believers: "You are not cramped in us, but you are cramped by your own hearts... be you also enlarged! Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness?" (2 Cor. 6:12-14). He's saying that the apparent 'cramping' or 'limitation' of being separate from the ways of the world is actually not a cramping at all- it's an enlargement of the heart's horizons. And this fits in admirably with the above examples of 'holiness'. Separation from sin is actually a separation unto so much more.

Notes

(1) C.S. Lewis, *God in The Dock: Essays On Theology And Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) p. 84.

Habits Old and New

For all our impressions that we are independent, creative, original and not under the power of anything, we are all in fact creatures of habit. Life really is the same old scene in so many ways; eating, sleeping, working, childcare, procedures, interactions with people- routine is so much part of our existence. Because of this, we each have our comfort zones, out of which we don't like moving. Indeed, people will suffer great things, fight, manipulate, pay any price- to just preserve their present position, to stay living where and how they are, rather than move on to something which may be far better for them. Whilst we may consider ourselves liberal and broad minded, eclectic thinkers and always open- we are in fact conservatives to the core. The Lord recognized this when He commented that nobody who has tasted old wine ever wants new wine, because they naturally think "the old is better" (Lk. 5:39). Yet the call of the Gospel is to be part of a new creation, both now and eternally; to refocus our horizons beyond the immediate, and instead look to the eternity which awaits us in God's Kingdom. We are asked to become new people, and that new being has very different structures to the old, natural being. In one sense we are called to be led of the Spirit if we are born of the Spirit, meaning that we never quite know to where we are being led but are continually on the journey throughout this life (Jn. 3:8); rather like Abraham journeyed by faith towards the promised land, not knowing [in terms of physical detail] where He was going (Heb. 11:8).

And yet on the other hand, we are still human, and we function still as creatures of habit. God recognizes this; and so 2 Kings 17 points a contrast between people deciding to follow the *customs* and *manners* of the pagan nations rather than accept the *commandments* of God; His commandments were and are designed to elicit a way of life, to be the alternative to the customs or tradition which we previously lived by. Judah walked in the habits ["customs"] of the heathen and of the kings of Israel; "they followed vanity and became vain and went after the heathen" (17:8). The habits of our world likewise are vain; wasting time online, following gossip and speculations, and in the end we become as vain as the vain habits we have slipped into. Once habit solidifies, it becomes effectively part of our nature and almost impossible to change, at least in human strength- so Jer. 13:23 teaches us: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may you also do good, that are accustomed to do evil". The Hebrew translated "accustomed" carries the idea of repeated habit. The Hebrew idea of 'teaching' is connected to the words for 'habit' or 'custom'; because teaching was by repetition. The Lord Jesus "morning by morning" heard God's word

“as the learned” (Is. 50:4); but the Hebrew words for “accustomed” in Jer. 13:23 and “learned” in Is. 50:4 are the same. God teaches by repetition- which may be out of vogue in the experience / problem based learning philosophy of current education, but it’s God’s way.

The Impact of Jesus on Habit

Whilst we are to develop good spiritual habits- regular daily prayer, Bible reading, fellowship with others etc.- it is the cross of Christ which can deliver us from the vain traditions we inherited (1 Pet. 1:18). It’s very hard, almost impossible, to break out of habit and regularly acting and thinking according to a familiar sequence; but in the blood of Christ, or rather through our response to it, we find unleashed the power of new thinking, new horizons, a new way of being. This matter of habit touches upon the question: How exactly was it that the Lord Jesus was of our nature and yet somehow never sinned? There are many windows onto that question, but one of them is in the reflection that He didn’t face every temptation with a steel will which was strong enough to just about save Him from sin and keep Him grimly hanging on to the way of righteousness. Instead I would suggest that His habitual way of thinking and living was such that many of the issues which are temptations to us, and which were to Him too in a technical sense, He simply didn’t heavily engage with because His whole way of thinking was beyond that. It’s rather like the temptation to take drugs or abuse alcohol; they are technically temptations for me, but in reality they are not because I have never been an alcoholic or drug abuser. But for the recovering alcoholic or drug addict brother or sister, they are huge temptations. And so it was, on a far wider and higher level, with the Lord Jesus. His habits and way of thinking, what the Bible would call His “spirit” (note the parallel between heart and spirit in many places, e.g. Ez. 13:2,3), were so spiritually advanced that many of our temptations weren’t a serious possibility of failure for Him.

If the person and work of the Lord Jesus inspires new habits, we can better appreciate how one of the reasons why He and His followers were persecuted was because His death meant a changing of the "customs" (Gk. 'habits') of the Jewish system of worship (Acts 6:14). Even within the first century ecclesia, the Judaizer element demanded that converts still kept the "manner" or habit (Gk.) of Moses (Acts 15:1; 21:21). We have noted that people will fight viciously to preserve their habitual way of life; and this is especially true when it comes to religion. It's why people who think outside the box and suggest change within our own community have suffered far more anger than let's say atheists or Moslems. The Gentile world likewise of course resents that the Gospel is a call to a new set of "customs" (Gk. 'habits')- Acts 16:21.

The New Being

Part of being transformed by the renewing of our minds in Christ (Rom. 12:1) means changing our habits from those of the world or of graceless religion; to the new habits which are inspired by the ultimately free example and spirit of the Lord Jesus. The habits of the new life are a discipline; self control in regularly met situations, training like a soldier or athlete does, learning obedience as a child does, these are all Biblical reasons to think that the believer in Christ isn't free to do as he or she wishes, but to accept that our nature being what it is, regime and discipline are required. The disciplines of regular prayer morning and evening, daily quiet time with the Lord, daily Bible reading, preferably in a systematic manner, prayer before meals, not forsaking meeting together as the manner (Gk. 'habit') of

some is (Heb. 10:25), these are all only a few of the habits of the new life. But the habits we are asked to adopt are largely mental, internal, psychological. That when we are asked to be generous or respond to a need, or to forgive, we habitually remind ourselves that we are to do so as God does- with the utmost generosity, good measure pressed down, reflecting the grace lavished upon us (Eph. 1:8). That when we are in a situation requiring us to exercise choice or to resist temptation, we as a habit immediately think what Biblical precedents there are to guide us, and what situations in the life of the Lord speak to us in helping our choices. The Lord during His wilderness temptations set us the way; He perceived that as Israel had been led by the Spirit / Angel into the wilderness to be tested for 40 years, so He had been led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tested for 40 days. And so He answers the three temptations by quoting each time from the same section of Deuteronomy, twice from Deuteronomy 6 and once from Deuteronomy 8. He saw the essence of Himself and His situation in Israel at that time; and we too should become accustomed to realizing that Biblical history holds the key to our inspiration, for what is recorded there, the characters and histories that have been chosen for recording and preservation, are there exactly because they are intended to speak to us, as a living word. But it all depends whether we are in the habit of seeing ourselves in Biblical situations; and the ability to do this meshes seamlessly with the habit of daily Bible reading and meditation. Prayer especially is to be habitual, and not only when urgent situations provoke it. David seems to have had a habit of praising God seven times during the day (Ps. 119:164). I learnt this lesson powerfully when paying an unexpected visit to a sister in rural Eastern Europe with eight children aged from 1 to 18, difficult husband, no money much, rejected by her own family for the sake of Christ. I entered the porch, and asked one of the younger children where mum was. She looked at the clock. "It's two o'clock and after lunch mum always prays, so, she's still praying". I went deeper into that humble home and through the open bedroom door I saw mum kneeling down at her bedside. And she more than any busy businessman had things in her life which appeared to demand her attention 24/7. If she can do it, lady Madonna, children at her feet, so can you and I.

The Life of the Spirit

But it's not just a question of replacing one set of habits with another. "The law of Christ" hasn't replaced the 613 commands of the law of Moses with another set. The "law of Christ" is the principle of being committed to be as Christ, to live by the law or principle which *is* Christ. And He is "the Lord the Spirit", and as such He changes, radically and dynamically, all who look into Him; for He is as a mirror, and the more we look into Him, we no longer see ourselves there but Him (2 Cor. 3:17,18). This is the power of a Christ-centred life. Life in Him isn't like life according to the vain customs or habits of this world, drifting on autopilot through life until we die the same death billions of others have done as they pass mindlessly through life's wonderful time of opportunity, as in a dream. We are asked, constantly and daily, to make some election, some conscious choice, to respond to God's spirit as it is in His word and radically change; we learnt about baptism, and we did something concrete and actual about it- we physically got wet, burying ourselves in water. And we are asked to continue that kind of life. We must ask when was the last time that we perceived something from God and actually did something actual and real about it, changing a pattern of living or reaction. For we are invited to live and in that sense experience "the eternal life" right now; not that we will not die, but insofar as we can live now the kind of life which we will eternally live. And the life eternal won't be any passive sitting under vines and fig trees as if on some eternal tropical beach holiday. It will be the life of the Spirit, of

progress, of change, of eternal movement ever deeper into the things of the Father and Son whom we do dearly love.

1-8 Wrestling Wild Beasts at Ephesus / Making Sense of Life

In the context of talking about our hope of bodily resurrection at Christ's return, Paul says that this hope was what had given perspective to his wrestling with wild beasts at Ephesus (1 Cor. 15:32). The context surely requires that we understand this as referring to how he had been in danger of losing his physical life because of this wrestling, but he endured it with a mindset which looked ahead to the resurrection of the body. The wrestling with wild beasts, therefore, appears to be a literal experience which he had, rather than using 'wrestling with wild beasts' in a figurative sense. There was at Ephesus an amphitheatre, and we also know that there were cases where convicted criminals were forced to fight wild animals; if they killed the animal, then they went free. It seems this is what happened to Paul. He speaks in 2 Cor. 1:8-10 of an acute crisis which he faced in Asia (and Ephesus was in Asia) which involved his having been given a death sentence, and yet being saved out of it by "the God who raises the dead". This emphasis on bodily resurrection is the same context we have in 1 Cor. 15:32. As he faced his death in 2 Tim. 4:17, Paul reminisced how the Lord had earlier saved him "out of the mouth of the lion"; and the context there is of literal language, and we are therefore inclined to consider that he was literally saved from a lion in the arena at Ephesus. This also helps us better understand his earlier reference in Corinthians to having been exhibited as a spectacle, as a gladiator at a show, "appointed unto death", in the presence of God and men (1 Cor. 4:9). Note that despite this traumatic experience, Paul chose to continue at Ephesus even after that, because he saw a door had been opened to him for the Gospel, despite "many adversaries" (1 Cor. 16:8,9). We who are so shy to put a word in for the Lord in our encounters with people ought to take strength from Paul's dogged example in Ephesus.

But when Paul speaks in 2 Cor. 1:8-10 of his death sentence experience in Ephesus, he does so in the context of having reasoned in the previous verses of how whatever we experience, we experience so that we may comfort others: "[God] comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so in Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer". These verses are profound in their implication. Whatever we experience is according to God's plan, so that we might use that experience in order to strengthen others. We all share in Christ's afflictions, but "in Christ" we experience comfort, insofar as others within the body of Christ mediate His comfort to us. However, the whole process only functions if we open ourselves up to others, understanding their experiences and sharing with them the strength which we received when we went through the same things in essence. No life is of course identical; few believers have experienced what Paul did in Ephesus. And yet he says that he wanted to use that experience in order to comfort those in Corinth who in essence were going through the same thing. We live in an age where mankind is in retreat, retreat back into himself. The online life tempts us to interact only as far as we wish and as often as we wish, and this has led many to retreat into themselves. Likewise interaction at meetings of the body of Christ can so often focus only around surface level issues. We don't expose ourselves, and others don't expose themselves to us. Within such a spirit of isolationism, we can never allow the body of Christ to function as God intends. We will fail to find ultimate meaning in our experiences; for Paul

teaches clearly that they happen to us in order that we may share the fruits of them with others. This is why so many alcoholics and other addicts who do the 12 step courses tend to fail on the very last step- that they hereafter vow to spend the rest of their lives sharing what they have learnt with others. And so they retreat back into the mire of mediocrity and into the old patterns of existence and coping.

This line of thought explains why within Biblical history, it's apparent that circumstances repeated in essence within the experience of God's children. Ezekiel was asked to eat unclean food by God, and he found it so hard to get his legalistic head around it; Peter likewise. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and was tempted there for 40 days to reveal what was in His heart- just as Israel had been for 40 years. It also explains why once and if we can dig beneath the facade of normality which we all tend to cover our faces with, we find there are others who have experienced amazingly similar experiences to ourselves. And the extraordinary similarity of experience is in fact designed by God; because these are meetings and connections made in Heaven. We are here for each other, and all we experience is in a sense for others. This opens another window onto the meaning of personal suffering; another take on the eternal question "Why?". There's an element to it which isn't for our benefit at all, but for others. Take Job. That man was "perfect" and solidly with the Lord at the start of the book, and he is the same at the end of the book. The purpose of his sufferings was perhaps not therefore simply for his own personal development; but for the conversion of the three friends. The palsied man was palsied and was healed so that others might learn that the Son of Man had power to forgive sins (Mt. 10:6-9).

We too easily assume that nobody else could ever understand our life path, the way we have taken. We too quickly consider that others have a charmed life. Some seem to have great health and family relationships, money, security and spirituality. But in fact beneath all that veneer there simply has to be in every life lived in Christ an awful co-suffering with Him. People in Christ go through the most awful, unspeakable agonies. Every one of us does. Nobody gets off light. It just seems to our limited vision that some do. We all wrestle with wild beasts at Ephesus, and are saved out of the mouth of the lion. Whatever the Corinthians were enduring, it was in essence "the same suffering" as Paul endured in that arena. And there should therefore have been a meeting of minds; the basis of our fellowship is largely intended to be our common *experience* in Christ. Ideas and theories tend to divide; experience unites. And what people need far more than anything else, than any smart expositions or mental gymnastics with Scripture, more than money, is the simple comfort of Christ's love. We have each received that comfort ourselves in our life experiences; and we are to make the functioning of Christ's body effective by getting out there and sharing that comfort with others. For this is how, mechanically as it were, on the ground, in reality, "we [who] share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, in Christ share abundantly in comfort too".

1-9 Our Humiliation

Central to God's plan of atonement is the idea that the Lord Jesus was our representative; that we are in Him and He is to be in us. His path to glory becomes ours. He, a man of our nature, who grew up as a working man in an obscure small town in a backwater of a great empire where His race were marginalized... who knew all about caring for kid brothers and sisters when there was little cash and food on the table... and His mum being viewed askance in the neighbourhood, talk of pregnancy out of wedlock and all that... This man was the one who rose up to be somehow more than man, developing a perfect mind, never sinning, in commission nor omission, and came to have nothing

less than the mind of God. We are not to merely look on at Him as spectators at a show, nor as Orthodox believers view an icon or steeple crucifix from afar, feeling they can never realistically aspire to His achievement. The message of the Lord's humanity and representative human nature seems so simple- perhaps the subconscious, psychological reason for its mass rejection is that it actually demands so, so much from us. For He there, crucified naked with the mind of God within Him, is to be us here today in the hot blood of our situations and temptations.

Throughout Philippians, Paul develops this theme- that we, here and now, can have the mind of Christ, and pass through the essence of what He passed through in His humiliation and exaltation. The central passage in Philippians is the hymn of Phil. 2:5-11: "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, though being in the mental image of God, did not consider grasping at being equal with God, but poured himself out, taking the mental attitude of a servant...". But the context begins in Phil. 1:27, with an appeal to be "standing fast in one spirit, with one mind...". This doesn't mean we should all think about everything the same way- for Biblical unity is not uniformity. And the New Testament history is evidence enough that the early believers were far from uniform in everything. The "one mind" we should strive for is the mind of Christ- He is the "one" whose mind we should each seek to emulate. Our unity is on the basis that you here and her there and they over there in Australia or Kosovo or Nairobi are all seeking above all to think and feel as Jesus did, having His mind. That is the law of our being, thinking and action which all in the body of Christ have signed up to as the paramount aspiration of our whole lives and being. The hymn of Phil. 2:5-11 matches the seven stages of the Lord's humiliation, climaxing in "death, even the death of the cross", with seven stages of His exaltation. His path is to be ours- progressive humiliation climaxing in death, as a prelude to our exaltation.

- Being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:
- But made himself of no reputation, and
- took upon him the form of a servant, and
- was made in the likeness of men:
- And being found in fashion as a man,
- he humbled himself, and
- became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:5-8)

- Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and
- gave him a name which is above every name:
- That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,

- of things in heaven, and
- things in earth, and
- things under the earth;
- And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:9-11).

Paul wrote that the Lord “humbled Himself”, but uses the same Greek word to speak of how we too shall have “the body of our humiliation [AV “this vile body”] changed that it may be like unto the body of His glorification” (Phil. 2:8; 3:21). So you see how the argument is developing. His body, His mind, is to be ours. Our death is His death. He “tasted death for every man” in Christ (Heb. 2:9). So that His resurrection shall be ours. We are made, in an ongoing sense, con-formable unto His *morphe* or ‘form’ in death (Phil. 3:10). The end point of the humiliation process is that by our deaths, we shall have the mind which Christ had in His death on the cross. Our weekly remembrances of Him in bread and wine are intended to be stakes along the path which leads us to that final point of mental, spiritual maturity. Paul saw this process happening in his own life, for he concludes his letter to the Philippians by using the same word about himself: “I know how to be humiliated” (AV “how to be abased”; Phil. 4:12). This transforms our thinking about death- how we die is significant. Old age and death is not, therefore, a fading away into insignificance. Ezekiel warns that a man may live a good life and at the end, fall away- and is counted as having fallen away; or that a man may live a bad life but at the end repent and be eternally accepted. How we end is significant. So as you see an old person coming to the end of their lives- they are actually on the final burst towards the end of the race, they are approaching the final humiliation. So that they might rise in glory. Indeed, there is a clear Biblical association between ‘death’ and ‘glory’. Just search out those two ideas together in a concordance. Paul concludes that death *works* in us, to prepare us for glory (2 Cor. 4:12). The process of mortality and humiliation is working for us the eternal weight of glory. Death- we, as decaying calcium and dreams reduced to dust- magnifies Christ, in this wonderful way (Phil. 1:20). This V-shaped pattern of humiliation now and exaltation later is therefore the essence of the Christian life, of the life committed to unity with Him. For His path is ours. At baptism, we sign up to the principle that His death shall be ours- in an ongoing sense, and in a final, literal sense as well.

Every adult body is in decline. Faculties and memory fade and fail. But this has meaning, in the bigger picture of our humiliation. These experiences are not for us mere frustrations; they are part of having “the body of our humiliation”, and if we respond to them rightly, they are the path to exaltation eternally- rather than a path to an inevitable end. There is thereby a dignity and immense meaning attached to our physical decline. Our loneliness forges a further link between us and the forsaken, existentially alone Christ of the cross. And there are other ways in which a loving Father progresses the humiliation process. False accusation may descend upon us, and we are left friendless, rejected and not understood by former family and friends. Our sin itself is used by God; He doesn’t turn away from us in disgust and cease working with us because of our failure. She who secretly prides herself at her morally upright life finds herself caught in an uncharacteristic sin. He who always keeps the speed limit is snapped by the speed camera. Or we may simply feel that we have not done as well as we might have done in secular life- we worked more diligently, with slightly higher

intelligence than others who did better than us, and yet we never moved far beyond minimum wage. And we may feel the same about the home we ended up with, the family... and so forth. And we may well be right. We didn't do as well as we might or even should have done. But that's OK. These things too are part of the bigger plan of our humiliation.

There are things we are good at, and know we're good at them. And in those very things we may fail. The talented plumber makes an inexplicable mess of a job. The fluent speaker of a foreign language finds themselves publically floundering for a basic word. Our human strength is taken away, whether through the loss of power which goes with advancing years, or through more dramatic event. A good inheritance is lost by an unforeseen blunder or circumstance. War breaks out, the careful middle class life is brought to an end, your home is in ruins and your savings meaningless- and you are left standing on a railway platform in a foreign land with your screaming, once pampered kids, begging for soup and at least a place to sit down on.

In the lives of believers, these things are not random event. They have meaning, within the process of our humiliation, and God's wondrous plan to do us good in our latter end. Perhaps we find ourselves facing a situation that our upbringing and culture never addressed; we are alone, humiliated, before our God. This is what happened to Israel and to the Lord in the wilderness: "He humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live" (Dt. 8:3). The tragedy is that so many fail to respond as intended to the humbling hand of God as a loving Father. The Hebrew word there translated "humbled" is so often used about the afflictions of Israel- in Egypt, in the wilderness, at the hands of their invaders. But they wriggled against it, their bitterness driving them deep within themselves rather than to God and His Son. This is the enduring tragedy of Israel, and Jewish history. And it is the same with so many lives today.

Job is a classic example of our humiliation, although his exaltation was achieved even in this life. We see the end of the Lord, that He is very pitiful and of tender mercy (James 5:11). And out of that dialogue came the statement: "All these things worketh God oftentimes with man" (Job 33:29). We see this to be true throughout the Bible and our own experience, both of ourselves and of others in our lives. And in all these things, man is not alone. God is with us, Emmanuel, in Christ- in the sense that the humiliation of our minds and bodies is in order to forge ever further and deeper our connection with Him. For we are "in Christ". Our baptisms signed us into covenant with His death and His life eternal, world without end: "For the death that he died, he died to sin once, but the life that he lives, he lives to God... We were buried therefore with him through a baptism into his death, that like as Christ was raised up from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall also be in the likeness of his resurrection" (Rom. 6:4,5,10).

2-1 Taking Up The Cross

2-1 " Take up the cross"

The Lord Jesus spoke several times of taking up the cross and following Him. This is the life you have committed yourself to by baptism; you have at least tried to take up the cross. The full horror and shock of what He was saying doubtless registered more powerfully with the first century believers than with us. They would have seen men in the agony of approaching death carrying their crosses and then being nailed to them. And the Lord Jesus asked men to do this to themselves. The idea of taking up the cross suggests a conscious, decided willingness to take on board the life of self-crucifixion. Taking up the cross is therefore not just a passive acceptance of the trials of life.

" Take up the cross, and follow me" is inviting us to carry Christ's cross with Him - He speaks of " the cross" rather than 'a cross'. The Greek translated " take up" is that translated 'to take away' in the context of Christ taking away our sins. Strong says that it implies " expiation" (of sins). This connection, between our taking away / up the cross, and Christ's taking away our sins, suggests that the efficacy of His cross for us depends upon our daily 'taking up the cross'. It is vital therefore that we " take up the cross" if our sins are to be taken away by Him.

Of course we cannot literally take up the Lord's cross. Taking up the cross must therefore refer to an attitude of mind; it is paralleled with forsaking all that we have (Lk. 14:27,33), which is surely a command to be obeyed in our attitudes. " Take up" is translated 'take on' when we read of 'taking on' the yoke of Christ, i.e. learning of Him (Matt. 11:29). To take up Christ's cross, to take on His yoke, is to learn of Him, to come to know Him. Yet do we sense any pain in our coming to know Christ? We should do, because the cross was the ultimate symbol of pain, and to take it up is to take on the yoke, the knowledge, of Christ.

The Context Of " Take up the cross"

Consider the contexts in which Christ spoke of taking up His cross:

(1) In Luke 9:23-26 He tells the crowds that they have come to His meetings because of the intriguing miracles of the loaves and fishes. The Lord is saying: 'Don't follow me because of the loaves and fishes; take up my cross'!

(2) The rich young man was willing to be obedient in everything apart from parting with his wealth. In this context, of asking the most difficult thing for him to do, Christ spoke of taking up His cross - in the man's case, giving up his wealth.

(3) The command to take up the cross in Matt. 10:38 is in the context of Christ's description of the family problems which would be caused by responding to His word. Presumably some were willing to follow Christ if they didn't have to break with their families; but Christ asks them to take up the cross in this sense.

In all of these cases people were willing to follow Christ - but only insofar as it didn't hurt them. They were unwilling to take on board the idea of consciously deciding to do something

against the grain of their natures and immediate surroundings. Yet this is what taking up the cross is all about, and it is vital for our identification with Christ. It is very easy to serve God in ways which reinforce the lifestyles we choose to have anyway; it is easy to obey Divine principles only insofar as they compound our own personality. By doing so we can deceive ourselves into thinking that we are spiritually active when, in reality, we have never walked out against the wind, never picked up the cross of Christ. Israel were an empty vine, without fruit in God's eyes- because the spiritual fruit they appeared to bring forth was in fact fruit to themselves (Hos. 10:1; see Study 2.13 for more on this).

Against The Grain

Solomon is an example of this. He loved building and architecture (Ecc. 2:4-6; 2 Chron. 8:4-6), therefore his building of God's temple was something he revelled in. But when it came to obeying the clear commands concerning not multiplying horses or wives, Solomon simply disregarded them. Likewise Israel were so sad to lose the temple because "Our holy and our beautiful house...is burned...and all our pleasant things are laid waste" (Is. 64:11). It was God's house, not theirs. They only mourned for the loss of it insofar as it was a reflection of what they revelled in anyway, as an expression of themselves, rather than a means of worshipping God.

By contrast, Paul says that the proof that he had been given a command to preach the Gospel was in the fact that he preached against his own will; he says that if he did it willingly, i.e. because it coincided with his own will, then he had his reward in this life (this is a paraphrase of 1 Cor. 9:17 and context). It seems strange to think that Paul had to make himself preach, that he did it against his natural will. But remember his poor eyesight, ugly physical appearance, his embarrassing early life spent persecuting and torturing Christians - no wonder public preaching of Christ was something he had to make himself do. It may be that the reason he went to the wilderness of Arabia after his conversion was that he was running away from the command to preach publicly (Gal. 1:17,18). Several times he speaks of how he fears he will lose his nerve to preach, and thereby lose his salvation; he even asks others to pray for him that he will preach more boldly. It also needs to be remembered that Paul was a passionate Jew; he loved his people. It seems that he "preached circumcision" (Gal. 5:11) in the sense of being involved in actively trying to proselytize Gentiles. But it was Paul the Hebrew of the Hebrews who was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. It might have sounded more appropriate if preaching to the Jews was his specialism, and fisherman Peter from half-Gentile Galilee went to the Gentiles. But no. Each man was sent against his grain. And more than this. It seems that the Lord set up Peter, James and John as some kind of replacement to the Scribes and rabbis. Peter was given the authority to bind and loose on earth, with Heaven's assent (Mt. 16:19); and binding and loosing were terms widely used amongst the Rabbis with respect to the force of their commandments and judgments having God's agreement (even in the NT record, 'binding' means 'to decree' in Mt. 23:4). They had the keys to the Kingdom (Mt.23:13), and shut it up against men. Now, in the Lord's new Israel, Peter was to have that power. An uneducated fisherman was to have the place of the learned Scribes; it would have seemed so much more appropriate if Paul took this place. And James and John were to be the "sons of thunder" (Mk. 3:17), another Rabbinic phrase, used of the young trainee Rabbis who stood at the left and right of the Master of the Synagogue during the Sabbath services (hence the later appeal for confirmation as to whether they would really stand at the Master's right and left in His Kingdom). These uneducated men were to take the place of the learned Scribes whom they had always respected and lived in fear of...truly they were being pushed against the grain.

This all confirms the suggestion that Paul had to make himself preach; it was against his natural inclination - and yet this was exactly why Christ had called him to preach (1 Cor. 9:17). In refusing funding for his work from the Corinthians, he abased himself that they might be exalted- all language of the crucifixion (2 Cor. 11:7 cp. Phil. 2:8,9). Thus his refusing of legitimate help to make his way easier was an enactment in himself of the cross. The Lord Jesus, in His ministry, had forbidden the extroverts from publicly preaching about Him, as they naturally wanted to (e.g. Mk. 8:26). To keep silent was an act of the will for them, something against the grain. It was to take up the cross. It is hard to find any other explanation for why He told Jairus not to tell anyone that He had raised his daughter (Lk. 8:56)- for it would have been obvious, surely. For they knew she had died (8:53). By contrast, those who would naturally have preferred to stay quiet were told to go and preach (e.g. Mk. 5:19). Perhaps Paul was in this category. He had to warn Timothy against the tendency to think that a man can attain the crown of mastery without striving for it according to the laws (2 Tim. 2:5). We can have an appearance of spiritual progress towards the crown, as did the man who quickly built his house on the sand. But it was the man who perhaps didn't finish his house (we are left to imagine) but who had hacked away at the rock of his own heart, striving to seriously obey the essence of his Lord's words, who was accepted in the end. And let's not forget Amos, too. He defended his prophetic ministry, as Paul defended his, by saying that it was something he had been called to quite against his nature. He was not a prophet nor a prophet's son, and yet he was taking from following his flock of sheep to be a prophet to Israel- quite against his will and inclination (Am. 7:14,15).

Christian Crosses- ?

It is not difficult to see the relevance of these principles to our lives. Consider the following possibilities:

- A young brother loves the idea of travel, as many young men in the world do. So he travels, preaching as he goes. He may reason that he is obeying the command to preach world-wide; actually he is doing what he wants to do.
- A brother or sister may have no desire to marry - an attitude shared by some in the world. It may seem they are rising to the heights of 1 Cor. 7:32 - staying single for the Lord's sake - but actually they may be doing just what they want to do anyway. That's not to take up the cross of singleness.
- A brother in (e.g.) China may enjoy writing letters to brothers in England because he likes to have friends in England and to improve his English - like many Chinese. But he may kid himself that he is writing those letters only because he likes fellowshiping his brethren in Christ, although he may be much less enthusiastic about contact with his Chinese brethren.
- Some people like to be in a group; they are social people. For them it is easy to attend ecclesial meetings; they like going out and meeting people. But for the single sister who has had her life wrecked by a series of bad relationships, and has four young children...to get out to a meeting full of those she perceives to be happy-clappy people with no problems: this is a real taking up the cross. She would much rather stay at home, in her own world, and break bread alone.
- Some will reason that they marry and have children because this is what God commands,

but actually this is only doing what most human beings throughout history have desired to do. Most human parents enjoy giving some of their time and money to their children. The fact that Christian parents feel the same doesn't necessarily mean that they are being spiritual or Godly in doing so; it's not in itself a taking up of the cross.

- It has often been observed that a reward of righteousness can be self-righteousness. Especially is this to be seen in public acts of generosity. L.G. Sargent coined a powerful phrase: " Self satisfaction at the emotional gluttony of giving" . The fact we make sacrifice, however great, is not necessarily the sacrifice of true love of Him and His Son which God looks for (cp. 1 Cor. 13). Remember how Israel made such great sacrifices to their idols, when ultimately they were only doing it for their own pleasure.

- All of us have a certain amount of anger and aggression in our souls. All too often we can use the Truth as a vehicle to express this, whilst we deceive ourselves that we are actually standing up for the Truth's doctrines. Consider the young well-versed brother triumphantly, aggressively debating the trinity with a Biblically-ignorant misbeliever; or the sister storming out of a meeting because a brother came over as too familiar with God in his prayer. In these rather exaggerated examples, love of purity is made an excuse for expressing the anger and aggression that is within every human soul. To defend purity without such anger coming out is indeed a spiritual art form. It is another way to take up the cross.

And so each of us could go on finding examples, drawn from our own deeply private lives. But by now the point is clear: we are called to take up the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. If only the picture and spirit of Him and His cross were more permanently with us! We would be the more sensitive to our need to serve until it hurts, to truly sacrifice ourselves, not to fake our fellowshiping of His sufferings. Like David, we must recognize that there is no point in offering a sacrifice which has cost us nothing. Sacrifice is essential if we are to have a covenant relationship with God and to take up the cross (Ps. 50:5).

It seems to me that the Lord asks each of us to do that which is essentially difficult for us personally, something against the grain of our very nature and personal understanding of and position in life. This may explain why sometimes He asked those He cured to spread the message (perhaps the introverts, or those whose past lives had been notorious?), whilst others (perhaps the extroverts?) He asked to remain silent about what He had done. When the Lord asked Peter to go out fishing, for example, this was totally and exactly against every grain of Peter's natural self. He was a fisherman, he'd been fishing all night, he knew it was absolutely pointless to try again. He knew that a carpenter didn't know what a fisherman did. The Lord's request was a blow at the justifiable pride in his specialism which every working man has. It was a call to take up the cross. If the Lord Jesus had asked let's say Paul to go out fishing, well, I guess he'd have obeyed with no real difficulty. But He asked Peter to do that, at that very moment, because it was a real cross for Peter to pick up. Likewise it would have seemed logical for Paul to preach to the Jews, and Peter to the Gentiles (note how the Gentiles approached Philip, from semi-Gentile Galilee, in Jn. 12:20,21). Yet in fact the Lord God used those men in the very opposite way, right against the grain of their natural abilities. He asked goldsmiths to do the manual work of building the wall of Jerusalem, bruising their sensitive fingers against lumps of rock (Neh. 3:8,31); and Barak's victorious warriors were civil servants and writers (Jud. 5:14), not military men. Naaman wanted to do some great act, but was asked to do the hardest thing for him- to dip in Jordan. And Abraham was asked to do what was so evidently the hardest thing- to offer up his only, specially beloved son.

" Him that overcometh"

The Lord Jesus, in His final words to us, keeps repeating a theme - " To him that overcometh..." runs like a refrain throughout Revelation 2 and 3. Many of those to whom He wrote in Rev. 2 and 3 were fitting a few convenient commands into their lives, but ignoring, doctrinally and practically, what did not appeal to them. There is reason to think that in our own lives, personally and collectively, there is this same tendency. " To him that overcometh..." is therefore a call to us too. To take up the cross. The one who overcomes will eat of the tree of life, as will he who does Christ's commands (Rev. 2:7; 22:14). To overcome is to do the commandments; to overcome is therefore to overcome ourselves - our natural resistance to God's principles.

All of us are weak-willed, vacillating by nature - although we may cover this through making dogmatic statements of one sort or another. All too many of us (and thousands out in the world) live lives full of fine intentions, deep realizations of where we need to change - yet failing, time and again, to actually take up the cross. For myself, this is an agony of my soul. I speak, I talk, I think, I decide, so much. Yet when it comes to doing it, I fail utterly. " Well, we're all like that" , I can hear you saying. Whether or not 'we're all like that' is irrelevant- to me. And it should be to you too; for perhaps you know exactly how I feel. Our failure to actually do what we resolve to do, what we know we ought to do in the light of Christ's example, in response to Him who loved us and gave himself for us, should be an agony of your soul too. Long term attitudes, entrenched habits, things we feel we just can't do without; rejecting these things is taking up the cross. The Lord almost mocked the Pharisees for tithing herbs but not showing true mercy and love. It's as if He were saying: 'Of course it's easy to be religious in things like tithing herbs. But the really essential issues, love, mercy, justice- that's not so easy. But they are crucial'. We become experts at manipulating our understanding of God's commands so that we keep what we should reject, and hive off those parts of our lives which ought to be the subject of close self-examination.

Do you see what I'm saying? Do you hear the call of your Lord to take up the cross to serve, as an act of the will? Ten minutes' self-examination will show how alarmingly much of our spirituality is only compounding our own natural personality and preferred lifestyle. If we can at least grasp the spirit of taking up Christ's cross, there will be a deep sense of fellowship with others who have reached the same realization; and a deep joy and calmness in confidence of sharing His resurrection.

2.2 " The love of Christ constrains us"

It's Not A Hobby

At the time we learnt the Gospel, either through studying literature or through regular contact with other believers, it's quite likely that Christianity was in a sense a hobby for us. In our spare time we read (e.g.) lessons of a correspondence course, or attended Christian meetings. There were other things which we gave priority to in our lives, and Christianity was one of those 'extra' things in life. But then we were baptized. *We died* to the natural life, and therefore the only life we have is the life which we are given by reason of our association with the resurrected Lord Jesus. And therefore our spiritual life must be the central thing in our existence- not a hobby. As I dried myself off after my baptism, I opened my Bible at

'random', and came with marvellous appropriacy to Prov. 23:26: " My son, give me *thine heart*" . And Paul taught the same: " Ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). " The love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that (Christ) has died for all (believers); therefore all have died. And He died for all (of us), that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised...therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old (life) has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:14-17 RSV). " I was co-crucified with Christ (Gk.): nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me" (Gal. 2:20). And " The love of Christ constrains us" , it shuts us up with no other real way to move, as the Greek implies.

If we are *controlled* by the love of Christ in dying for us, if we realize that *we died* in association with Christ's death, and the life we have is *only* because we are united with Him... then we cease to see our Christianity on the hobbyist level. It's not a hobby; it's not even a full time job. It's our *life*. As Dennis Hingley once put it, in his manner, " the Truth *should be the very atmosphere that we breathe*" . And Moses likewise, on the very last day of his life, assembled all Israel by their tribes, and with a voice no doubt cracking with emotion, *pleaded* with them to understand that *there's nothing like the God of Israel and His Truth*, and it must therefore be at the very centre, at the very *core*, of a man's soul: " There is none like unto the God of Jeshurun...who is like unto thee, O people saved by Yahweh...Set your hearts unto all the words which I testify among you this day...for it is not a vain thing for you; *because it is your life*" (Dt. 33:27,28; 32:46,47). " The love of Christ constrains us" .

" Holding the head"

Spiritual intensity is something alien to our natures. Israel and the early church are clear Biblical examples of this; they treated God and His Truth as a hobby, something they believed in and studied in their spare time, a social club, a kind of spiritual insurance policy against the time of trouble or death. Paul lamented how many believers failed to " hold" the head of the body, Christ (Col. 2:19). Israel were plagued with poisonous snakes, and the only way of being healed of the venom rising up within them was to look in faith at the bronze serpent, lifted up by Moses on a pole. The Lord Jesus taught that the pole spoke of His cross, and the intense, desperate gaze of the Israelites, as they felt the venom rising up within them, pointed to *our* faith in His work on the cross (Jn. 3:14). Israel were not sitting there watching telly or reading novels, occasionally glancing up at the pole to make sure it was still there. *It was for their lives* that they desperately dragged themselves (despite their plague) into a position where they could see the pole, and fixed their gaze on it, surrounded as they were by the mighty snakes. Gazing at the pole was no hobby for them. It's as if the Lord takes a snapshot of those men, as it were, and presents it to us as a picture of how our lives should be centred upon Him. Paul demonstrates that our Lord Jesus is at the very centre of the whole cosmos, the whole of creation (Eph. 3:15; Col. 1:16,17); and he says this in the context of appealing to *us* to likewise centre our thinking on the Lord Jesus, knowing that " The love of Christ constrains us" .

The Lord himself spoke of how He expected this of us; and He put it in language which He surely *knew* would arrest attention: " If any man come to me, and hate not his father, *and* mother, *and* wife, *and* children, *and* brethren, *and* sisters...he cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:26). He's a demanding Lord- and reflection on His life and death for us shows that He has every right to be so. Notice how the Lord Jesus uses the figure of polysyndeton- i.e. repeating the word " and" when there's no grammatical need to, in order to build up the impression of

how many different people we must be prepared to break with. His message is plain: the Lord Jesus must come in front of every human relationship, or else we are not His disciples. And it isn't just human relationships that must be sacrificed; it's "houses...lands" (careers, cars, we might say) as well (Mt. 19:29). It has to be seriously asked whether our community, especially the younger generation, are prepared to be the Lord's disciples; whether they have given up these kind of things for His sake. He must be the *Lord* of our lives, the master passion and controller. Christ's love *constrains* us. *These* sort of demanding words are so common in the Gospels that they almost slip our notice. There can be no serious doubt what He's saying: He has no room for passengers or part-timers. As far as He is concerned, it can't be a hobby.

No Excuses

The usual excuse for not reading Scripture daily, or remembering the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread as He asked, or meeting with brethren and sisters etc. normally goes along these lines: 'I've nothing against these things. But after all, we're only human beings, Christ understands that, He knows we have to get on with the things of this life'. To which so many passages in the Gospels reply: 'Yes, the Lord does know exactly what everyday human life is all about; and He expects you, in these daily things, to make decisions which *consciously* sacrifice what you could get for yourselves in life'. And to which Paul replies: "The love of Christ constrains us". Consider the parable of the great supper (the Kingdom). The servant goes out and invites people to the supper. They each make excuses which on a human level seem perfectly reasonable. One man was on his way to inspect some land he had just bought; another man was on his way (Gk.) to prove his new oxen; if they were no good, he had the right to get his money back ⁽¹⁾. It seems, humanly, a bit unreasonable to go up to a person right in the middle of doing something important in daily life, and say 'Now stop that, come to a supper'. The third man assumed Christ would understand why *he* couldn't respond: "I have married a wife, and therefore (of course, as you'll appreciate) I cannot come". After all, even the Law said that a man was free from military obligations after his marriage. But "the master" was "angry" with those men (Lk. 14:21). What Moses' law conceded to men, the Lord Jesus wasn't necessarily ready to concede (and his attitude to divorce was similar).

Just seeing the outline message of the story, through half closed eyes as it were, it's clear what Jesus was driving at: 'What *you* may think are perfectly acceptable, legitimate excuses for not responding to my call, I'm afraid I *don't* think are good reasons at all. If you've been invited to the wedding of God's son, you *must* put this in front of everything in your human life'. And surely the Lord intended us to take His story further: we've not only been invited to the wedding as guests, we are the bride herself- so how much greater is our responsibility to respond. If this is God's attitude to ungrateful guests, how much *worse* in the case of an indifferent bride? It's not a hobby, it just can't be; not just a passing phase in our lives for a few years; none less than the Lord Jesus Christ, the exalted, peerless Son of God, has chosen us as His very own, has died for us to redeem us unto himself, and is pleading with us to respond. We have responded, although when we first started to learn about these things, it was like a hobby, something at the periphery of our lives. But now we have grasped the wondrous truth of it all, it must be at the very *centre*. So high is our honour that we have a responsibility to God which the world generally doesn't have. For it is only for those who have accepted the cross of Christ that it remains always true: "The love of Christ constrains us".

A Deceptive God

And this leads me on to a serious issue. If we continue to treat our spiritual lives on the 'hobby' level, God isn't indifferent. When you or I meet a brother or sister who clearly show little interest in daily studying the word or in making the Truth the central thing in their lives, we may be sad, we may gently plead with them, but at the end we can't do anything else. " At the end of the day" , we say, " it's their problem, I can't do any more" . And it's tempting to think that God sees things likewise. But He doesn't. He isn't passive to such indifference. He actively does something to those who treat their relationship with Him as a hobby: He *actively deceives them*. The evidence for this is presented in Study 6.6.

God worked false miracles at the time of AD70, according to 2 Thess. 2:9-11. This means that the 'miracles' claimed by Pentecostals and the like may be actual miracles; God allows them to be done because He wishes to deceive such people. The Bible is likewise written in a way which almost invites us to misinterpret it. The casual Bible reader may open Matthew 4 and conclude that the devil is a person who lives in deserts and tries to stop people being righteous. And if he flicks over to Rev. 12, he will think that the devil is a dragon who was thrown down from Heaven: because that's what the Bible says. But we know this is actually not the case, if you read the records carefully. Many times I can recall conversations where I want to say: 'Yes, I know that's what it seems, I agree; but the general teaching of the Bible, under the surface, is quite the opposite. But until you give your *heart* to wanting to find God's truth, that's how you'll always see it'. Thus the superficial Bible reader will be deceived by God's word into believing things which are a false Gospel; a system of understanding which has an *appearance* of the Gospel, but which is actually an anti-Gospel (cp. 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6). The fact that so many apparently sincere Bible readers are so wrong shows that there is a power of delusion at work greater than those people just making a few mistakes in their Bible exposition. After all, how *can* we believe in a 'trinity'? The Bible is so clearly against this idea. But millions read their Bibles (after a fashion) and believe it. The super-human power of deceit which is at work is from God. The hobbyists, the part-timers, those who *in their hearts* are not wholeheartedly committed to God's Truth, are deceived.

Such deception can be frequently seen operating in the weak believer. Daily Bible reading is skipped, the breaking of bread forgotten about (for those in isolation), prayer pushed into the background, meals gulped down with no further thought for the Father who provides, self-examination never thought of... and yet the brother or sister feels they have come to a higher spiritual level, whereby as they understand it (e.g.) God quite understands if we marry out of the Truth, or (e.g.) they come to the 'realization' that actually friendship with the world, or total commitment to our careers, is really serving God, or that really, doctrine doesn't matter and other churches are quite acceptable. And so their real fellowship with God slips away, but they are *convinced* that actually they are spiritually growing into a higher relationship with God. God, working through their deceitful natures, has deceived them. For this reason the Truth is in one sense the most dangerous thing in the world. It can destroy us, blow us apart; God can terribly, terribly deceive us, until at judgment day we gnash our teeth in white hot rage against Him and ourselves (Is. 45:24). The Truth is precious, *very* precious, we must hold it like diamonds. For it will gloriously save us, or miserably destroy us.

The Centre Of Our Souls

I'm writing all this primarily for those who have recently been baptized. As we hold on over the years, the logic of endurance becomes the more apparent; " Lord, to whom shall we go?" rings in our minds the more (Jn. 6:68). The thought of quitting becomes answered the more readily by appreciating that " The love of Christ constrains us" . And yet there is the

temptation that because for many years we have known nothing else apart from the Christian life, the fire of real spirituality and sacrifice, the spirit of the cross, can burn low. Our religion can become a fondly loved hobby, full of precious memories of fine friends and moments; but the Lord Jesus Christ, the one for whom the true Israel hopes and longs, the fire of what God's Truth is really all about, can cease to be at the very *centre* of our souls. As we come to know ourselves better, as we observe the habitual patterns of our nature, our secret sins, we tend to make excuses, we become generous spirited towards our own humanity, spiritual 'growth' becomes just a scratching around on the surface of our natures. This isn't easy for me to write, and it can't be easy for you to read it. To a man and to a woman, these things hit altogether too too close to home. " My son, *give me thine heart*" stands true for you as well as me. We must grow in our realization of the *enthusiasm* of God for our salvation. Consider how the Father ran unto the pathetic son and fell on (Gk. violently seized) his neck and kissed him (Lk. 15:20; the same Greek as in Acts 20:37). Or consider how Christ interprets our often distracted, sleepy and half-hearted prayers " with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom. 8:26), a description which is evidently intended to be connected with His sufferings on the cross (Heb. 5:5-8). The intensity of His prayers then is just the same as when He intercedes for us now. Prayer and confession of sin simply can't be part of an offhand, part-time hobby-level religion. The enthusiasm of the Father and Son for our redemption from our sins and spiritual indifference means that we simply *must* be wholehearted in response.

There are things we *must* do, under the sun. We must work, we must service our car, prepare our food and eat it, I must wash my clothes out tonight... but the temptation is to allow these daily necessities to obsess us. All too often we make the excuse that because we are human, surrounded by human needs, we can't dedicate ourselves *wholly*. Our natures seem to suggest a *fear* of being too committed; we are almost embarrassed by a high level of commitment. To give up an over-demanding job or course of study, to move *down* the property ladder rather than up it, resigning our holiday in Hawaii for a visit to the brethren in Ghana; these sort of things are somehow embarrassing for us, even within the context of the response of our brethren. And subconsciously, we remind ourselves of this fact. We don't let ourselves go in commitment. Yet the Kingdom age is described as a keeping of Sabbath. The Sabbath was a release from the everyday things of life, the need to search for food (in the wilderness years), to work, from doing one's own pleasure and speaking words which relate to one's own earthly desires (Is. 58:13,14). It is therefore fitting that in our present experience of life, these necessary daily things will not obsess us; and if we may be made free from them, we will " use it rather" . Sodom was condemned for this revelling in the legitimate daily activities of life- attending and organizing weddings, eating, drinking... So let's drive away our nervousness at the idea of serious commitment; we are a priesthood, the centre of our lives is the service of God, His tabernacle is what we camp around by night and carry by day. Let's not make the mistake of so many, and pass off this personal priestly responsibility to others. We are a *nation* of priests. " The love of Christ constrains us" , each and every one. The commitment implied in this needs to be pondered. We must look seriously at our spiritual life. If it is not central to our lives, our spiritual exercises are blasphemous, and will be judged as such. For example, if we break bread without due attention, we drink condemnation to ourselves; like Israel, their " solemn meeting" became " iniquity" , their incense (cp. our prayers) became an abomination to God (Is. 1:13). We can put too much emphasis on works, on doing things. It's where our heart is as we sleep, as we travel... " With no eyes for anyone but Jesus" (Heb. 12:2 Moffatt). The love of Christ for us demands a total response. He told His men to go and do His work and " salute no man by the way" , to not even go to their father's funeral but do *His* work. He may have been exaggerating to make the point; but the point is there: single minded devotion is what He asks.

Of course, we've given only one side of the coin; our salvation is ultimately by pure grace alone rather than willing ourselves onto higher levels of commitment. And yet that doesn't militate in any way against the truth of what we've presented above; the Lord Jesus expects us to serve Him and Him alone, as Yahweh likewise expected of His people under the Old Covenant; to put Him above all else in our lives. If we realize the extent of God's grace, His *pure grace* in translating us into the Kingdom of His Son *even now*, regardless of our works (Eph. 2:9; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 1:9), then we will realize that it's not a hobby, it simply can't be. We *can't* serve two masters (Mt. 6:24), we will either love God with *all* our heart, or (in His eyes) *hate* Him. If we appreciate this, we won't want our relationship with God to be on a hobby level. It can't be like that, ultimately; the Kingdom, 99.99% of our future, will be purely spiritual, and therefore the Hope of the Kingdom must be the centre of our present existence. Isaiah realized this when he said that the total devotion of the righteous *now* is because ultimately, devotion to God's ways will be what eternity is all about: "The desire of our soul is to thy name, and to the remembrance of Thee. With my soul have I desired Thee in the night...for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness" (Is. 26:8,9). We must come to appreciate this; that in real terms, the Lord *can't* be only part of our lives. And as we do, He will become, quite artlessly and naturally, the master passion of our souls. "The love of Christ constrains us" will be written all over us.

Notes

(1) There may be the implication that the three people said "I cannot come" with the implication 'I can't come *right now*, but later'; and the Greek could bear such an interpretation. The master's comment at the end suggests that he knew these people would later turn up at the supper, but he would refuse them entry: "For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper" (Lk. 14:24). There are often connections within the Lord's parables; in this case, the men who were so busy with daily life that they turned up at the wedding later would connect with the story of the other wedding guests who didn't have enough oil, and who *later* turned up at the wedding feast- again, only to be barred entry.

(2) This sheds light on the question of whether sexual immorality is a natural, God given instinct. According to Rom. 1:21,27,28, it is an attitude of mind given by God to those who wish to go this way.

(3) Listed in my *The Last Days* pp. 284,5 (London: Pioneer, 1992).

2-3 " Redeeming the time"

As cotton wool clouds drift lazily across the sky and life goes on in its petty routines, it is easy to miss the point that we are a planet tearing through space at a huge speed. And likewise it is difficult to appreciate the astonishing brevity of our human experience. God has existed from eternity, and the future Kingdom will exist eternally. The 6,000 years of humanity is an absolute pin prick in the spectrum of eternity. And our seventy years is even less significant. It is almost beyond belief that for the sake of our brief experience here, we have the hope of eternal existence. Our few millimetres of time here gives us the entrance to absolute eternity- if we use our brief time here aright. This is what "Redeeming the time" is all about. The relationship between infinite time and our few years of existence now is absolutely disproportionate. Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, works out an eternal weight of glory for us (2 Cor. 4:17). It follows from this that every moment of our lives is being intensely used by God to prepare us for the eternity ahead. It is incredible that our probations here are so short- just forty years or so after our baptisms. It would seem more appropriate if we suffered for say one million years in order to prepare us for the infinite time we will one day enjoy, in which one million years will be as a moment. The point is, a tremendous amount of spiritual development and preparation is packed in to a very very small space of time. And from this a crucial conclusion follows: we must allow God to use

every moment of our present lives as intensively as possible, to the end we might be prepared for His eternal Kingdom.

Bond-slaves

This is not only a choice which we *ought* to make; it is a duty and obligation which is logically required from each of us. It is unfortunate that most English (and other) translations mask the real force of the Greek words translated 'servant'; for they really mean 'bond-slave', a slave totally owned by his master, totally obedient, totally dedicated to his service. This is the logic brought out in Rom. 6: that before baptism, we were slaves of sin and self. After baptism, we changed masters. We didn't become free, but we became slaves of the Lord Jesus. "He that is called, being free, is the Lord's servant / bond slave" (1 Cor. 7:22). We cannot serve two masters; we are solely His. We are not only slaves, we are slaves whom the Master has come to know as His friends (Jn. 15:15,20). It is a great NT theme that we are the bond slaves of the Lord Jesus. And yet we are also to be slaves to all His people (Mk. 10:44), for the Lord Jesus *is* His people: they are His body. To serve our brethren is to serve the Lord Himself. The Lord Jesus *expects* us to relate to Him as bond slaves. He speaks of how a bond slave can be working in the field all day, come home tired, and then be immediately commanded by the master to prepare his meal and only then get his own meal- and the master won't thank him, but just expects it of him. And the Lord Jesus applies this to His relationship with us. The Lord of all grace is, by absolute rights, a demanding Lord. He commented that we call Him Lord and Master, and we say well, for so He is (Jn. 13:13). If we are truly the bond-slaves of the Lord Jesus, we have no 'free time' for ourselves. Neither will we expect to have time for ultimately our 'own thing'. The craze for personal and social freedom which sweeps the modern world will leave us untouched. Ultimate freedom and total independence is not for us. We will be able to understand why the Proverbs criticize over sleeping- an otherwise legitimate human activity (Prov. 6:11; 10:5; 19:15; 20:13). For we are to be "Redeeming the time" - not wasting it. We are bond slaves, who are willingly so. We have joined ourselves to the Lord (in baptism) *in order* to be His slaves (Is. 56:6). We love our Master, and are committed to Him and His cause 24 hours / day. And the Kingdom will involve the same; for quite simply "His servants shall serve him" in that age, continually and eternally (Rev. 22:3). We are "all things" to God; we are invited to conceive of His world-view as being limited by and to us (Heb. 2:8 cp. Eph. 1:22; 4:10; Col. 1:16,20). And if we are all things to the Father and Son, they should be all things to us. Our vista should be full of the things of the Lord. They are our 'all things'.

There are plenty of other Biblical reasons for understanding the urgency of our need to devote our time to the Lord. And not only our *need* to do this; we *are* His bond slaves, and therefore we by our very nature are entirely devoted to His cause. We must number our days, realize their number is only 70 years, and therefore apply our hearts unto wisdom (Ps. 90:10 cp. 12). "Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom" (Prov. 4:7). This is what we must cry after and lift up our voice for. Ecc. 9:20 teaches the sober fact that in the grave there is nothing, nothing at all, no work, no thought; and so now is the day in which to labour with all our heart in the thing we put our hands to. We may apprehend all this intellectually, and yet there is an inherent, clinging laziness which lurks within our nature. One simple reason why Israel failed to inherit the Kingdom in the time of Joshua / Judges was that they were simply "slack", lazy, to drive out the tribes (Josh. 18:3; the same word is used in Ex. 5:8 regarding how the Egyptians perceived them to be lazy; and also s.w. Prov. 18:9). They were happy to receive tribute from them, and to enjoy what blessings they received. They were

satisficers, not men of principle or mission; not real bond slaves. And for this, God rejected them and they never really inherited the Kingdom prepared for them.

" Redeeming the time"

In contexts regarding the evil of our surrounding world, Paul teaches us to 'redeem the time' (Eph. 5:15; Col. 4:5). This is a word classically used of the market place, in the sense of 'buying up' while the opportunity is there. Yet the context demands that this pressing need to buy up time be understood in the light of the evil world around us. Is it not that Paul is saying 'Buy up all the opportunities to gain back time from this world', in the same spirit as he told slaves " If thou mayest be made free, use it rather" (1 Cor. 7:21)? This means we shouldn't glorify the use of time for the necessary things of the world. If we *must* spend our time in the things of the world, as the NT slaves simply had to, then God will accept this as done in His service. But we shouldn't use this gracious concession to do all we can in the life of the world, justifying it by saying it is done 'unto the Lord'. This concession, in its context, only applies to those who by force of circumstances really must spend their time in the things of the world (Eph. 6:5-7; 1 Cor. 10:31). We must " break up our fallow ground" (Heb. 'plough the unploughed'), analyze ourselves from outside ourselves, and use our time and our "all things" to the utmost of their potential (Jer. 4:3; Hos. 10:12). We were created " unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10); we were redeemed that we might be zealous of good works (Tit. 2:14)- not that we might drift through life playing with our hobbies and with the fascinations of our careers.

Closer analysis of " redeeming the time" reveals that this is in fact a quotation from the LXX of Dan. 2:8, where Nebuchadnezzar tells the wise men that they want to 'redeem the time, because you know that [the decree for their execution] is gone from me'. There are other allusions in Col. 4 to Daniel: captivity, earnest prayer, thanksgiving, making manifest wisdom to the world as we ought to, walking in wisdom in the eyes of the world. Daniel and his friends urgently devoted every moment of their lives to prayer in order to redeem time, so that they would be delivered; and Paul took as it were a snapshot of their frantic urgency, and applies it to each of us, also living in Babylon. " The days are evil" , the world around us is insidious- and *therefore* we must redeem the time from it. Or it could be that 'the evil days' refers to the great and special day of evil, at the second coming (Eph. 6:13, in context; Ps. 37:29). In view of the coming of that day and the judgment it will bring, we ought to have a deep sense of the future we might miss, and the urgency of our present position; and devote ourselves therefore to redeeming the time. The sure coming of that day is an exhortation to the believer, " that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles... [for we] shall give account to him that is ready to judge" (1 Pet. 4:2-5). Peter's message is that there's no need to spend time living as the world does, tickling the desires of our nature- for we already spent enough of our time doing that. We are men and women living under judgment, and therefore should devote our lives to the service of God's will.

Really grasping all this will mean that we don't see the things of the truth as just a hobby or even super-hobby, affecting only our spare time. We are bond slaves of the most glorious Lord, living not only in service but also in friendship with Him. Our necessary labour, in daily work, parenting, caring for relatives, cooking, washing, indeed " whatever ye do" ... these things are an intrinsic part of the human experience, and must be done *as if* they are conscious service to the Lord (Eph. 6:5-7; 1 Cor. 10:31). There is to be no separation of our spiritual and secular lives. This is a fine art; not to just occasionally assent to the truth of this,

but to actually live daily life in this spirit. But all these things are aspects of the curse. We shouldn't glory in that curse more than we have to. We are first and foremost the Lord's bondmen *and as far as humanly possible*, this must be the passion of our lives. The other things which are simply necessary as a function of being human, these we must do *as if* they are His service. But above all we are *His servants*. We were bought with a price, redeemed and purchased, *in order that* we might serve Him (Tit. 2:14). We are bought with a price, and therefore we should not be the servants of men (1 Cor. 7:23)- and this is in the context of *choosing* freedom from slavery to men. Our response to the atonement should be that we seek to redeem the time from this world, to use what conscious choices we have to serve God directly rather than men.

Practical Suggestions

Seeing we must all serve the Lord (rather than men, if we have the choice) with all our strength and heart, the crucial practical question arises: *how best can we maximize our use of time?* How can we "redeem the time" in practice? There are plenty of books which seek to explain how to use time effectively, how to maximize ourselves- goal setting, self assessment, small scale objectives and the like... but personally, I wouldn't bother with these books. The essential thing is to understand Biblically that we are the Lord's bond slaves, to catch the fire of service and true devotion, of definite *mission*... and then the practical decisions will flow naturally. I hesitate to make suggestions which relate to private decisions in the lives of my brethren, whom I seriously try to esteem better than myself to be. So the following are only my own practical understandings of how to articulate the principles discussed:

- If you are fortunate enough to have a choice of careers, don't choose something which is bound to eat up all your heart, strength and soul. For they are for God's service. Be a minimalist. One who is "Redeeming the time". Catch the spirit of the early believers, who didn't loiter in ceremonious salutations but ran the risk of upsetting social protocol in order to be on with the Lord's business; this is what was the great light in their lives (Lk. 10:4 is hyperbole). Don't fall into the trap of thinking that it doesn't matter if you choose a demanding career, because it's all done as unto the Lord. That gracious concession, in the context in which it was given, applies to the bare necessities of life. But we must redeem the time from the world, choose freedom from man's service with preference to that of the Lord.

- If you must have a television- and some of us simply choose not to- watch out for the tendency to let that box just eat up your time (and mind), especially when you're tired.

- Beware of hobbies. The reasoning runs: 'Life's so stressed, even spiritual life is: so you need to do something totally different to take a break'. There are no Biblical examples of God's bond slaves doing this. Can we match hobbies with bondservice? Are these the "good works" which the Lord died that we might bring forth?

- Develop the right daily habits. An hour or so serious reading / study; 10-15 minutes prayer morning and evening (as a minimum). "Redeeming the time" becomes a principle of daily life.

- There is a much repeated characteristic of God's servants: that they 'rose up early in the morning' and did God's work. In each of the following passages, this phrase is clearly not an idiom; rather does it have an evidently literal meaning: Abraham (Gen. 19:27; 21:14; 22:3);

Jacob (Gen. 28:18); Job (1:5); Moses (Ex. 8:20; 9:13; 24:4; 34:4); Joshua (Josh. 3:1; 6:12; 7:16; 8:10); Gideon (Jud. 6:38; 7:1); Samuel (1 Sam. 15:12); David (1 Sam. 17:20; 29:11); Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chron. 29:20). This is quite an impressive list, numerically. This can be a figure for being zealous (Ps. 127:2; Pr. 27:14; Song 7:12; Is. 5:11; Zeph. 3:7). God Himself rises up early in His zeal to save and bring back His wayward people (2 Chron. 36:15; Jer. 7:13,25; 11:7; 25:3,4; 26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 35:14,15; 44:4). Yet the above examples all show that men literally rose up early in their service to God; this was an expression of their zeal for God, in response to His zeal for us. I'm not suggesting that zeal for God is reflected by rising early rather than staying up late; but it wouldn't be too much to suggest that if we are men of mission, we won't waste our hours in bed. Get up when you wake up.

- *Despise* the things of this material world. Paul counted all as dung (Phil. 3:8), knowing that the things of this life *are not worthy to be compared* with the exaltation of the Kingdom (Rom. 8:18); realize that all the extra labour of longer hours, better paying jobs- is so often merely to buy more expensive foods that tickle the taste buds more, to live in a house not a flat, to have softer furniture and designer clothes, or (and this is a more powerful temptation) to do a job which we feel fits our intellectual and social level, even if we could do something less demanding.

- When you perceive an opportunity to do the Lord's service, *respond immediately*. See it as another opportunity for "redeeming the time". This is a major Biblical theme. Israel were not to delay in offering their firstfruits to God (Ex. 22:29), lest their intentions weren't translated into practice. The disciples *immediately* left the ship, simply put their nets down and followed (Mt. 4:20,22); Matthew left his opened books and queue of clients in the tax office and walked out never to return (Lk. 5:17,18 implies). There is a marked theme in the NT of men and women hearing the Gospel and *immediately* responding by accepting baptism. In this spirit Cornelius immediately sent for Peter (Acts 10:33), and the Philippian jailer was immediately baptized, even though there were many other things to think about that night (Acts 16:33). Joseph was twice told in dreams to "arise" and take the child Jesus to another country. Both times he "arose" in the morning and just did it, leaving all he had, responding immediately (Mt. 2:13,14,20,21). Paul and Luke immediately went to preach in Macedonia after seeing the inviting vision (Acts 16:10); Paul "straightway" preached Christ after receiving his vision of preaching commission (Acts 9:20). Indeed, the records of the Lord's ministry are shot through (in Mark especially) with words like "immediately", "straightway", "forthwith", "as soon as...". He was a man of immediate response, Yahweh's servant *par excellence*. He dismissed the man who would fain follow Him after he had buried his father, i.e. who wanted to wait some years until his father's death and then set out in earnest on the Christian life. The Lord's point was that we must immediately respond to the call to live and preach Him, with none of the delay and hesitancy to total commitment which masquerades as careful planning. Note how the Lord told another parable in which He characterized those not worthy of Him as those who thought they had valid reason to delay their response to the call (Lk. 14:16-20). They didn't turn Him down, they just thought He would understand if they delayed. But He is a demanding Lord, in some ways. What He seeks is an immediacy of response. If we have this in the daily calls to service in this life, we will likewise respond immediately to the knowledge that 'He's back' (Lk. 12:36, cp. the wise virgins going immediately, whilst the others delayed). And whether we respond immediately or not will be the litmus test as to whether our life's spirituality was worth anything or not. All this is not to say that we should rush off in hot-headed enthusiasm, crushing the work and systematic efforts of other brethren and committees under foot. But when we see the need, when we catch the vision of service, let's not hesitate in our response, dilly dallying until we

are left with simply a host of good intentions swimming around in our brain cells. Instead, let's appreciate that one aspect of the seed in good soil was that there was an *immediacy of response* to the word, a joyful and speedy 'springing up' in response (Mk. 4:5).

2.4 Serving God For Nothing

2-4-1 Serving God for nothing

There are quite a number of passages which speak of how the righteous are blessed for their righteousness in this life. For example: If we forsake the things of this life for the sake of the Kingdom, we will receive them back a hundred fold (Lk. 18:30). The context here (and in Lk. 12:31) is clearly of receiving *physical* blessings from God as a result of our dedication to Him. There are prominent Biblical and contemporary examples of this. Godliness not only gives a future Hope, but has blessings in this life too (1 Tim. 4:8). Other relevant references include Lk. 12:31; Dt. 28; Ps. 37:25; 63:5; 84:11; Mal. 3:10. And yet there are a growing number of believers *in many parts of the globe* who are finding that life in this world is daily getting grimmer: longer hours for lower pay, poor diet, inadequate clothes, no security for one's family, and especially (and this, I notice, is the worst-felt of all) lack of spare cash for the work of the Lord within their local context. Increasingly, the promises that there will be extra blessing for those who put God first seem hard to believe. Many brethren and sisters *do* put God first. Their lives are examples of serving God for nothing. But they are not receiving the promised increase in human things, even though they are fully prepared to use these things in the Lord's service. The idea of joy and peace here and now becomes hard to reconcile with a life spent endlessly planning how to provide the bare necessities of human existence.

Why?

It certainly isn't because these brethren and sisters don't have enough faith. It is the poor of this world who are rich in faith (James 2:5). There are many other references which teach that the cross comes before the crown: and the crown is only in the Kingdom. Through much tribulation now we will enter the Kingdom (Acts 14:22). The false image of Christianity which exists in our European and African cultures has taught us that if we believe in God, somehow every story has a happy ending. It's easy to think that as Christians, everything will turn out OK in this life- as well as on judgment day. The broken-hearted single sister finds a wonderful brother and they get married, the separated brother and sister come to love each other again and their marriage becomes better than ever, the unemployed brother gets a nice job after his baptism, the alcoholic finds the Truth and never touches another drop. But the Bible record is packed with examples of believers whose lives, on a human level, didn't have a happy ending. And our experience shows the same. The single sister struggles on all her days of tribulation, faithful to Christ Jesus, and dies alone in her bedroom: assured of acceptance by the Lord who loved her and gave himself for her. The marriage rift becomes more serious, the wife leaves the faith, divorces, and marries again. The brother holds on, 'does the readings' alone in his flat, night after night, walking that Kingdom road with an incurable pain in the soul. The unemployed brother gets thrown out of his home, his wife leaves him. And he struggles on in faith, until at last the Lord comes to end this petty life. Of course, there are other examples of where God abundantly provides materially, He honours His promise to provide physical blessings for His children. I openly, and gratefully, admit

that compared to many of my brethren, this is the category I come under. But very often, this doesn't happen: especially, it seems, in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe at the moment. Life for many brethren and sisters doesn't seem to be heading towards a happy ending, a walking off into the sunset with the promised hundred fold of blessings. Why? Why? Does a man serve God for nothing?

Personally, I put this on my long list of irreconcilable paradoxes in God's dealings with us ⁽¹⁾. There are verses which teach that God *will* materially bless us in this life. And there are others which say that the reverse is true. Yet God's word is without contradiction. Job, David and Asaph were among the many believers who wrestled the same paradox. They all ended up *accepting* it. But they offered no trite answer to it, no pithy few sentences that explained it.

Note

(1) See *The Inconsistency Of God* for fuller discussion of this.

2-4-2 Examples Of Selflessness

But... There's a significant theme in the Bible of men being so full of *love* for God, so saturated with appreciation of His character, that they were willing to serve Him with no expectation of reward in this life. For such men, the paradox we are discussing would have caused no lasting difficulty. Those unnamed, unknown believers who in Old Testament times castrated themselves for the sake of the Truth were in this category (Mt. 19:12). They served God, expecting *nothing* from Him now. And our Lord was the same. "For the joy set before Him He endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2) may seem on first reading to mean that He did serve for a reward. Until we understand that the Greek word *anti* translated "for" really means 'in place of'. With evident reference to the wilderness temptation to take the Kingdom joys without the cross, the writer is making the point that instead of the joy that the tempter of His own flesh set before Him, He endured the cross. Consider just a few more examples of selflessness:

- The Satan in the book of Job expresses his serious doubt that any man would serve God for no prospect of reward in this life (Job 1:9) ⁽¹⁾. One of the themes of the book of Job is to show how a real believer *will* serve God for nothing. In fact, Job went beyond this. He says that he will still serve God even if he gets nothing from Him in this life *and even if there is no future reward either*, and even if God treats Him unfairly; 'Even if', Job speculates, 'God *slays me* (not just 'kills' me)' (consider Job 13:15; 14:7,14; 19:10). This was love of God, this was devotion to one's creator, despite not understanding His ways. In Malachi's time, the Jews were expecting a reward from God for every little thing they did. They are rebuked in language which is full of allusion back to Job, and his willingness to serve God "for nought" (Mal. 1:10).

- Moses reached a similar height, being one of the foremost Old Testament examples of selflessness. He was willing to give both his physical and *eternal* life for the salvation of Israel (Ex. 32:29-32), that God's Name might be upheld. He so loved and respected God's character, His personality (all bound up in His Name) that he was willing to forego all personal blessings, even life itself, just because of the wonder of God. A less spiritually mature Moses had been motivated 40 years earlier by his respect of the recompense of the

reward (Heb. 11:26). But now his motive is the glory of God's Name. Personal possession of the Kingdom *is* held up as a motivator in our lives; but surely, like Moses, we ought to progress towards a desire to see the achievement of God's glory, rather than being obsessed with personally finding our place in the political Kingdom

- Ittai was a mercenary, and David therefore told him his services were no longer needed now that he had been deposed from being king and was facing extinction. But despite David's apparently hopeless cause at the time, Ittai replied: "Surely in what place my Lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be".

- The Levites were likewise taught that the fact they were so close to God, that they were honoured with the call to daily do His work, was more than enough to compensate for the fact that they were left out of the physical blessings of inheritance in the land of Canaan. And the Levites are types of us (1 Pet. 2:5). They were to be examples of selflessness to the whole nation.

- Job at times expressed a total lack of hope in a resurrection (Job 14:14)- and yet he still continued to serve God, because he loved Him.

- Gentile Ruth came to love, really love, the God of Israel. She willingly decided to forego re-marriage after her husband died for the wonder of the fact she had been allowed in to the commonwealth of Israel. As it happened, this *is* a story with a happy ending. But she was prepared for it not to be.

- Jesus told Martha that if she believed in Him, she would have eternal life. She responded simply: "I believe" (Jn. 11:26,27). She didn't go on to talk about the promised 'carrot' of eternal life.

- There is a connection between Lk. 14:13 and 21. "When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind...*for* they cannot recompense thee". Yet this is exactly what the parable of v. 21 teaches that God does: "Bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind". The basis of God's calling of us must be the basis upon which we relate to others. We cannot recompense Him, yet He shows us His gracious invitation. So we too must share ourselves with those who cannot give us anything. In this sense, we like our Father, serve for nothing in the sense of no personal, concrete gain. We must *be* gracious by nature, and just *be* as He *is*.

- David felt that the wonder of having God's word meant that the presence or absence of physical blessings in his life was irrelevant (Ps. 119: 72,111).

- The mother of James and John wanted them to have great reward in the Kingdom. The Lord's basic answer was: 'Take up my cross, follow my example, focused as it is on getting *others* to the Kingdom' (Mt. 20:21,27,28). They were to be to others examples of selflessness.

- Paul quotes the words of Prov. 25:21,22 in Rom. 12:20: " If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat...*for* thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head" . But he omits to apply the last part of Prov. 25:22 to us: " And the Lord shall reward thee" . Paul's point is that we should not resist evil, leave God to glorify His Name- and enable this to happen, without seeking for a personal reward for our righteousness.

- Elijah had to pray daily for the lack of bread and water in Israel (so 1 Kings 17:1 implies). He suffered himself because of this. He was prepared to forego quite legitimate blessings in order to lead an apostate ecclesia back to God.

- The widow woman prepared to die. The tragedy of that gaunt woman touches me deeply. I imagine her tidying the house, and then walking out into the blazing heat to gather sticks. But she gave her last bit to God's man Elijah; not, it seems, with any hope of getting out of her plight. She gave of her very last, her best, her all, not expecting anything back. Another widow, centuries later, threw her two mites into the collection bag of a fabulously rich, doctrinally corrupt, hypocritical ecclesia. The implication is that she died even more pathetically, perhaps tossed onto Gehenna with the starving cats. There seems to have been no happy ending- in this life. And she absolutely understood that.

- One of the thieves begged the Lord: "Save thyself and us". The other didn't agree; he focused instead on the righteousness of the Lord and his own unworthiness, and asked only to be remembered for good. 'Save *me*' wasn't upmost in his mind.

- In the parable of the labourers, the hard, all day workers came expecting their pay; they were sent away, it could be, in rejection. But those whom the parable appears to commend worked having made no agreement nor mention of the reward they would receive.

- James and John clamoured for a reward in the Kingdom. They were told instead to go away and serve; this was what it was all about, being the minister of others, serving for nothing- not badgering the Lord for a reward in the Kingdom (Mt. 20:20-26).

- Paul seems to exalt in the fact that his "reward" or wage for preaching the Gospel is in fact *not* to have any wage or reward (1 Cor. 9:18). Having this attitude to the work of witness will mean that we will never suffer from deep disappointment with lack of response, gratitude or recognition for our work.

- Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were examples of selflessness. They told Nebuchadnezzar that they were confident that Yahweh would save them from the furnace. " But even if He does not, we want you to know, O King, that we will not serve your gods" (Dan. 3:18 NIV). Even if God didn't preserve them, they would still serve Him alone. Perhaps they had Job's words going round in their minds: " Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" .

- Perhaps the twelve had the same sense. When the Lord spoke of going to Lazarus, they thought He was going to commit suicide. They hoped He would redeem Israel in glory, there and then. But such was their devotion to Him as their Saviour, even though they didn't understand how He was going to work it out, that Thomas solemnly ordered them, as they huddled together out of the Lord's earshot: " Let us also go, that we may die with him" (Jn. 11:16). I imagine dear Peter solemnly nodding in agreement, thinking of his wife and dear children back in that fisherman's cottage. But he was serving for nothing, for sheer love of his Lord. And he was prepared to die for Him, even if it meant receiving nothing of the present benefits he thought Jesus of Nazareth might bring for him. And yet the Lord demands such devotion from all of us. The tired servant can labour all day for Him, but immediately he returns, the Lord expects him to *immediately* prepare a meal, and doesn't expect to thank us. As it happens, He elsewhere intimated that He will praise us at the judgment, He Himself will

serve us (Lk. 12:37). But the attitude of serving for nothing, for no thanks even, must be with us now, in this life.

- Abraham was told to leave Ur and all he had there, and journey to a land he would be shown. Trying to keep up a sense of eagerness and hope for the new life, he made tremendous sacrifices, and journeyed to Canaan. When he finally got there, he didn't realize he'd arrived. Then the Lord appeared to him and said that to *his seed* He would give this land (Gen. 12:1,7). To the human mind, this would have been a huge blow. He had given up all in the hope of a new life and inheritance, and now he is told that someone called his "seed" would inherit it. His response was to build an altar and worship, realizing he had served for nothing personally in this life, but with his mind filled with the glory and Kingdom of Christ, his future seed. God was so delighted with this attitude that later promises included Abraham personally, showing that because of his part in Christ, the seed, he would in fact personally have an inheritance too.

- The righteous gave to the poor, the sick, the hungry- without even realizing they had done it. They will confidently deny it when Jesus points it all out to them. They served with no expectation of reward; so much so that they even forgot what they did. And *every* one who is accepted at the judgment will have been like that (Mt. 25:36). Giving without any thought of getting anything back is a *must* for all of us who seek to truly manifest God: for this is exactly what He does and has done, minute by minute, down through the millennia of indifferent, unresponsive human history (Lk. 6:35,36).

Above all, in my opinion, Habakkuk battled with the problem of God's policy of giving blessings. He sees that the righteous examples of selflessness in Israel were not being given the physical blessings promised to the righteous. Yet he concludes his prophecy with a personal burst of praise and devotion to his God. He speaks of the things which God had promised to bless righteous Israelites with, and which He had threatened to withhold from those who were wicked. He says that even though he, as a righteous man, is being given the curses of the wicked, and is not being given the promised blessings, yet he still loves God more and more. " *Although:*

1) the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines (cp. Dt. 8:8; Ps. 105:33; Joel 1:7; Mic. 4:4 and especially Jer. 8:13);

2) the (promised fruit) of the olive shall (turn out to be a lie; AVmg. with Heb.), and

3) the fields shall yield no meat (cp. Dt. 28:3; 32:32; Lev. 26:4);

4) the flock shall be cut off from the fold (cp. Dt. 28:4,18; Is. 65:10; Zeph. 2:6), and

5) there shall be no herd in the stalls:

yet (despite all this confusion) I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He will make my feet like hinds' feet, and He will make me to walk upon mine high places" (Hab. 3:17-19).

But above all these human examples, the life and cross of the Lord Jesus was the supreme example of serving for nothing in this life. He was the good shepherd who wasn't interested in wages or His own personal escape from violent death, but only the salvation of His

beloved sheep (Jn. 10:12). He did not conceive the equality with God with which He would be rewarded as "booty" (Gk.). something to be grasped for: instead, He concentrated on being a humble servant, working to bring about the salvation of others (Phil. 2). This sense of working for *God's* glory must really permeate our thinking. Consider Prov. 25:21,22: "If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat...for thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee". This passage is quoted in Rom. 12:20, but with the pointed omission of the last clause: "The Lord shall reward thee". It's as if Paul is saying: 'The condemnation of the wicked, when *God*, not you, pours out His vengeance, will glorify Him. So do your part to bring this about, don't worry about the reward you're promised so much as the bringing about of His glory'.

Notes

(1) My own conviction is that the *satan* refers to a righteous Angel and the human believer which that Angel represented. Whoever '*satan*' was, he was a believer, and he says nothing that is wrong- when you analyze his few words carefully. So perhaps even Angels find it hard to accept that a man will love God for nothing in this life.

2-4-3 The Prosperity Gospel ?

Will A Man...?

By now, from all these examples, you must have got my point. They're all the very opposite of the prosperity Gospel. I fear some will feel I'm trying to be too tough on us, too ascetic. Really, I'm not: I'm just trying to grapple, in all intellectual and Biblical honesty, with both the Bible teaching on this theme and also our present Christian experience. We are to love God more than the gifts or rewards God offers or could give us. The challenge comes to each of us, right between the eyes: *Will* a man serve God for nought? There can be no escaping the import of it. *Will* a man serve God for nought? Will you? Will I? Will we rise to the level of Habakkuk? Will it be "enough" for us, that we the servants experience something of the opposition of the Master; is that *enough* for us? Or do we want some more personal benefit? Or will we ever rise to the level of Moses or Job, to so love God that we will resign all physical blessings, even life itself, *regardless* of whether we will be in the Kingdom? Will we really grasp the oft-repeated theme of John Thomas, that "God manifestation, not (personal) human salvation" is the ultimate purpose of God? Could we walk away rejected from the judgment, still *loving* God? We should be able to, in our imaginations. For it is only the unworthy who will be angry with God, calling His Son a hard and austere man (Mt. 25:24).

The principles we have discussed are far more wide reaching than the issue of faithful brethren remaining poor in the things of this world. Active brethren frequently complain that they feel unappreciated by others, single brethren and sisters complain that they can't find a partner and so they are going to seek one in the world. But if a man serves God for nought, we won't expect the blessings of marriage, of appreciation from our brethren...if we *do* have these things, we'll see them as icing on the cake, sugar in our tea. They're certainly not what the prosperity Gospel makes them out to be. If we have the spirit of serving God for nothing, then we will really appreciate what physical blessings we do receive; and we'll give true praise for them. There is a strong link between this spirit of serving God for nothing, and

living a life of heartfelt gratitude and thanksgiving, with a spirit that easily copes with theft, i.e. loss of blessings, material or otherwise.

Surely we've got down to something utterly fundamental. *Will* a man serve God for nought? "My son, give me thine heart" ; " love the Lord thy God with *all* thy heart, and with *all* thy soul, and with *all* thy might" . Time and again, Moses in his final hours used these words, as he pleaded on that last day of his life for Israel to grasp the nettle, to take on board the idea of loving God, of giving our all (Dt. 6:5; 10:12; 11:13,22; 13:3; 19:9; 30:6 ; an impressive seven-fold emphasis). I can almost hear his voice cracking as he stressed the word " all" . Having pleaded six times for them to love God with *all* their soul and *all* their might, Moses then makes the point that if they enter the Kingdom, there they will be *made by God* to love Him then with all their soul and might (Dt. 30:6). The logic is over-powering. In the Kingdom, our very nature, every fibre of our being, will be bent towards love of God. If this will be our eternal destiny, isn't it logical that we at least aspire to it now? In that day, *the prospect of reward will not be before us*. Love of God, joy in His Name, will be our driving force. And therefore, Moses implies in that last fine address, it should be the same now, in this brief moment of preparation. Taking this idea on board involves more than making a few practical New Year-type resolutions; more than mentally assenting as we are exhorted " Let us strive the more *earnestly*, brethren!" . All this is in some way just *scratching around on the surface of our natures*, making a few cosmetic improvements. Far, far too much of our Christian spirituality is little more than this. And the prosperity Gospel is even worse. We must open our hearts to the *love* of God, in both senses: His love for us, and the loving of God which this should provoke ⁽¹⁾. If we can do this, we will be consumed, *so consumed*, that the presence or absence of physical blessing is scarcely on our agenda.

Blessings Already

The New Testament emphasis is on the great *spiritual* blessings which we have *already* received; these are the blessings we should have our eye on. The prosperity Gospel overlooks these spiritual blessings. " What would ye that I should do for you?" (Mk. 10:34-36) was surely said by the Lord with a gentle irony; He had just been speaking of how He would die for them. James and John evidently didn't appreciate the wonder, the blessing, the honour of the fact that the Son of God would love them unto the end. All they wanted was the human blessing, in this life, of being able to tell their brethren that they would be *the* greatest in the Kingdom. " What would ye that I should do for you" - in addition to loving you unto the death, of loving you with a love greater than that of *anyone* else? Their minds were all too set on the present, the petty glory of here and now. But when they actually beheld the cross (Lk. 23:49 suggests James also did), they would have learnt their lesson. And so it was with Job. Throughout the core of the book, he consistently addresses God as 'Shaddai', the fruitful one, the provider of blessing. But in the prologue and epilogue, he calls God 'Yahweh'. It may be that He came to *know* the wonder of God's Name to the extent that he quit his perception of God as only the provider of material blessing.

The Way

The disciples were confused as to where Jesus was going and where He was leading them. His response was that He was and is "the way". C.H. Dodd in *The Interpretation Of John's Gospel* p. 412 suggests the meaning of Jn. 14:4,5 as: "You know the way [in that I am the way], but you do not know where it leads", and Thomas therefore objects: "If we do not know the destination, how can we know the way?". The Lord's response is that He is the

way. That's it. It's not so much the destination as the way there. The excellency of knowing Christ demands of us to walk in His way, to know Him as the life right now, to live His life, to be in His way. The way is the goal; 'You don't need any further horizons than that, than me, right now'. This is totally unappreciated by the prosperity Gospel.

All this said, there's nothing wrong with being motivated by the promised reward of the Kingdom; there is Biblical evidence to support this view of the Kingdom. Likewise it is possible to discern an element of human appeal in some Biblical statements. Thus the Spirit encourages husbands to love their wives as themselves, because effectively they are loving themselves if they do this (Eph. 5:29). Yet we are also warned that a characteristic of the last days will be a selfish loving of *ourselves*. Paul speaks of how he puts things "in human terms" (Rom. 6:19 NIV); e.g. he suggests that fear of the judgment alone ought to at least make us sit up and take our spiritual life seriously (2 Cor. 5:11), even though the tenor of Scripture elsewhere is that this shouldn't be our motivator. And so the Kingdom *is* held out as a motivator to us. But we must want to be there not just for our own self-fulfilment; we must want to be there for the sake of glorifying God. Neither is there anything wrong with asking God for physical blessings, for pleading His promises. Habakkuk effectively does this in Hab. 1. The Lord himself recommended the twelve to ask God daily for their daily food, pleading His promises never to let the righteous go hungry (Ps. 37:25; Jos. 1:5 cp. Heb. 13:5), as exemplified in the way He daily provided for Israel in their wilderness years. God assured Israel that as He had provided for them in the wilderness, so He would continue to do so (Jos. 1:5); and that very assurance is quoted to us (Heb. 13:5); therefore, Paul reasons, because God will continue to provide for us as He did for Israel in the wilderness, we should live without desire for material things. And yet we shouldn't *expect* this blessing (or indeed, anything at all), as the prosperity Gospel of today's preachers falsely argues. On one level, we can quite rightly ask for material blessing, and the Father is pleased that we should. But there is a higher level we can live on, where requesting physical blessings doesn't figure so largely. We can be like Caleb, who conquered Hebron (his part in the Kingdom) for himself and then gave it to others (Josh. 14:12-14). Many mature brethren realize that their prayers place decreasing emphasis on requesting physical blessing from God; be it safe-keeping, health etc. The joy, the honour, of knowing God, of having His word, of the sure and blessed Hope of sharing the moral glory of His nature, of *seeing God*, of having *God Himself* wipe away all tears from our faces... these things, *appreciating* them, *meditating* upon them, make the seeking and receipt of any present physical blessing pale into insignificance. Thus the prosperity Gospel of today's preachers becomes a non-Gospel compared to the true good news. It was a hymnwriter of fine, fine spiritual apprehension who penned these verses:

Lord, who Thyself hast bidden us to pray

For daily bread,

We ask Thee but for grace and strength this day

Our path to tread.

Not for tomorrow, its uncharted road,

Shall be our prayer;

Sufficient for each day our daily load,

Notes

(1) Understanding "the love of God" as the love we have for God opens up several passages. The Jews didn't have the love of God inside them (Jn. 5:42); but this doesn't mean God didn't love them. They *are* beloved for the father's sakes; as a Father always loves His wayward son. But they didn't have love of God in their souls. Paul's prayer that God would direct hearts "into the love of God" (2 Thess. 3:5) surely means that He would influence their consciousness to be more filled with an upsurging love of God, rather than meaning that God would bring them into a position where He loved their hearts.

2-5 Loving The Appearing Of Christ

The lack of spiritual dynamism, perhaps even stagnation, which we seem to face individually and collectively can be traced back to three basic causes- in my opinion, I have to add:

1. A lack of serious, personal *daily* Bible study
2. A lack of appreciation of the seriousness of sin
3. A lack of urgent, intense expectancy of our Lord's return.

I have commented elsewhere upon the first two problems ⁽¹⁾. It is naturally difficult to live on the same level of intensity of expectation for Christ. It is also difficult to *become* more enthusiastic for the second coming as an act of the will. The fact is, if we truly love Christ, if we have a genuine relationship with Him, we will yearn to be with Him, we will long for our present nature to be ended and to enter into a true and fuller unity with the Father and Son. Heb. 9:28 speaks of the faithful as waiting for Christ to "appear without sin unto salvation". This alludes to a humbled, repentant Israel on the Day of Atonement, having confessed their sins and afflicted their souls through fasting, waiting for their High Priest to appear and pronounce upon them the blessing of forgiveness. The Spirit is using this as a type of us expecting the second coming of our Lord; the motivation for our enthusiasm should be our earnest need of ultimate forgiveness and reconciliation with God. David likewise speaks of waiting and watching for the Lord in the context of asking for forgiveness (Ps. 130:5,6).

Loving The Appearing Of Christ

We must be crystal clear about one thing. Our attitude to the second coming decides whether we will be in the Kingdom. In this sense we are judging ourselves, right now; we are formulating the outcome of the judgment seat by our attitude now towards the second coming. The proof for this lies in a group of passages which suggest that everyone who truly loves the return of his Lord will be in the Kingdom. Of course, a true love of His coming is only possible if we hold correct doctrine, and if our faith and behaviour is mature enough to be able to look with quiet joy and confidence towards that day. Thus our Lord said that all those whom He finds *watching* will be welcomed into the marriage feast (Lk. 12:37). And 2 Tim. 4:8 is plain enough: "All them also that love his appearing" will be rewarded along with Paul. Paul's own confidence in salvation was because he knew the earnestness of his desire to be "present with the Lord" Jesus (2 Cor. 5:8), such was the closeness of his relationship with Him. Is this really our attitude too? Can we feel like Simeon, that we are quite happy to die after we have just seen our Lord with our own eyes (Lk. 2:29)? Is there really much *love*

between us and our Lord? The faithful are described as " those that *seek* (God)...such as *love* Thy salvation" (Ps. 40:16). None truly seeks God (Rom. 3:11- the context concerns all of us, believers and unbelievers); and yet we are those who seek Him. We must be ambitious to do the impossible. Those who truly *love* righteousness and the Kingdom will be rewarded with it. Likewise Paul in 1 Cor. 8:2,3 describes the faithful man as one who accepts he knows nothing as he ought to know, but truly loves God. Heb. 9:28 is clear: " Unto them that look for (Christ) shall He appear the second time...unto salvation" . Those who truly look for Christ will be given salvation.

Of course these verses are abused by some who reason that anyone who has the emotion of love towards Christ will be rewarded by Him. We know that true love involves both having and keeping His commands. But for those of us in Christ, these verses are still a major challenge. If we truly " look for" Christ's second coming, if we " love His appearing" , this will lead us to acceptance with Him. So the point is surely clinched: our attitude towards the second coming is an indicator of whether we will be saved. Time and again in the Psalms, David expresses his good conscience in terms of asking God to come and judge him (e.g. Ps. 35:24). Was this not some reference to the future theophany which David knew some day would come?

The fact is, our attitude and response in the split second when we know 'He's back' will effectively be our judgment. When the Lord speaks about knocking on the door of our hearts and our response (Rev. 3:20), He is picking up the language of the Song of Solomon 5:2-8, where the bridegroom (cp. Jesus) knocks at the door of the bride. But notice the sequence there:

While she sleeps at night, the bridegroom comes and knocks [unworthy virgins sleeping instead of being awake; the Lord Jesus comes]

She replies that she's not dressed properly, makes excuses about her feet, she can't come and open [the unworthy don't respond immediately]

He tries to open the door from the outside, putting his hand through the latch-hole [by grace, after the pattern of Lot being encouraged to leave Sodom when he hesitated, the Lord will be patient even with sleepy virgins in His desire for their salvation]

Her heart is moved with desire for him [the rejected still call Jesus 'Lord, Lord'; they love Him emotionally; but they don't *truly* love the appearing of Christ]

She starts dressing herself up, and then is overtaken by desire and rushes to the door, her hands dripping all kinds of perfume and make up over the lock as she opens it [cp. the virgins going to buy oil, the unworthy trying to prepare themselves all too late, not trusting that their Lord loves them as they are at the moment of His coming]

But he's gone , he *withdraws himself* [all too late, the door is shut, He never knew them]

Her soul fails [the shock of rejection]

She seeks him but doesn't find him, calls but he doesn't answer [Prov. 1:28; the rejected call, but aren't answered; they seek the Lord early, but don't find Him. Hos. 5:6 is likewise

relevant: "They shall go with their flocks and with their herds to *seek* the LORD; but they shall not find him; he hath *withdrawn himself* from them".]

She feels tired of her relationship with him ("sick of love").

She is persecuted by the world around her ["condemned with the world"]

The basic point is that if we don't immediately respond to the Lord's knock, we show ourselves to not love Him enough. We aren't truly loving the appearing of Christ. If we don't open immediately, it's as if we didn't open at all. The Lord wants us as we are, bleary eyed and without our make up, but with a basic overriding love of Him , and faith in the depth of His love, which will lead us to immediately go out to meet Him.

As If We Know...

We do not know the exact calendar date of the appearing of Christ; and yet we should be watching for his coming with the same intensity *as if* we did know the day and hour. This seems to be the message behind Mt. 24:42,43, where Jesus reasons that if the manager of a wealthy house knew when the thief was coming, he would have watched carefully; 'And that', Jesus continued, 'Should be the intensity of expectancy *you* should have towards my return, even though you don't know the exact date'. Now this is quite something. If we knew the exact date of the Lord's return, we can imagine how we might behave the day before. It seems Christ is asking us to imagine that scenario; and then He asks us to live like this all the time. This is truly a high challenge. Our attitude to God's word, entertainment, hobbies, money, relationships; all these areas of life would probably be somewhat different to what they are now if we really took on board this idea: that we should live *as if* we expect the imminent return of Christ. This idea makes sense of two apparently contradictory strands in the Lord's teaching: that we do not know the exact time of His return (Mt. 24:36,42,44; 25:13; Acts 1:7), and yet He tells us clearly it will come "soon" (Rev. 1:1,3 and many other passages). Perhaps the implication is that we should read coming 'soon' as meaning 'as *if* you know He is coming soon'. For, we ourselves cannot know the exact time.

" Watch"

Throughout Christ's discourses concerning his return, " watch" is the key-word (Mt. 24:42; 25:13; Mk. 13:33-37; Lk. 12:37; 21:36). There are at least ten New Testament allusions to Christ's command for us to " watch" in the last days, and thus be found loving the appearing of Christ; this alone indicates how our lives should be characterized by this spirit of watching. I would go so far as to say that generally we seem almost unaware of this emphasis. " Watch...watch...watch" is the cry that comes out from our Lord himself. It seems almost unknown to us that we are *commanded* by the Lord Jesus Christ himself, with a great sense of urgency, to live in this spirit of watchfulness for His return. It is easy to think that the command to watch means that we should scan Bible prophecies and compare them with current world events, and thereby see the coming of Christ approaching. However, this is not the idea behind the word " watch" . We are told to watch precisely because we do *not* know the time of Christ's appearing; therefore Jesus cannot be telling us (in this command) to watch political developments as pointers towards the date of His return. " Watch" nearly always refers to watching our personal spirituality, and concerning ourselves with that of others'. The Hebrew word translated " watch" carries the idea of defending, holding on as a matter of

life or death, enduring with stamina, being awake. Thus Habakkuk speaks of " watching" , i.e. being spiritually sensitive, to what God is going to tell him (Hab. 2:1).

Doing a study of New Testament allusions to Christ's command to " watch" yields conclusions which may seem unpleasantly negative to some. In Greek, the verb 'to watch' is related to the noun 'watch', referring to soldiers guarding something, or the period of guard duty. The idea behind 'watching' is definitely defensive rather than aggressive. In the same way as the gate keeper of a large house has to watch, to guard and protect, so should we in the last days (Mk. 13:34-37). Lk. 21:36 defines watching as praying always, concentrating our faith upon the fact that ultimately we will stand acceptably before the Lord Jesus at the day of judgment, and by His grace be saved from the great judgments which will surely come upon this world. The ideas of watching and praying often occur together (Lk. 21:36; Mk. 14:38; Mt. 26:41; Eph. 6:18; 1 Pet. 4:7). Prayer for our forgiveness, for acceptance by our Lord, must therefore characterize our watching in these last days. We must " watch" in the sense of being on our guard against the possibility of personal and communal apostasy from the faith (Acts 20:31); " watching" is standing fast in the doctrines of the one faith (1 Cor. 16:31), exhorting and encouraging others in the household of faith (1 Thess. 5:6,11), holding fast in ecclesias swamped by apathy and apostasy, strengthening what remains (Rev. 3:2,3; 2 Tim. 4:3-5), keeping the oil of the word burning in our lamps even though others have let it burn out (Mt. 25:13).

Loving the appearing of Christ

" Watching" is not only a guarding of one's own spirituality; the idea of guarding a house and the people and goods inside it suggests that our watching is of our brethren and sisters too. Elders " watch for your souls" (Heb. 13:17) in this sense. Christ's parable about the gate-keeper might at first suggest that the duty of watching is only with the elders; it is for *them* to watch and feed the flock, in the same way as it was the duty of the house manager to guard the house and feed the other servants (Mt. 24:43-51; Mk. 13:33-37). But that parable is intended for *all* of us; " Watch *ye* therefore (as intensely as that manager)...and what I say unto you, I say unto *all*, Watch" (Mk. 13:37). In other words, we are all elders, the command to watch for each other extends to each of us. And yet how really concerned are most of us about each other's salvation?

Watching and loving the appearing of Christ therefore involves a recognition of our own proneness to apostasy, both personally and communally. It involves defence of doctrine, watching for the salvation of our brethren as much as we watch for our own, really caring for their needs (Mt. 24:42-45), holding on, strengthening, giving ourselves to prayer until this becomes a way of life and thinking for us. Now some of us have heard all these things all too often. But the fact is, there can be no escaping the meaning of watching, and the repeated emphasis upon the need for it. There can be no escaping the Biblical fact that many will lose their faith in the last days *without realizing it* . There is the real possibility that when Christ returns, none will hold the faith (Lk. 17:8). Only eight people were truly watching when the flood came; and Peter cites this as an example for us at the time of Christ's return. No wonder there is such emphasis upon the need to watch.

If we are the generation which will see Christ's appearing, we will be the only people who never physically die. And we will be those who welcome the Lord Jesus to this earth, who stand ready to welcome Him. This is an honour higher than we probably appreciate. No wonder there is this pressing need in these last days to watch our doctrine, our way of life, *to*

hold on to the great salvation which we have been given in prospect. And yet at no other time in the history of our community has there been such de-emphasis upon watching doctrine and way of life. Can we not see the perfect appropriacy of this command to watch in these last days?

It cannot be accidental that Matthew's Gospel twice records Christ's plea for us to watch (Mt. 24:42; 25:13); and then goes straight on to describe how in Gethsemane, Christ pleaded with the disciples to join Him in watching and praying, lest they fall to temptation (Mt. 26:38-41). He was evidently deeply, deeply disappointed that they could not share this with Him. Surely the reason for this further mention of watching is to suggest that in the pain of our latter day watching, we will be at one with our suffering Lord in Gethsemane, as He too watched- not "signs of the times" , but His own relationship with the Father, desperately seeking strength to carry the cross rather than quit the race [\(2\)](#).

" Of your own selves..."

There is a superficial contradiction between the following three passages:

" Watch therefore; for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come" (Mt. 24:42)

" But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief" (1 Thess. 5:5). This is alluding to Christ's parable of Mt. 24:42-51, where He says that we should stay awake like the house manager who knows when the thief is coming, and therefore watches.

" If therefore thou wilt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (Rev. 3:3). The implication is that if we watch, Christ's coming will not be like a thief to us, and therefore we *will* know the hour of His coming.

So we should watch and be loving the appearing of Christ because we don't know when He will come; but if we watch, He will not come like an unexpected thief, because we will know the hour of His coming. Giving all these passages a latter day application (whilst not denying they had a primary meaning in the first century too), this would suggest that those who do watch will have a sure sense of when Christ is coming. I can hear many of you chanting: " But we can't know the day or hour!" . To which I would respond: We must watch *as if* we know for sure that the hour of Christ's coming is upon us. If we do this, then when Christ comes, we will be prepared for Him, *as if* we had been told the actual hour. The fact the NT writers spoke as if Christ's return was imminent in their time was not because they were just over optimistic; for they were inspired. Surely they were inspired to write *as if* the Lord's return was imminent in their time because this is how God expected His people to perceive the Lord's coming: as absolutely imminent.

" Knowing the time..."

But I would go further than this by suggesting that perhaps the very last generation *will* know the time of Christ's return. " Likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, *know ye* that the Kingdom of God is nigh at hand" (Lk. 21:31). As surely as trees bud and then Summer comes, so when we see the signs of Lk. 21:24-26 in Israel, we will know that the Lord is really at hand. It is only to the unworthy that the Lord comes unexpectedly. The majority of generations, including the disciples to whom Christ primarily spoke those words concerning not knowing the hour, have of course not known the day or hour. But there seems absolutely

no point in the Lord giving us *any* signs if in fact the last generation cannot foresee with some certainty the time of His coming. Surely Yahweh has revealed all His plans to His servants the prophets? As a woman knows within herself the approximate time of childbirth although not the day or hour, so we should know that the day of new birth is approaching- so Paul's reasoning goes in 1 Thess. 5. He warns that for those who do not watch, the day of Christ's coming will be a day of " sudden destruction...as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape" (1 Thess. 5:3). Surely the picture here is of a woman whose time of delivery comes unexpectedly upon her, with complications that result in her dying in childbirth. As a woman who knows the time of delivery is very near will behave in an appropriately careful way, so will the faithful of the last generation who likewise know that the Lord's coming is nigh. The same mixture of seriousness and joyful anticipation will be seen in us too, who are watching and loving the appearing of Christ.

Consider Lk. 21:28: " When these things begin to come to pass, then look up (Gk. 'unbend'- as if the depression of the faithful is partly lifted by discerning the nearness of Christ's return), and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh" . These are words which can only apply to the last generation; and they self-evidently imply that therefore that last generation does know for sure that Christ is about to come. Just two verses later, the Lord spoke of how in the Spring " Ye see and know *of your own selves* that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the Kingdom of God is nigh" (Lk. 21:30,31). There is an instinctive sense within us concerning the change of the seasons; and this will be the same in the minds of the faithful as they sense the Lord's return approaching. There will be no need for magazine articles expounding " signs of the times" ; we will not need any man to say unto us " The time draweth near" because we will know *of our own selves* that the coming of Christ is near (Lk. 21:7,8 should be read in the context of v.30,31). The relationship between Solomon and his bride in the Song of Solomon is typical of that between Christ and His church; and significantly, therefore, she senses his approach, she hears his voice telling her that he is coming, even before she sees him (Song 2:8).

Saving the best till last, consider Lk. 17:24-26. This passage speaks of " the days of the Son of man" - and refers them to three things:

1. The days of Christ's ministry
2. The time leading up to His return
3. The day of judgment, of His actual second coming.

Putting these together, we come to the following conclusion: those living in the very last days will effectively be living with the actual presence of Christ, it will be as if Christ has physically returned, although He has not done so. This may well be in order to provide encouragement to the persecuted saints in their latter day holocaust; but it surely suggests that they will *know* that Christ is about to return, that they are living in the days of the Son of man. Those days leading up to Christ's return will not, therefore, just seem like any other portion of human history- *to the faithful*. The signs will be so clear to them that it will be as if Christ has returned.

There is a connection between the breaking of bread and the second coming. We are to do it " until He come" . Christ said He would not take the wine *until* He takes it again with us at the

marriage supper. Thus " That dark betrayal night...with His blessed advent we unite" . Christ's desire for us to break bread regularly to remember Him is therefore associated with His desire for us to remember the reality of His second coming.

Notes

(1) See [Are We Too Academic?](#) .

(2) The idea that the faithful remnant in the latter day ecclesia will acutely fellowship the sufferings of Christ is developed in *The Last Days* - as is the idea that there must be major apostasy within the latter day ecclesia.

2.6 Spiritual Ambition

The Hope of the Gospel is described as a " high" or " Heavenly calling" (Phil. 3:14; Heb. 3:1). As high as Heaven is above earth, so high above our natural life is the Hope of the Kingdom. Any who believe this Gospel must have a degree of spiritual ambition within them; an awareness and belief that although we are earth-bound mortals, only dust and ashes with extremely limited horizons, yet one day we will share God's nature. Thousands hear the Gospel but have no desire to realize the personal bearing of it; the wonder of it all when applied to them personally is lost on them. Yet we who have believed are prepared to rise up to grasp the reality of God's offer, we have " respect unto the recompense of the reward" (Heb. 11:26); we have spiritual ambition.

In the humdrum of daily life, the flame of spiritual ambition burns dim. Yet the art of spiritual life is to keep that ambition burning brightly.

When we read that humanity is the "image and glory of God" (1 Cor. 11:7), it seems to me that Paul is stating something which is only potentially true- for he elsewhere says that we must be transformed *into* the image of God (2 Cor. 3:18), speaking of a progressive renewal in knowledge until we come to the image of our creator (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; 2 Cor. 3:18). This kind of approach is common in Paul- he speaks of a state of being which we should rise up to, as if we already have it. He's surely inspiring us to rise up to our potential.

There is a Greek word which basically means 'to be ambitious', although it is poorly translated in most versions. Its three occurrences are instructive.

" In this (body) we *groan*...we that are in this tabernacle do *groan*, being burdened...we are always *confident*...we are *confident*, I say...Wherefore we *labour* (are ambitious), that...we may be accepted of Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:1-10). Notice the designed repetition of the words " groan" and " confident" . The humdrum groaning of this life is related to our ambitious confidence that we really will be accepted at the day of judgment. The very thought of acceptance on that day requires real ambition, an ambition that will lift us right up out of the 'groaning' of this life.

Paul prays that "every desire of goodness" which there is in the Thessalonians will be fulfilled (2 Thess. 1:11 RV). He assumed they had such spiritual ambition, and wanted to see it realized. Spiritual ambition means that we will desire to do some things which we can't

physically fulfil- and yet they will be counted to us. Abraham is spoken of as having offered up Isaac- his intention was counted as the act. And Prov. 19:22 RV appropriately comments: "The desire of a man is the measure of his kindness". It is all accepted according to what a man has, not what he has not.

Ambition In Preaching

Preaching, on whatever scale, involves a certain spirit of spiritual ambition; for example, the hope and faith that a leaflet, a mere piece of paper, might be the means of directing someone on to the Kingdom road. That a scrappy piece of paper, a passing comment at a bus stop should really lead a small mortal towards the eternal glory of God's nature...without spiritual ambition the preacher just wouldn't bother to start. Paul was the supreme model of ambition in preaching: " I have *fully preached* the gospel of Christ. Yea, so have I *strived* (been ambitious, RV mg.) to preach the gospel" (Rom. 15:19,20). In his last days (or hours?) Paul's mind returned to these words. His swansong in 2 Tim. 4:17 is a direct allusion to Rom. 15:19: " The Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the *preaching* might be *fully known*, and that all the Gentiles might hear" [\(1\) Paul's reference here to 'completing the Gospel from Jerusalem and in a circle as far as Illyricum' is a window into his ambition in preaching. He speaks of his ambition to preach in Spain; and so we get the impression of him planning a circle starting in Jerusalem, curving north-west, then further west to Rome, and then south-west to Spain. To complete the circle to Jerusalem would have involved him preaching in North Africa- where there were major Jewish centers, e.g. Alexandria. Perhaps he implies that his ambition was to preach there too, in order to 'complete the circle of the gospel'.](#)

It seems that Paul on his own initiative developed this ambition to spread the Gospel as far as he could. The Lord knew this before, but this does not mean that Paul was explicitly ordered to spread the Gospel as far as possible. Paul was no puppet, otherwise the account of his personal *ambition* in this area is meaningless. Of course, we do not all share Paul's abilities. Educationally, socially, linguistically, family-wise Paul had such gifts and opportunities. He used them to fuel his ambition to spread the word as far as he could. There are many in our community today who have what it takes to spread the word worldwide. If only we could treat our careers as Paul did his tent-making, and capture the spirit of his ambition to spread the word! But for every one of us the idea of being ambitious to preach the Gospel is still valid. Swinging conversations round to the Truth, leaving a tract in a bus...the spirit of ambition will fire us up to more urgent efforts. There is reason to think that the early believers could strive to possess certain gifts. Paul seems to be teaching in 1 Cor. 12 and 14 that they ought to be ambitious to possess the gifts which would lead to the wider spreading of God's word, both in the world and in the ecclesia. Again, he is advocating some kind of spiritual ambition.

The final reference to ambition brings us back to the daily grind: " ...that ye *study* (be ambitious) to be quiet, and to do your own business...that ye may *walk* honestly toward them that are without" (1 Thess. 4:11,12). " That ye *study* (be ambitious) to be *quiet*" presents a powerful opposition of ideas; to have heroic ambition to be quiet; to be self-controlled, living a blameless spiritual life in everyday things (this is what the idiom of " walk" refers to). In 2 Thess. 3:12,13, Paul returns to this idea: He tells them once again to live a *quiet* life, and says in that context: " Be not weary in (such) well doing" . Yet he asks them in 1 Thess. 4:11 to be ambitious to be quiet. Surely he is encouraging them not to be weary in living a life of such ambition. And this is not the only reference to ambition in Thessalonians. Paul praises them for the brotherly love which they undoubtedly had. But he doesn't just say 'Keep it up!'. He exhorts them to increase in it, more and more (1 Thess. 4:10).

There are other suggestions of spiritual ambition which don't directly use this Greek word. Consider how the Lord taught ambition in prayer- He put before His men the real possibility of moving a mountain into the sea, if that was what was required (Mk. 11:23). This example wasn't off the top of His head; He was consciously alluding to Job 9:5, where Job says that God alone, but not man, can do something like moving a mountain into the sea. And the Lord is saying: 'Yes, God alone can do it; but such is the potential power of prayer, that He will hearken to your requests to do such things- and do them'. The whole process of Nazariteship was to encourage the normal Israelite to have the ambition to rise up to the spirit of the High Priest himself; the restrictions governing Nazariteship were a purposeful echo of those regarding the High Priest. The way God describes Himself as depriving Israel of " wine or strong drink" (Dt. 29:6) throughout the wilderness journey is Nazarite language: as if in all their weakness and profligacy, God still sought to inspire them to rise up to the heights.

The Ambition Of Christ

The Lord Jesus was the supreme example of spiritual ambition in daily life. When the disciples debated about who would be greatest in the Kingdom, Christ said that " If any man desire to be first, the same shall be...servant of all" (Mk. 9:34,35). Christ was the " servant of all" because He *desired* to be the greatest in the Kingdom. It was this ambition which motivated His endurance of the daily cross of His life: " Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: *even as* the Son of man came...to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:27,28). He was drawing on the ideas of Hos. 13:1, where Ephraim exalted himself when he humbled himself to speak to God with the trembling of a true humility. The Lord Jesus was not esteemed by men in His death (Is. 53:3); the same word occurs in Dan. 4:17, concerning how Yahweh will exalt the *basest*, the least esteemed, to be King over the kingdoms of this world. That made-basest man was a reference to the Lord Jesus. He humbled Himself on the cross, that He might be exalted. Peter had his eye on this fact when he asks us to humble ourselves, after the pattern of the Lord, that we might be exalted in due time (1 Pet. 5:6). Christ desired greatness in the Kingdom, and so can we; for the brighter stars only reflect more glory of the Sun (1 Cor. 15:41). This very thought alone should lift us up on the eagle wings of Spirit above whatever monotony or grief we now endure.

The thought of the Lord Himself being spiritually ambitious may explain a problem which has been in my mind for some time. God promised Abraham a very specific inheritance in Canaan. And yet this promise seems to be interpreted in later Scripture as referring to the *world-wide* Kingdom which will be established at the second coming (e.g. Rom. 4:13 speaks of how Abraham was promised that he would inherit the world; Ps. 72 and other familiar prophecies speak of a world-wide Messianic Kingdom, based on the promises to Abraham). One possible explanation is found in Psalm 2, where the Father seems to encourage the Son to ask of Him " the *heathen* [i.e., not just the Jews] for thine inheritance, and the *uttermost parts of the earth* [not just the land of promise] for thy possession" (Ps. 2:8). Could it be that due to the Lord's spiritual ambition, the inheritance was extended from the Jewish people to *all* nations, and from literal Canaan to all the earth? This is not to say, of course, that *fundamentally* the promises to Abraham have been changed. No. The promise of eternal inheritance of Canaan still stands as the basis of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Gal. 3:8), but that promise has been considerably extended, thanks to the Lord's spiritual ambition.

The Spirit Of Heroism

There is a certain heroism in our spiritual lives. " We poor weak ones, we poor sinners" trapped within the moral and intellectual limits of our own very natures, only dust and ashes, are struggling to throw away our chains, to rise up to heavenly things, things altogether above our grasp - and somehow we are succeeding. The very fact that we want to rise up to the heights commends us to God. When the rich young man, in his zeal for righteousness, claimed: " Master, all these have I observed from my youth" , the Lord didn't rebuke him for self-righteousness; instead, He beheld Him (with His head cocked to one side?), He took a long wistful look at Him, and *loved him* (Mk. 10:21). The Lord had a wave of warmth come over Him for that arrogant young man, simply because He appreciated the evident spiritual ambition which was within him. It was for this reason that the Father so loved the Son. God caused the Lord Jesus to approach unto Him; " for who would dare of himself to approach unto me?" (Jer. 30:21 RSV). The Father confirmed the Son in His spiritual ambition, recognizing that very few men would rise up to the honour of truly approaching unto God. The whole way of life of the righteous man is described as seeking God, knowing we will eventually find Him when the Lord returns to change our natures (2 Chron. 15:2). So many times does David parallel those who seek God with those who keep His word (e.g. Ps. 119:2). We will never achieve perfect obedience; but seeking it is paralleled with it. We are coming to *know* the love of Christ which passes our natural knowledge (Eph. 3:19), to experience the peace of God that passes our natural understanding (Phil. 4:7). We are asked to be perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect (Mt. 5:48); to have the faith of God (Mk. 11:22 AVmg.). By faith in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, we can attain these heights; but not in our own strength. In our every spiritual struggle and victory against the flesh throughout the day, we are playing out the finest and highest heroism that any playwright could conceive: the absolute underdog, the outsider without a chance, winning, at the end, the ultimate victory against impossible odds.

Our very nature is inclined against spiritual ambition: " There is none (not one) that seeketh after God" (Rom. 3:11). But somehow we are " always" , time and again, caused to triumph in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14), participating day by day (and hour by hour at times) in His triumphant victory procession (so the allusion to the Roman 'triumph' implies). The spirit of ambition shouldn't just be an occasional flare in our lives; it should characterize our whole way of living and thinking. And at the very, glorious end, we will in fact be granted something well beyond the highest spiritual ambition we may now have; a salvation exceeding abundant above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20- this is a description of salvation rather than present blessings). When the Lord Jesus promised those who overcome that they would sit down with Him in His throne (Rev. 3:21), He was surely casting a glance back at the way His men had asked to sit at His right and left hand, in His glory (Mk. 10:37). He knew He was promising a future glory far above what to them must have been the heights of their spiritual ambition. It seems to me that we undervalue our sins of omission. A lack of spiritual ambition is in fact a sin. When Asa was threatened by his enemies, he hired the Syrians to drive them away- and he was condemned for this, being told that he should instead have had the ambition to ask God to deliver the mighty Syrians into his hand, as well as his enemies (2 Chron. 16:7). He was reminded that the Angelic eyes of the Lord are running to and fro in our support (2 Chron. 16:9), as Asa would have theoretically acknowledged. But his sin of omission, his lack of an ambitious vision, incited the Father's anger. We need to meditate carefully upon this, because it surely has many similarities with 21st century life, where money and 'hiring' worldly help is so easy...

Ruth seems to me to be a wonderful example of a spiritually ambitious person. It was unheard of in those times for a woman to propose to a man; yet by coming to him,

uncovering his feet and laying under his mantle, she was stating that she wished to see him as a manifestation of God to her (Ruth 3:7,9 = Ruth 2:12). She went after him, following him (Ruth 3:10); the poor, landless Gentile aspired to be a part of a wealthy Jewish family, in order to fulfil the spirit of the Law. And she attained this.

Such examples of spiritual ambition are inspirational; just as soldiers inspire each other by their acts of bravery. Achsah followed her father Caleb's spiritual ambition in specifically asking for an inheritance in the Kingdom (Josh. 14:12; 15:18); and this in turn inspired another woman to ask for an inheritance soon afterwards (Josh. 17:4). And so it ought to be in any healthy congregation of believers. Ponder the parallel between Is. 51:1 and 7: "Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord...hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness". To know God's righteousness is to seek / follow it; of itself, it inspires us to ambitiously seeking to attain it.

As husbands struggle to show the peerless love of Christ to their wives, to reflect His sublime patience, as brethren from different cultures and backgrounds strive to get on with each other, as we each try to reflect the supreme love of God to the world around us, as we fight the continual promptings of our inner natures - in these humdrum things of daily life in Christ we should sense this spirit of *heroism*, - almost of *adventure* - of struggle towards a realistic end: true spiritual ambition.

Notes

(1) Paul seems to want to inculcate the spirit of ambition in preaching when he told Corinth that they should be ambitious to gain those Spirit gifts which would be most useful in public rather than private teaching of the word (1 Cor. 14:1,12). In similar vein Paul commends those who were ambitious (from the right motives) to be bishops (1 Tim. 3:1). Perhaps men like Jephthah (Jud. 11:9) and Samson (14:4) were not wrong to *seek* to be the judges who delivered Israel from the Philistines.

2.7 Living On Different Levels

2-7-1 Concessions To Human Weakness

Someone analyzing our community from outside would see a great variety of attitudes to the same Gospel. Some of us would seem to be more committed than others to the principles which we all believe. Those who feel that they are highly committed to the Truth often find it hard to live with and respect other believers who apparently are not so serious. For example, a sister may make great efforts to attend a Bible study: arrange a baby sitter, change her shift at work...only to find that another two brothers have decided to skip Bible study and go to a football match. It isn't difficult to imagine her frustration with them and her possible anger. It will be very difficult for her to get along with them in future. Or, more realistically, consider the divorced brother who feels that his first marriage (before baptism) was the only one valid in God's eyes. He may personally believe that if he has another relationship after his divorce, he will be committing adultery and will be excluded from the Kingdom. But then he is invited to the wedding of a brother divorced three times before baptism, who is now marrying a sister. It will be hard, very hard, for the first brother to see this brother get married, doing the very thing which he has bruised his very soul not to do. And then he hears brethren and sisters talking about "how sweet" the new couple are. It's very, very hard for him to live in such a situation. The usual Christian response to these dilemmas is for the hurt brother to get

up and go, muttering things about apostasy and guilt by association as he does so. The two examples given may seem extreme; but there are many many such things going on all the time. A brother may have given up smoking because of his conscience towards God; it must be very hard for him to see another brother smoking, with an apparently clear conscience. What we need is a way of understanding each other which enables us to cope with this kind of thing. I fain would wish whatever words now follow could provide this; but perhaps they will contribute something.

Concessions To Human Weakness

God makes concessions to human weakness; He sets an ideal standard, but will accept us achieving a lower level. "Be ye therefore perfect, *as* your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:48) is proof enough of this. The standard is clear: absolute perfection. But our lower attainment is accepted, by grace. If God accepts our obvious failure to attain an ideal standard, we should be inspired to accept this in others. Daily Israel were taught this; for they were to offer totally unblemished animals. And yet there was no totally unblemished animal. There are many other examples of how God concedes to human weakness:

- Lot's desire to flee to Zoar, albeit on irrelevant excuses ("is it not a little one?"), was accepted by the Angel. The original plan for Lot was amended in accordance with his appeal for a Divine concession. But later he realized his error and fled right away from any contact with the plain dwellers.

- God told Israel to totally destroy the spoil from the cities they attacked. But when they failed to do this with Jericho, God told them that with Ai, the next city on the agenda, they were allowed to keep the spoil (Josh. 8:2); even though Dt. 20:14-16 said that this was how they should treat their distant enemies, but *not* cities like Ai which were part of their inheritance. This was an undoubted concession to human weakness. The same concession to human weakness applied to other cities apart from Ai; it became a general policy that "all the spoil of these cities...the children of Israel took for a prey unto themselves"; and yet following straight on from this we are told that Joshua "left nothing undone of all that the Lord commanded Moses" (Josh. 11:14,15). God accepted those concessions to human weakness, this living on a lower level, as total obedience. The grace of all this is marvellous.

- It was evidently God's plan that Moses should be His spokesman to Egypt. But when Moses refused, God didn't just give up; He worked with what He had available, He didn't totally reject Moses, but instead put a 'plan B' into operation by conceding to Moses' stubbornness and making Aaron the spokesman (Ex. 4:10-17). The Exodus record is full of this kind of contingency planning by God. Pharaoh had real possibility to let the people go, and therefore Ex. 4:23 NRSV implies that God only therefore went ahead with the plan to kill Pharaoh's firstborn. *If* the people don't believe the first sign, they *may* believe the second; *if* they don't believe either of them then there will be a third sign (Ex. 4:8,9). Yet God states in Ex. 3:18 that the people *will* listen; and yet Ex. 4:8,9 accepts the possibility that they may not. In this we see not only the essential hopefulness of God for human response to Him, but His willingness to go along with our continued weakness and blindness in an open-ended manner. There is, therefore, the possibility of living before God on different levels. This connects with the whole concept of conditional prophecy of which we have written at length elsewhere.

- Rather similar language is used about the Passover: "Ye shall let nothing of it remain until the morning; but that which remaineth of it until the morning..." (Ex. 12:10 RV). This was a concession to human weakness.

- The Lord Jesus didn't come to destroy the Law of Moses. It still stood when He gave His teaching (Mt. 5:38). Yet He said that instead of insisting upon an eye for an eye in situations like a pregnant woman having a deformed child because of the violence of a man, she should instead try to forgive him (Ex. 22:22-24). He was not changing the Law, as some have wrongly thought. He was saying that the Law was capable of being lived on different levels, and that some aspects of it were a concession to human weakness. Thus the woman with a deformed child could legitimately express her anger by insisting on the physical deformation of the man who had attacked her during pregnancy; but this, the Lord was saying, can give way to a higher level: simply forgive the man.

- Lev.25:20 promised that if Israel had doubts about how they would survive in the seventh year when the land rested, God would provide them with bumper harvests in the sixth year. But when the Lord bids us take no anxious thought what we shall eat on the morrow, He is surely directing us to the higher level, despite His willingness to make concession to human weakness.

- Zech. 2:5 had prophesied that Yahweh would be a wall of fire around Jerusalem at the time of the restoration. But He allowed and even enabled the fearful Jews to build a human wall for defence in the time of Nehemiah. The higher level would have been for them to have set their trust in these words of prophecy.

- It was God's wish that Israel would not have a human king; hence His sorrow when they did (1 Sam. 10:19-21). Yet in the Law, God foresaw that they would want a human king, and so He gave commandments concerning how he should behave (Dt. 17:14,15). These passages speak of how Israel would choose to set a King over themselves, and would do so. Yet God worked through this system of human kings; hence the Queen of Sheba speaks of how *God* had set Solomon over Israel as King, and how he was king on God's behalf (2 Chron. 9:8). Israel set a king over themselves; but God worked with this, so that in a sense *He* set the King over them. God's ideal was that the Levites would live from the tithes given by Israel (Dt. 14:27); but He foresaw that this ideal level wouldn't be reached by them, therefore the Levites were given land on which to grow their own crops for survival. However, it must be noted that by opting to make use of God's concessions to human weakness, real spirituality became harder to achieve. Thus it was harder to accept Yahweh as King if they had a human king demanding their allegiance. Josh. 23:7 made a similar concession regarding the nations left in the land. The ideal standard was to destroy them. But the concession was made that they should not socialize with them or worship their gods. But inevitably they did mix with those nations and learned their religions. Likewise the early Jewish Christians were allowed to keep the Mosaic law (in concessions to human weakness like that of Acts 15), but this really implied a lack of faith in Christ's sacrifice, with the result that many of them seem to have drifted back to Judaism.

- It seems that it is God's especial wish that a man conquer some specific human weakness in his life. If he succeeds in this, God may make concessions to his other areas of human weakness. It seems that the Thyatiran believers had none other burden put upon them than to resist the teaching and practice of the "woman Jezebel" amongst them (Rev. 2:24)- although it would seem there were other 'burdens' which the Lord *could* have put on them.

- And likewise with the idea of a physical temple. It was God's clearly expressed wish that He should *not* live in a physical house (2 Sam. 7:12-16; Acts 7:48; 17:24). Yet He accommodated Himself to human weakness in wanting a physical house in which to worship Him; He came and lived (in a sense) in just such a house.

- Jeremiah was commanded not to make lamentation for the punishment of his people (Jer. 16:5). But he did, and God inspired the record of them in Lamentations, and because they are inspired words, He spoke through those words to all subsequent generations.

- Ezra had the faith to make the long journey back to the land from Babylon with no armed escort, despite the fact he was carrying so much valuable material for the temple (Ezra 8:22). Yet Nehemiah seems to have taken a lower level- for Neh. 2:7,9 could imply he asked for an escort and was granted it. Yet it doesn't mean he had no faith.

- The boundaries of the promised land and indeed the individual possessions of the tribes were changed by God in accordance with the weakness of Israel to actually drive out the tribes and take the inheritance (consider how the inheritance of Simeon and Judah was merged because of this inability to expel the Canaanites, Josh. 19:1). He "changed the portion of my people" (Mic. 2:4). Yet God worked with them in this progressive lowering of levels. When faced with the prospect of driving out the tribes, they procrastinated by asking "Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites first?" (Jud. 1:1). God could have responded: 'I have already gone before you, all of you have a duty to go up and possess the land, and to help your brethren. The question of who goes first is totally faithless and irrelevant!'. But He didn't say this. He told Judah to go up first (1:3). By contrast, if Israel had been obedient, then "the Lord thy God shall enlarge thy border" (Dt. 12:2). This "blessed be he that enlargeth Gad" (Dt. 33:20). Who knows the height and depth, length and breadth of what could have been for God's people? And the same is true for us today. According to Israel's perception of the land, so it was defined for them. It seems they perceived the land to the East of Jordan as "unclean"- even though right up to the Euphrates had been promised to them. They were told that if they considered it unclean, then they could inherit on the West of Jordan (Josh. 22:19). And so with us- as we define God's working, so, in some ways, will it be unto us. Dt. 11:23,24 seem to imply that after God had driven out the seven nations which lived in Canaan, He planned- given Israel's obedience- to drive out yet greater nations from before them. I can only take that as meaning that His intention was to drive out the nations who possessed the rest of the land promised to Abraham, right over to the Euphrates. I see here a promise of ultimate victory against Babylon and Assyria, who controlled the Euphrates area. But the very opposite happened- even though potentially, those nations need never have developed and their empires were intended to be Israel's. These potential victories were to be because all the land Israel trod upon [Heb. 'to bend the bow against'], they would receive (Dt. 11:25). But they weren't ambitious enough to go much beyond their farmsteads. We too will be given all we tread upon, all we desire to inherit of God's Kingdom, if we go forward in faith. It's all potentially possible, if we bend our bow with ambition, we will receive our furthestmost dreams and beyond. This line of thought inevitably connects with the incident where Elisha sees the shooting of arrows as a symbol of how far God would give Israel deliverance from Syria (2 Kings 13:17).

- The disciples literally did give up most of what they had and follow the Lord. And yet there were evidently others who responded to His teaching without doing this- Peter's family (Mk. 1:29); Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38); Simon the leper Mk. 14:3). They made use of the Lord's concessions to human weakness.

- Ex. 22:2,3 teach that if a man kills a thief while he is in the act of breaking in to a home, this is not to be counted as murder. But if some time passes and then the owner as an act of revenge murders the thief, this is seen by God differently. Surely this reflects the fact that God is more lenient to sins committed in hot blood than those more premeditated. Yet on the other hand, sin is sin. His law, as law, can appear to make no distinction between sins of passion and premeditated sins, if the same act is committed in the end. However, this and other examples indicate God's willingness to concede to human weakness, and recognize sins of passion more leniently than others. And our judgment in ecclesial life should reflect this too.

- Some of the reasoning used to inspire us is (sometimes admittedly) human. Paul urges brethren to love their wives because the wife so belongs to the husband that he is loving himself by loving her (Eph. 5:29). This is a lower level of reasoning to a direct call for selfless love. It is a concession to human weakness. But it is nonetheless made by the Spirit. Likewise the appeal for obedience because the day of judgment will be so awesome and terrible (2 Cor. 5:5).

- Naaman was allowed to bow himself before Rimmon (2 Kings 5:18) for the sake of losing his position. Yet the higher level would surely have been, as Daniel's friends, not to bow down to an idol. And when we ask what the rest of the Jews in Babylon did on that occasion, it seems hard to avoid the conclusion that they took the lower level which Naaman did- and bowed down.

- We all offend others (James 3:2), and he who offends his brother will be condemned. Those who are sleeping at the Lord's coming will be found unworthy, so says the spirit in Thessalonians. But in the Lord's parable, *all* the virgins are sleeping at His coming, wise and foolish alike. They were all living on far too low a level, and yet the Lord will save them [us] by grace alone. God accepts we aren't going to make it as we should. There ought to be no schism in the body (1 Cor. 12:25), but He realizes that inevitably there will be (1 Cor. 11:19).

- There are concessions to our human weakness throughout Scripture, once we look for them. Ezekiel was told to bake his food with human dung in order to show the extent of uncleanness Israel would suffer. But his Levitical background made him ask for a concession here. And the Lord gave it, in telling him to use cow's dung (Ez. 4:15). The ideal is for a sister to have long hair; but Paul admits, "we have no such custom, neither the churches of God" (1 Cor. 11:16), as if to say: 'This is the ideal, but as you know, there is sadly no tradition of this among the ecclesias'.

- The Lord said that He didn't receive witness from men; but, because He so wanted men to be saved, He directed them to the witness of John the Baptist (Jn. 5:33,34). This in essence is the same as the way in which some people believed the testimony of the Samaritan woman, but others said they only believed once they heard Jesus Himself, as they discounted the testimony of men / women (Jn. 4:42). And so in our day, the ideal witness is that of the Father and Son themselves directly through their word. And yet there are others who are persuaded not by that so much as by the testimony of others who have believed. This may be a lower level compared to the Lord's ideal position of not allowing the testimony of mere men; and yet He makes this concession, for the sake of His burning desire for human salvation.

- There is such a thing as compromise in spiritual life. The compromise of Acts 15 about the demands placed upon the Gentile believers was an example. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write that the Mosaic food laws had no binding at all upon Christian converts; and yet "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit" to endorse the compromise reached in Acts 15:28. The laws agreed there as binding upon the Gentile converts in Acts 15:29 are in fact the so-called Noachic or Primeval Laws, considered by some orthodox Jews to be binding upon all the sons of Noah. That interpretation of what God said to Noah is itself stretched and hardly on a solid Biblical foundation- but God was willing to go along with it in order to make concessions required so that there would at least be some human chance of unity in the early church. Note that the Western Text [*Codex Bezae*] of Acts omits "things strangled", leaving us with three basic laws about idolatry, fornication and bloodshed. In this case we would see an allusion to an uninspired passage in the Mishnah (*Aboth* 5) which taught that the captivity in Babylon came about "on account of idolatry, fornication and bloodshed". In this case we would see God willing to compromise and accept the terms which were familiar to the orthodox Jewish minds, rather than merely telling them that their Mishnah was uninspired and so often hopelessly incorrect.

2-7-2 Living On Different Levels

- There are different levels of fellowship; as we actually know from our own experience. There are some we are 'in fellowship' with whom we don't feel so close to as others. John says that he wanted to declare to them the depths of the understanding of Christ, "that ye also may have fellowship with us" (1 Jn. 1:3), even though they were already technically 'in fellowship'. And so it is with our communal life. A close binding together in the depths and heights of the Lord Jesus leads to ever higher experiences of fellowship. It may be that there are even different levels of fellowship between men and God. Thus God's original intention was that His presence in the Angel should go up to Canaan in the midst of Israel; but because of their weakness, He went in front of them, somewhat separate from them (Ex. 33:2,3). Likewise the glory of God progressively distanced itself from the temple and people of God in Ezekiel's time.

- The Lord's comment that "If thy brother shall trespass against thee" (Mt. 18:15) then one could take the matter to the church was immediately picked up by Peter when he asked: "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times?" (Mt. 18:21). The Lord's reply was that Peter should forgive his brother to an unlimited extent, each and every day. It seems to me that the Lord was saying that the 'one-two-out' attitude which He had just described was very much the lower level of response; He wished His followers to take the higher level, of unconditional forgiveness. Indeed, the whole passage where He speaks about going to see your brother and then telling the church is wedged in between His teachings about grace and forgiveness. It's so out of place that one wonders whether He wasn't saying it very tongue in cheek, perhaps in ironic allusion to the synagogue discipline methods. At the very least, He seems to intend the contrast between His surrounding words and those about 'one-two-out' to sink in, to the point that we realize, as He told Peter, that there is indeed a higher way.

- There are degrees of sin. Paul seems to reason that sexual sin involving the body of God's creation is especially culpable. Num. 32:14 speaks of 'augmenting yet the fierce anger of the Lord' by premeditated sin, as if there is a scale of offence to God.

- There will be different degrees of reward in the Kingdom. Are these not a reflection of the different levels which men have served God on in this life? One star will shine brighter than another; one will rule over five cities, another over two. There is entry into the Kingdom, and an 'abundant' entry (2 Pet. 1:11).

- It seems that the record is prepared to accept that some achieved a valid faith in Jesus, even though they didn't confess Him (Jn. 12:42). And yet there are abundant reasons for understanding that unless we witness to our faith, it isn't a faith that's worth much. And yet the record still accounts these who didn't testify as they ought to have done as 'believers'. This is a comfort for us in those times when we know we chose a far lower level than we should have done, and simply kept quiet about the wondrous hope within us.

- It would have been no sin for Ezra to ask for an armed guard to escort him back to Judah from Babylon. But he chose not to, because he wanted to show the power of God's saving arm to the Gentile world through which he would pass, as well as to the Babylonians (Ezra 8:22). In other words, the concept of living on different levels inspires spiritual ambition, of which we have written elsewhere in these studies.

- There are many links between 1 Thess. 4,5 and Mat. 24,25. The wise virgins slumbered and were sleeping at the time of the Lord's return. Paul matches this by saying that the *unworthy* will be slumbering and we ought to be awake and watching at the time of the Lord's return. And yet, the parable teaches that those slumbering wise girls will be accepted. This is a glaring paradox within the Lord's own teaching- for had He not taught that the faithful servants will be awake and watching when their Lord returns? Yet the paradox is there to flag a major message- that even though the last generation of believers may well not be ready and watching as they should be, their humble recognition of the very likelihood of their oil running out would be their saving grace. And within 1 Thess. 5:6-10 this same paradox is brought out: "Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us *watch* and be sober. For they that *sleep sleep* in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we *wake [s.w. watch]* or *sleep*, we should live together with him". The same Greek words are italicized. The contrast is between those who watch and those who sleep. And yet Christ died to save both those who watch / are awake, and those who sleep, as the 'wise' virgins slept when they ought not to have done. Both those who watch and those who sleep [after the humble pattern of the wise virgins] will be saved due to the fact that Christ died to save sinners, to save the sleepy as well as the more lively- if they are truly and humbly in Him. Likewise the Lord's parables generally include two types- the self-righteous rejected, and the accepted, who have something spiritually the matter with them. They either enter the Kingdom with splinters in their spiritual vision / perception, or are totally blinded by planks in their vision and will be rejected.

- The Lord seemed to accept that men would live His Truth on different levels. He told the people concerning John: " If ye will receive it, this is Elias" (Mt. 11:14). It's as if He wasn't sure whether they could rise up to the level of realizing that Malachi's prophecy had a primary fulfilment in John, notwithstanding its evidently future application. And John records that some Jews believed, although they didn't confess Jesus as Lord openly (Jn. 12:42). It took the crisis of the cross to bring them up to a higher level.

- The Gospel records, especially John, seem to recognize different levels of belief in Jesus. The nobleman "believed the word that Jesus spake" and yet when he saw his healed son, he "himself believed" (Jn. 4:50,53).

- The Jews could have taken the spoil of those whom they killed at Purim. But they didn't, thereby choosing a higher level (Esther 8:11; 9:10).

- When "the children of Joseph" complained that they didn't have enough territory, Joshua could've told them to go and drive out Canaanites and take their territory- this was clearly God's ideal intention. Instead, Joshua said they could go to some virgin forest and cut down trees to provide more territory for themselves (Josh. 17:15).

- The structure of the law of Moses seemed to almost encourage this idea of serving God on different levels. After much study of it, the Rabbis concluded that there was within it "a distinction between holy and holy just as much as there is between holy and profane". Take the uncleanness laws. They basically said: 'Don't touch an unclean animal. If you do, there's a penalty. If you carry the carcass, there's a more serious penalty. And if you carry the carcass home and eat it, there's something more serious (Lev. 11). The highest ideal was not to touch the unclean thing. But there were concessions to weakness for those who either couldn't or wouldn't make the effort to attain the highest level of response to the will of God. Another example of different levels of service is in the legislation about Levites. They could choose to go and serve at Jerusalem, and therefore sell their possession of land which they had in the local area (Dt. 18:6-8). By doing this, a number of principles were broken, in order that the highest level- serving Yahweh in the temple- might be achieved.

- God told Israel that He wanted altars made of earth; but He knew they would want to make altars of stone like the other nations, and He made allowance for this (Ex. 20:24,25). The Law has several examples of this living on different levels. "Ye shall let nothing of (the Passover) remain until the morning; and that which remaineth of it until the morning ye shall burn with fire" (Ex. 12:10) is an evident example. God foresaw their disobedience to His stated principle, and made a concession and provision. Or take the Law's ruling about tithes: "...neither shall he change it: and if he change it..." (Lev. 27:33).

- When the Lord Jesus gave His commandments as an elaboration of Moses' Law, that Law was still in force. He didn't say 'When I'm dead, this is how you should behave...'. He was showing us a higher level; but in the interim period until the Law was taken out of the way, He was opening up the *choice* of taking that higher level, even though making use of the concessions which Moses offered would not have been a sin during that period. Thus He spoke of not insisting on "an eye for an eye"; even though in certain cases the Law did allow for this. He was saying: 'You can keep Moses' Law, and take an eye for an eye. But there is a higher level: to simply forgive'.

- Likewise Paul taught his hopeless Corinthians that they ought not to be taking each other to court in the world, but rather should get brethren to settle disputes between brethren. But then he offers the higher level: don't even do this, but "rather take wrong...rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded" (1 Cor. 6:7).

- The Lord's teaching about judging does not in fact say that the act of condemning our brother is in itself a sin- it's simply that we must cast out the beam from our own eye first, and then we can judge our brother by pointing out to him the splinter in his eye. But the Lord

tells us not to judge because He foresaw that we would never completely throw out the beam from our own eye. His command not to judge / condemn at all was therefore in this sense a concession to our inevitable weakness (Mt. 7:1-5).

- The Lord Jesus could've called upon legions of Angels to help Him; but He chose not to (Mt. 26:53); He could have taken power there and then in His ministry and declared Himself King- but He walked off to the hills instead (Jn. 6:15). In these examples we see what we could call a renunciation of power. Time and again we are called upon to decide whether we will renounce what power we have, or use it or abuse it for our own selfish ends. A parent faces this issue so often with a young child. The parent has more power; but how and for what reasons should she / he use that power? We can use 'power' in many ways in the trivia of daily life; but actually in most of those micro level decisions we are challenged with a choice as to what level of spirituality and unselfishness we are going to show.

- God had prophesied that He would restore Jerusalem at the time of the return from Babylon, and would be "unto her a wall of fire round about" (Zech. 2:5). Therefore Nehemiah's rebuilding of a physical wall for defence can be seen as taking a lower level of faith, living on a lower level; and yet God worked with him in this, putting the idea into his heart and strengthening him in the work (Neh. 2:12,18,20).

- We are presented with the possibility of being "slow to wrath", being angry, and yet not sinning. However, these passages are both in the context of warnings against the wrath of man (James 1:19-21; Eph. 5:26). Surely the point is, that 'righteous anger' is not in itself wrong (witness the Lord's anger in the temple); but whilst this is allowable for us, the more sensible level for us frail men is not to be angry *at all*.

- According to 1 Chron. 21:5, there were 1,100,000 "men that drew sword" in Israel. According to 2 Sam. 24:9, there were 800,000 "valiant men" in Israel, according to the same census. There is no contradiction- rather the Samuel record is perceiving that there was a higher level of commitment, as. There were the enthusiasts, and those who merely could draw a sword. They were all living on different levels.

- "Thou shalt not avenge nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Lev. 19:18). But they *could* avenge, and provisions were made for their human desire to do so (Num. 35:12; Dt. 19:6). These provisions must also be seen as a modification of the command not to murder. The highest level was *not* to avenge; but for the harshness of men's hearts, a concession was made *in some cases*, and on *God's* prerogative. *We* have no right to assume that prerogative.

- It was forbidden by the Law to keep a man's outer garment overnight (Ex. 22:26,27). But the Lord taught *whilst the law was still in operation* that we should be willing to give it up, and even offer it (Mt. 5:40). The threatened man could have quoted the Law and kept his clothing. But the Lord bids us go to a higher level, beyond using God's law to uphold our own rights. And in this He raises a vital if difficult principle: Don't always enforce what Biblical rights you have against your brother. Don't rush to your own defence and justification even if Scripture is on your side. Live on the level of true love and non-resistance to evil.

- We get the impression that God was very strict about the offerings. He was. But He made concession to the man who couldn't bring what he ought to: "If he be poor, and cannot get

much...two young pigeons, *such as he is able to get*" (Lev. 14:22). If they were blemished in some way, and even though they were not the animal God desired, God would accept such as the man was able to get. Likewise the offerings had to involve the shedding of blood; but God was prepared to accept a food offering if a man really couldn't get an animal. The *eagerness of God to accept what a man can do* rather than the insistence on legal principles really comes over. He recognized the Israelites would be living on different levels. Such an eagerness involved accepting a lower standard of adherence to God's ideal principles. In harmony with this, the Passover 'lamb' could be either a sheep, or if necessary, a goat (Ex. 12:5), even though the use of a goat would somewhat spoil the foreshadowing of Christ.

- In the face of sin amongst His people, there are levels of God's withdrawal of His presence. The way the glory progressively departed from the temple as recounted in Ezekiel is a graphic illustration of this. Under the Law, Aaron initially could come at will within the Most Holy. But after the blasphemy of his sons, apparently for being drunk on duty, he was only allowed to come once per year, and only after an elaborate ritual emphasizing human sinfulness (Lev. 16:2 ff.). Likewise it seems that God's original intention was that the Angel of the presence should travel in the midst of Israel in the wilderness. But after the golden calf apostasy, God announced that He was still with Israel, but His Angel would "go before thee...for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiff-necked people: lest I consume thee in the way" (Ex. 33:2,3).

- The slayer of innocent blood was to be slain without pity: "thou shalt put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with thee" (Dt. 19:13). But David seems to have stepped up to a higher level when he told the woman of Tekoah that he would protect her son from revenge murder, after he had slain another man (2 Sam. 14:8-10). The woman pointed out that if her son was slain, the inheritance would be lost in her husband's name. Here was a case where two principles seemed to be at variance: the need to slay the guilty, and the need to preserve the inheritance. The higher level was to forgive the slayer of innocent blood, even though the Law categorically stated that he should be slain.

- Elisha with the eye of faith knew that the mountain was full of invisible Angels, ministering for him as he did God's will. But his servant didn't have such faith. And therefore "Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw" the Angels. But Elisha didn't ask this for himself. He could have done. But he chose the higher level. The Lord in His final agony did this time and again (see Study 7.11).

- There are several examples in the NT of where Paul could have taken a certain course of action, or insisted on acceptance of a certain doctrinal position, knowing that Truth was on his side. But he didn't. Thus the council of Jerusalem established that Gentiles didn't need to be circumcised, but straight afterwards Paul circumcised Timothy in Lystra out of consideration to the feelings of the Jewish believers (Acts 16:1-3). He could have stood on his rights, and on the clear spiritual principles involved. But he stepped down to the lower level of other believers (e.g. by keeping some of the redundant Jewish feasts), he made himself all things to all men that he might try to save some, and by so doing stepped up to the higher level in his own spirituality.

- God wanted to speak directly with Israel at Sinai; and yet they urged Moses personally to go and hear what God wished to say, and tell them about it: "Go *thou* [you singular] near and hear" (Dt. 5:23,27). Moses urged them not to fear, and told them that this was all a test from

God for them (Ex. 20:20). But they didn't rise to it. Yet God accepted this lower level, so did He wish to communicate with them. And He used Moses as a mediator through whom He spoke His word to His people.

- Paul could have taken wages from the Corinthians for his service. But on that occasion he chose "not to use to the full my right in the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:18 RV); and he uses the same word in 1 Cor. 7:31, in teaching that although we have to 'use this world' we are to 'use it to the full' (RVmg.). As God operates with us on different levels, accepting non-ideal situations, so we are to deal with each other. Paul could have used his power in the Gospel more sharply than he actually did with the Corinthians (2 Cor. 13:10)- and note how he earlier uses those two words "power" and "use" in saying that he could have demanded financial support from them, but he chose not to use that power / authority which he had (1 Cor. 9:12).

God works like this because He is prepared to accept that different people will make something different of His Truth. The parable of the sower shows that; the "good ground" brings forth 30, 60 or 100 fold. Some believers respond three times as actively to the Gospel as others; yet they will all be accepted at the end. I see a connection between this parable and Christ's words to the rich, righteous young man: "'If thou wilt be *perfect*...' sell what you've got; and then you'll receive *100 fold* in this life, and eternal life in the Kingdom' (Mt. 19:12,21). Presumably, that man at that time was (say) in the 30 or 60 fold category. Christ wanted him in the 100 fold category. But if that man didn't sell all that he had, it doesn't necessarily mean that Christ would have rejected him ultimately. In this context, He says: "Many that are first (in this life) will be last (least- in the Kingdom); and the last shall be first" (Mt. 19:30). Those who don't sell all that they have will be in the Kingdom, but least in it. The poor of his world, rich in faith, will be great in the Kingdom (James 2:5). We need to ask ourselves whether we really accept the parable of the sower; whether we are strong enough to let another brother be weak, to accept that even if he's in the 30 fold category, he's still acceptable to his Lord, just living on a different level. Indeed, it isn't for us to go very deeply at all into how exactly Christ sees others; because we can't know. The point to note is that God wants us to rise up the levels of commitment. Paul was persuaded that the Romans were "full of goodness, filled with all knowledge", but he prayed they would be filled yet further (Rom. 15:13,14).

2-7-3 The Biblical Ideal Of Marriage

The standard of husband = Christ, wife = obedient church is the impossibly high Biblical ideal of marriage. Yet that standard is set, and therefore inevitably God accepts the achievement of a lower standard. This was foreshadowed in the OT's attitude to this kind of thing, particularly in the Law of Moses- where, as we have seen, there were several examples of concessions to weakness. It is hardly surprising that in the area of marriage the Law also allowed levels of response within God's basic principles:

- If a man committed fornication with a girl he "surely" *must* marry her; so says Ex. 22:16. *But* if her father refused to give permission, this "sure" commandment didn't have to apply (Ex. 22:17).

- If a man's wife committed adultery he could have her killed; *or* he could put her through the trial of jealousy of Num. 5, with the result that she would become barren; or he could divorce her (Dt. 22:19; 24:1 RV; Lev. 21:14; 22:13). Within a Law that was holy, just and good

(Rom. 7:12), unsurpassed in its righteousness (Dt. 4:8; and let us not overlook these estimations), there were these different levels of response possible. But there was a higher level: he could simply forgive her. This was what God did with His fickle Israel, time and again (Hos. 3:1-3). And so the Israelite faced with an unfaithful wife could respond on at least four levels. This view would explain how divorce seems outlawed in passages like Dt. 22:19,29, and yet there are other parts of the OT which seem to imply that it was permitted. It should be noted that there were some concessions to weakness under the Law which the Lord was not so willing to make to His followers (e.g., outside the marriage context, Dt. 20:5-8 cp. Lk. 9:59-62; 14:18,19). He ever held before us the Biblical ideal of marriage.

- If a man betrothed his slave girl unto his son, he *must* treat her as he would his own daughter. But if he didn't, she could go free (Ex. 21:9-11).

- If a man simply felt jealous, he could subject his wife to the humiliating trial of jealousy (Num. 5:14). But evidently the higher level was to overcome that natural male jealousy.

- Abraham's relationship with Hagar doesn't really sound like marriage. And yet she is called "she with hath an husband" (Gal. 4:27), as if God recognized the relationship even though it was less than ideal.

- Throughout the Old Covenant there is the repeated stress that Israel were not to marry Gentiles. This was so far from the Biblical ideal of marriage. But then there is a concession to their likely weakness in Dt. 21:11-15: If they saw a beautiful woman among their enemies whom they liked, they had to put her through certain rituals, and then they could marry her.

- The New Testament is full of similar examples. 1 Cor. 7 is a chapter full of this kind of thing. You could paraphrase it something like this: 'Basically, consider the option of not marrying. *But and if* you do, it's no sin. Once married, don't separate; *but and if* you do, this is allowable. If you are an elderly widow, it's best not to re-marry; *but and if* you do, OK go ahead'. The Lord Jesus recognized that these sorts of concessions to failures in married life had been made earlier; He spoke of how God through Moses had "for the hardness of your hearts" allowed divorce under the Law, although this was hardly God's original ideal in Eden (Mt. 19:8). The Lord Jesus spoke the word to His listeners "as they were able to hear it" (Mk. 4:33), following the same pattern. The exceptive clause, allowing divorce for adultery, is a prime example of this kind of concession. And yet the Lord speaks in Mark 10 as if there is no allowance for divorce even in this case; whilst in Matthew's record He clearly allows it. The point is, God doesn't advertise His concessions to human weakness (and neither should we). He leads men to attempt life on the highest level. Likewise Num. 6:7 speaks as if a man *couldn't* make himself unclean and end his vow, whereas in fact there was legislation which allowed him to take this lower level. But the Father doesn't want us to be minimalists, serving Him at the lowest level; quite to the contrary.

- In this light, consider Paul's apparently contradictory teaching about widows. They should remarry (1 Tim. 5:11,14); and yet they should only be given special respect and support if they have been the wife of one husband (1 Tim. 5:9). Surely Paul is thinking in terms of 'different levels' here; the highest level was for a widow not to remarry; but because most couldn't cope with that, especially with all the difficulties faced by single women in the first century, therefore Paul commands them to remarry. But he did that full well knowing that there was a higher level.

- Although God joins together man and wife, He allows His work to be undone in that He concedes to separation, even when there has been no adultery (1 Cor. 7:11). Prov. 21:9; 25:24 almost seem to encourage it, by saying that it is better for a spiritual man to dwell in a corner of the housetop than to share a house in common (LKK *koinos*) with his contentious wife. The same word occurs in Mal. 2:14 LXX in describing a man's wife as his "companion" (*koinonos*).

- Another concession in the area of marriage occurs in Dt. 25:5-10: " If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall...take her to him to wife...and if the man like not to take his brother's wife... then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face..." . Not only does this show a concession to human weakness and human inability to live up to the Biblical ideal of marriage; but it should be observed that seeing that most adult men in such societies were married, obeying this command probably involved polygamy. One principle was broken in order to keep another, more important one (in this case " that his name be not put out of Israel").

- The Lord Himself spoke of how the Law's attitude to divorce was a concession because of the hardness of men's hearts. Dt. 24:1-4 allows divorce if a man "found some uncleanness" in his wife. This, the Lord comments, was a concession for the hardness of their hearts. But the passage moves on to say: "When a man hath taken *new* wife, he shall not go out to war...but he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer up his wife" (:5). Taking a *new* wife seems a strange way to describe taking a first wife. It would seem that Yahweh through Moses is making a gracious concession to a man taking a second wife according to the concession laid down in the previous verses.

- God remonstrated with David concerning Bathsheba: " I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom (which meant, incidentally, God encouraged David to marry both a mother and her daughter, contrary to the Law)...and if that had been too little, I would moreover have given thee such and such things" (2 Sam. 12:8). This seems to be saying that God would have made concessions to David's sexual weakness, even further than the ones He had already made. It is as if God had prepared those concessions on different levels. If David had felt that he needed yet more sexual fulfilment, God had a way prepared to meet this. Yet David took it into his own hands to decide what God would concede to him. However, God's concessions to David cannot necessarily be extrapolated to our lives today. Nor can the fact that we sense that God accepted the achievement of a lower standard in men like Aaron than what was potentially possible.

- Embedded within a context of criticizing adultery, Prov. 6:30 adds the comment: " Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry...but whoso commiteth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding...a wound and *dishonour* shall *he* get" . This statement about a desperately hungry man stealing and not being despised (cp. dishonoured) is, on its own, an example of God making concessions to human weakness. But the context in which it occurs leads one to think that the point is being made that in *some* marital areas, there could be concessions to human desperation. But this is not to be taken as a justification for adultery, which if unrepented of will lead to an inevitable judgment.

Paul wrote that slaves should abide in the callings they had when called, and not unduly seek freedom. This has huge implications when we consider the plight of female slaves, amongst

whom the Gospel spread so significantly in the first century. They were the sexual property of their owners, who would personally use them and sub-let them as he wished. This was all part and parcel of being a female slave. For those women / sisters, the moral demands of the New Testament were even harder to follow than they are now. Yet nowhere do we read of Paul insisting that those women refuse their 'duties'; he teaches that they should abide in that position, and try as best they can to live by Christian principles. That appears to me to be a concession to weakness and to the huge difficulty those women faced. If God has so repeatedly made concessions to human weakness, allowing us to live below the Biblical ideal of marriage, then we must in some way respond to this in our dealings with our brethren. Somehow we must do this without infringing the need to uphold the Truth of God's commandments. The Lord Himself seems to make a concession to the inability of the surrounding world to understand Him, when He tells Peter that as God's people, they are free from the requirement to pay taxes to the present world. But "lest we should offend them", we should pay them (Mt. 17:27). As the Lord spoke to men according to their level of ability to comprehend Him (Mk. 4:33; and consider how He used the language of demons), so should we.

2-7-4 The Jephthah's Vow Principle

Close analysis of the lives of many of God's servants reveals that they understood this idea of being able to serve God on different levels.

Jephthah could have redeemed his daughter from the vow he involved her with (Lev. 27:4). But he decided in his mind: "I have opened my mouth unto the Lord, and I cannot go back" (Jud. 11:35). Actually he could have done; but he so firmly chose the higher level that it was as if there was no way back. Ps. 15:4, in evident allusion to Jephthah, describes those who will attain the Kingdom as fearing Yahweh, and swearing to their own hurt and changing not. Some may swear and change and attain the Kingdom; but we are invited to follow Jephthah to the highest level. The principle of Jephthah's vow is seen in many other Bible characters.

Daniel

Take Daniel. Most of the Jews in Babylon were becoming spiritually strong at this time; they were the "good figs" of Jer. 24:2, as a result of their tribulations in captivity. Yet they saw nothing wrong with eating meat that had been offered to idols; indeed, Paul also (under inspiration!) says that there is nothing wrong with doing this in itself (1 Cor. 8); it is the offence it may give to others which is the problem. Yet Daniel was prepared to risk his life in order to obey his conscience, which told him not to eat such food. Likewise when the King forbade people to pray to any other god apart from himself, Daniel opened his windows towards Jerusalem and prayed publicly, for all to see. Presumably the other Jews just prayed silently to themselves, without making an issue about it. I can just imagine myself taking that option. But Daniel felt he had to make a point; and he risked his life to do so. And in the business of bowing down to the statue, it seems only three Jews out of thousands were willing to stand up and object to this. Perhaps Daniel himself bowed down to it, following the principle of Jephthah's vow. Yet I wouldn't say that *only* those three men were acceptable to God at that time.

Hezekiah

It seems that Hezekiah lived on a high, high spiritual level prior to his illness and the final invasion. He seems to have been single, and then in his illness he wished for a descendant, and subsequently married the Gentile Hephzibah. However, he didn't render again according to the benefit done to him (2 Chron. 32:25), and was therefore threatened with judgment. In response to this he humbled himself, and the judgment was postponed. He commented that it was a good deal for him, because he would have peace for the rest of the days of the 15 years which God had given him (2 Kings 20:19). My feeling is that Hezekiah lived the rest of his days acceptable with God, but on a markedly lower level than he had lived his earlier life. There are some other kings who are recorded as having lived acceptable lives to God, although evidently they lived on a lower level than the likes of David.

Paul

Or take Paul. He says he could have got married, and he cites Peter as a justification for this. But he implies he chose not to for the sake of the Gospel. It seems Paul had the choice from Christ as to whether he wanted to die and finish his probation; but he chose to stay alive, with all the temptations and spiritual pitfalls of human existence, for the sake of the first century believers (Phil. 1:24). He could have taken payment from his converts, in fact Christ had *ordained* that this was possible, but Paul rejected this (1 Cor. 9:4-16); likewise he chose to be a vegetarian for the sake of not offending others, although he himself knew that God had created animals to be eaten and enjoyed (1 Cor. 8:13). Although he himself chose the higher levels, it is a mark of his spirituality that he was able to tolerate others who took lower levels, and (especially in Corinthians) he even makes the offer of lower levels of attainment. He speaks as if he sometimes writes to his brethren in very human terms, because this is the only level they are yet up to (e.g. 1 Cor. 15:32 AVmg.). He addressed them as still on the level of milk, when they ought to have been on an altogether higher level for their time in Christ (1 Cor. 3:1-3). In I Cor. 11:15,16, Paul speaks about the appropriacy of sisters in Christ having long hair, but he goes on to say: " But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God" . This is admittedly difficult to understand. My suggestion is that Paul is saying: 'The ideal is for a sister to grow her hair long. But I know that once you start saying this kind of thing, some will start getting contentious (and times don't change!). So, OK, I admit, there isn't such a custom in the ecclesias, although ideally I think there should be, so if it's going to cause such argument, OK drop the issue. But for sisters to have long hair is the highest level'.

On a more personal level, we read (almost in passing) that Paul five times was beaten with 39 stripes (2 Cor. 11:22-27). Yet from Acts 22:26 it is evident that Paul as a Roman citizen didn't need not have endured this. On each of those five occasions he could have played the card of his Roman citizenship to get him out of it; but he didn't. It wouldn't have been wrong to; but five times out of six, he chose the highest level. It may be that he chose not to mention his Roman citizenship so as to enable him access to the synagogues for preaching purposes. The one time Paul didn't play that card, perhaps he was using the principle of Jephthah's vow- that you can vow to your own hurt but chose a lower level and break it.

The Lord Jesus

And above all, the Lord Jesus. The way Paul speaks of " such *great* salvation" (Heb. 2:3) might imply that a lesser salvation could have been achieved by Christ, but He achieved the greatest possible. " He is able also *to save them to the uttermost* that come unto God by him" (Heb. 7:25) may be saying the same thing. Indeed, the *excellence* of our salvation in Christ is

a major NT theme. It was typified by the way Esther interceded for Israel; she could have simply asked for her own life to be spared, but she asked for that of all Israel. And further, she has the courage (and we sense her reticence, how difficult it was for her) to ask the King yet another favour- that the Jews be allowed to slay their enemies for one more day, and also to hang Haman's sons (Es. 9:12). She was achieving the maximum possible redemption for Israel rather than the minimum. Paul again seems to comment on this theme when he speaks of how Christ became obedient, " *even* to the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8), as if perhaps some kind of salvation could have been achieved without the death *of the cross*. Perhaps there was no theological necessity for Christ to die *such* a painful death; if so, doubtless this was in His mind in His agony in the garden. " If *it* be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Mt. 26:39) may not simply mean 'If it's possible, may I not have to die'. The Lord could have meant: 'If *it*- some unrecorded possible alternative to the cross- is *really* possible, then let *this* cup pass'- as if to say 'If option A is possible, then let the cup of option B pass from me'. But He overrode this with a desire to be submissive to the Father's preferred will- which was for us to have a part in the greatest, most surpassing salvation, which required the death of the cross.

One likewise feels that Christ would have been justified in accepting the pain killer that was offered Him in His final agony (Mt. 27:34); but He refused it, it seems to me, in order to achieve the *greatest* salvation for us. He never once used what I have called the principle of Jephthah's vow. In the same spirit, some faithful men of old refused legitimate deliverance from torture so that they might obtain " a better resurrection" (Heb. 11:35). The record of the cross (see 7.11) is full of examples of where the Lord in physical terms rejected legitimate comforts in His final hours. Yet throughout His life, He was ever ready to concede to the weakness of those who would genuinely follow Him. The way He spoke about demons without giving His hearers a lecture about the folly of such belief is proof of this. He could have insisted, as we do, on the rejection of such superstitions. But this was not His way. I am not suggesting that *we* have the right to make such concessions in our preaching and baptizing. But He did.

It is also worth meditating upon the Lord's wilderness temptations. The first temptation- to turn stones into bread- would not in itself have been a sin if He had agreed to it. But it would have been choosing a lower level, by breaking His fast. But the next temptations were to actually sin. If He had agreed to the first suggestion, obedience to the next ones would have been harder. It could even be argued that to put the Lord to the test was permissible on a lower level- for passages like Ps. 34:8 and Mal. 3:10 almost encourage it for those with a weak faith. Gideon likewise put the Lord to the test and was answered. But the Lord chose the higher level: and He knew Scripture which could support it. But the fact He chose the highest level first of all, meant that He was better able to take the higher level again, and to finally overcome the third temptation, which was definitely a clear choice between right and wrong. More than this, anything other than a desire to make the highest maximum commitment can lead to failure. "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left" (Ecc. 10:2 NIV) has been understood as referring not so much to right and wrong, good and evil, as to the highest good and lesser good (cp. how the left hand can stand for simply lesser blessing rather than outright evil, e.g. Gen. 48:13-20). The fool inclines to lower commitment. The wise will always incline to the maximum, wholehearted level.

The nobleman is credited with faith by the Lord, and therefore He healed his son; but the record says that he only believed *after* the healing (Jn. 4:50,53). Christ saw that man's low level of faith, and took him where he was, with the result that he soon rose up to a higher

level. The Lord must have reflected on the wide differences between the various levels of faith and commitment He encountered. Jairus besought Him to lay His hands on his daughter (Mk. 5:23); whilst the Centurion's attitude was "say the word only" (Lk. 7:6). His faith was undoubtedly on a higher level (Lk. 7:9), but still the Lord accepted the lower level of Jairus and worked with it. He was manifesting His Father in this. Reflect how Daniel refused to eat the food sent to him from the King of Babylon; but God arranged for this very thing to be sent to Jehoiachin as a sign of His recognition of his repentance (Jer. 52:34)! God saw that Jehoiachin wasn't on Daniel's level, and yet he worked with him.

How we treat each other should be a reflection of how God treats us. We can make concessions for each other's weaknesses, accepting that some will live on higher levels than others; or we can demand a rigid standard of spirituality from them. I would venture to say that neither of these attitudes are *morally* wrong in themselves; it's just that as we judge, so we will be judged. For some time I have struggled with Matthew 18. It's a chapter all about forgiveness, of forgiving until 70 times 7, of never giving up our search for the lost sheep; *of being soft as shy children in dealing with each other* (a matchless, powerful analogy if ever there was one). But wedged in the middle of the chapter is the passage which says that if your brother personally offends you, go to him and ensure that he sorts it out; and if he doesn't, take someone else with you, then tell the other believers about him, and throw him out of the church. This always seemed to me rather out of context in that chapter. But there must be a point behind the paradox presented here. Perhaps it's something along these lines: 'If your brother offends you, you are quite justified in 'taking it up' with him, demanding he acknowledge his wrong, and eventually expelling him from the church. But- why not just forgive him, without demanding an apology from him?'.

Black And White -?

I am aware that some are uncomfortable with these suggestions. Some would rather see everything in black and white; 'If you do *this*, it's a sin; but you can do *that* and that's OK, that's not a sin'. And of course, this is just how many churches operate (Catholics and JW's especially), because they know this is what people want. Yet we have to wrestle with a personal relationship with God, not through a church or priest. Therefore I don't think it's always appropriate to analyze our lives in terms of "Is this a sin...?". It implies a spiritual brinkmanship, a playing with God, which ought to be foreign to us. It is surely a denial of the idea of us being in a dynamic, two-way *relationship* with God; we don't structure personal relationships around a list of dos and don'ts. The "Is this a sin...?" syndrome also runs into problems with the fact that obeying some of God's principles *technically* leads to breaking others; e.g. the command to take the wife of your dead brother, even if you were already married, led to polygamy, which was against the ideal standard of Genesis. And there are other examples of breaking one commandment to keep another.

The fact God allows His children to live His truth on different levels needs to be grasped firmly by us, lest we become discouraged that others live on an apparently lower level than we do in some aspects of life. Being surrounded by 'lower levels' ought to inspire us to the higher levels. Zelophehad had only daughters; usually, in his context, a man would have taken concubines in order to produce sons. The record of his only having daughters is presented in the context of genealogies which show that many Israelite men had more than one wife (1 Chron. 7:15). But Zelophehad wasn't dragged down by this; God inspired him to maintain the higher level which he had chosen to live by. He didn't use the principle of Jephthah's vow.

The fact God allows us each to live His Truth on different levels ought to inspire us to greater heights of devotion, rather than lead to complacency. After all, think of (or imagine!) someone you truly love and respect. If they say: 'Please can you do this job for me by next week, but if you can, it would be great if you could do it by tomorrow, although actually it would be fantastic if you could do it right now'; what will your response be? The very fact they have given you some options will inspire you to do what they ask, as far as you are humanly able, as quickly as possible, with a zest that probably wouldn't be there if they had given you only one option. And the more you realize that the person will still genuinely love and respect you if you do the job in a week's time, the more it will inspire you to do it right now. I think it's the same with us and God.

The generous response of the Israelites in giving towards the tabernacle was surely because it was not demanded of them but merely their assistance was invited (Ex. 35:24). We all know (or we ought to) that we are basically weak-willed, we try to take spiritual short-cuts wherever possible; we suffer from the 'little of both' syndrome. Like Lot, we perceive that what we want is both like the garden of God (Eden) and also like Egypt (Gen. 13:10); there is a tremendous dualism in our spiritual vision. By nature we will tend towards keeping God's commandments next week rather than today. God knows all this; and so instead of giving us *only* black and white commandments (and I am not suggesting that such things don't exist), God has also given us some options. The problem with deciding to live on a low level, to be consciously content with giving a 30-fold response rather than 100-fold, is that we can slip down the spiritual levels until we actually go out of relationship with God. There *is* such a thing as right and wrong. If we truly *love* God, surely we will want to serve on the highest level. What others are doing ought to be quite irrelevant to us. Most of our lives are spent relatively indifferent to the vast love and grace that has been personally shown to us. If we spot our brother behaving in the same indifferent way, albeit in different aspects of life- what is that to us? If only we were *swamped* by the grace which we have received, by *the wonder* of standing acceptable in God's eyes; the weaknesses of our brethren would hurt so much the less.

" If God's moral judgment differs from ours so that our 'black' may be His 'white', we can mean nothing by calling Him good" .

C.S.Lewis

2.8 The Logic Of Devotion

2-8-1 The Two Roads In Proverbs

A read through Proverbs in one or two sittings reveals a repeated emphasis on the idea of paths, roads, ways etc. Because we have become so familiar with the metaphorical use of 'way' or 'path', this tends to blind us to the more literal sense these words have. These two roads are the basis of a very simple yet powerful exhortation, concerning the logic of total dedication to God's way. There are only two roads outlined in Proverbs, along which a man moves. We are either on one, or the other.

The Path

"The way" in Proverbs means our general way of life (Proverbs 1:19); our "own devices" (Proverbs 1:31); our heart (Proverbs 7:25; 14:14; 19:3; 21:2; 23:26); our way of understanding life (Proverbs 2:9; 9:6; 21:16); our house, the life that we build (Proverbs 2:18; 7:27); the work we do in life (Proverbs 21:8); what we think in our soul as we sleep (Proverbs 3:22-24); the words of our mouth and work of our hands (Proverbs 12:14,15). Our path, our road, our way in life, is therefore what we do, what we think deep inside us, the way we view life, our world view, what is at the very depth of our thinking as we sleep, our home life. There is a way of life, a road, which leads to the Kingdom: "Reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (Proverbs 6:23). "He is in the way of life that keepeth instruction" (Proverbs 10:17). And there is a road which leads to death: "For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead" (Proverbs 2:18); "Let not thine heart decline to her ways, go not astray in her paths...her house is the way to hell" (Proverbs 7:25,27); "Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell" (Proverbs 5:5,6). There is no third road. In drawing nigh to God we draw away from the flesh (James 4:7,8). And God recognizes this in how He looks at us. He sees us as either believers or unbelievers, as saved or damned (Jn. 3:18); and He thereby overlooks our temporary flashes of disbelief, and doesn't consider the occasional spirituality of those in the 'unbeliever' category.

Fellow Travellers

The two roads in Proverbs cannot be travelled at the same time. We either love the road of wisdom, or that which leads to death (Prov. 8:36). They lead to totally opposite destinations: death, and life. The need to realize the width of separation between these two roads is stressed in Proverbs, as is the need to realize that those on the road to death will try to encourage us to join their road: "Who leave the paths of righteousness, to walk in the ways of darkness" (Proverbs 2:13); "None that go unto her...take hold of the paths of life" (2:19); "Her ways are moveable...remove *thy* way far from her" (Proverbs 5:6,8). The wicked encourage the righteous to join their road: "To call passengers who go right on their ways...a violent man enticeth his neighbour, and leadeth him into the way that is not good...whoso causeth the righteous to go astray in an evil way" (Proverbs 9:15; 16:29; 28:10). Those who travel the two roads in Proverbs are therefore in opposition to each other; those not on the road to life are the wicked, on the road to death. There is an evident reason here for our separation from the things and people of this world: "Make no friendship with an angry man...lest thou learn his ways" (Proverbs 22:24). "Choose none of his ways" (Proverbs 3:31). "Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it" (Proverbs 4:14,15).

The mutual antagonism between these two groups of travellers is rooted in the opposition between snake and woman in Gen. 3:15: "He that is upright in the way is abomination to the wicked" (Proverbs 29:27). Time and again in Proverbs the contrast is pointed between the righteous who are in the way of life, and "the wicked" -i.e. everyone else. Again, within our nature, we would prefer not to classify all non-believers as "wicked"; we'd rather there were three categories: the righteous, the wicked, and the in-betweens. But there aren't, in the same way as there are only two masters who we completely serve; we hold to either mammon, or God (Mt. 6:24). The idea of "holding to" in Greek implies holding *against* something else; the result of holding to God is that we are against everything else. "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad" (Mt. 12:30)- rather than being passively indifferent. Men reacted to the Lord in ultimately one of two ways- they either truly believed on Him, or supported the Jews in murdering Him (Jn. 11:45,46). Those who apparently believed on Him but kept it quiet were forced by the cross and resurrection to

make their commitment one way or the other [and serious reflection on the memorials of these things in bread and wine leads us to the same decision]. So much for the philosophy of balance! The Hebrew word for vacillate (translated "dissemble" in AV) also means to go astray; indecision and indifference are effectively decisions against God's way. The Hebrew language often reflects God's characteristics and attitudes.

And in Proverbs, there are only two roads, and human beings are on either one or the other. The two roads are leading in totally opposite directions; this is why they can't be travelled at the same time. The highway of the upright means in itself a departing away from the way of evil (Proverbs 16:17). Thus we are either growing further and further away from this world, or heading towards it. We mustn't just like *the idea* of being in the Kingdom. We must seek it above all. The Lord told a parable about people invited to the Kingdom who all came up with different excuses as to why they couldn't come. This was in response to somebody remarking: "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" - 'how great it would be to be in the Kingdom!' (Lk. 14:15). And the Lord is replying 'Many of those given the real opportunity to be there actually don't want it that much at all. Don't just like the idea of being in my Kingdom, but make it the driving passion in your daily life, for which you'll sacrifice all'. We either violently snatch / take the Kingdom by force (Mt. 11:12), or the devil of our own nature will snatch us away (s.w. Mt. 13:19; Jn. 10:12). The choice before us is that pointed: fight or fall.

The huge conflict between those in the way of life and those on the way to death is not only articulated in a negative sense, of separation from those not in "the way". The importance of these things means that we will feel a strong bond with all others who are in "the way", seeing that the other category of people in this world is so so different from us: "Walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous" (Proverbs 2:20); "He that walketh with wise men shall be wise" (Proverbs 13:20). the two roads in Proverbs are mutually exclusive. Those who realize the depth of our separation from the world will by the same token realize the urgent attraction which we feel with others who are in the way with us. It has been my observation that many of those who, for whatever reason, hold back in their fellowshiping of other believers, are often not separate from the spirit of this world. Viewed from this perspective, attendance at ecclesial meetings is poor indeed; if we are truly in the way, and we know that all others not "in the way" are going fast in the opposite direction, we will surely want to be with those who are with us on the Kingdom road, regardless of whether we 'click' with them on a personal level. Likewise, the fact there are so many isolated brethren and sisters throughout this world, walking the Kingdom road alone, humanly speaking, ought to create a sense of responsibility within us that will well up and express itself in action, as far as we are able.

Confirmation

The teaching about the two roads in Proverbs often stresses that the way of the flesh is leading to death, whilst the way of life leads to the Kingdom (cp. Mt. 5:3,14). "The way of life leads upwards for the wise, to keep him from going down to the grave" (Proverbs 15:24 NIV); the further along the road to the Kingdom we go, the further away we go from the road to death. And as we grow spiritually, the clearer our way becomes; whilst those who go the way of the flesh find their future uncertain, they lack that sense of direction which we have: "The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns; but the path of the upright is a highway" (Proverbs 15:19 NIV). The road of the wise is described as a highway in Proverbs 16:17 too; and the way of the wicked is also strewn with difficult obstacles in Proverbs 22:5; "Whose

ways are crooked, and they froward in their paths" (2:15). There is probably a designed contrast between this and the way the Lord described the road to the Kingdom as made narrow, and the way to death as a wide, broad highway (Mt. 7:13,14); the Proverbs seem to say the opposite. The answer may be that Proverbs is presenting God's viewpoint; in ultimate reality, the way to the Kingdom is wide and clear and easier, better marked, than the road to death. But the Lord turned all this round, because He appreciated that from *our* perspective, this wouldn't be the case. We will think that the way to the Kingdom is made narrow (Gk.) and hard, restricted; whilst the road to death seems so wide and obviously right.

We are almost pushed by God along the path which we decide, in our deepest heart, to follow: "A man's heart deviseth his way; but the Lord directeth his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). And yet "the upright directeth his (own) way" (Proverbs 21:29); as if our self-direction on the road is confirmed by God. "Man's steps are directed by the Lord; how then can anyone understand his own way?" (Proverbs 20:24 NIV). This cannot mean that self-examination is impossible; rather, it must mean that we do not have 100% our "own way" because the steps we chose to take are confirmed and therefore directed by God's hand in our lives. "He is a buckler to them that walk uprightly. He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of His saints" (Proverbs 2:7,8) says it all; *God* keeps the righteous man in the way to life, if that is his will. As we go further along the road, we realize this: "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and He shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:6) because part of our daily prayer and experience. Through daily reading of the word, we are *led* in this way: "I (wisdom) lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment" (8:20,22); "I have led thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened, and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble" (Proverbs 4:11,12). The two roads in Proverbs propel the traveller along them.

The longer we live in Christ, the further we travel down the road, the closer we get to the Kingdom, and the more confirmed we are in the way of total dedication, knowing that we are moving surely towards the glory of the Kingdom: "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Proverbs 4:18). The momentum of our own ever developing spirituality will carry us along this road: "He that walketh uprightly walketh surely; but he that perverteth his ways shall be known" (Proverbs 10:9). "The way of the Lord is strength to the upright" (Proverbs 10:29). "Righteousness keepeth him that is upright in the way" (Proverbs 13:6); "he that walketh in his uprightness" (Proverbs 14:2); and there are several other references to the fact that the righteous walk the Kingdom road in their own "uprightness" or "righteousness". This obviously doesn't imply self-righteousness, but rather means that the life of serious obedience will lead to more obedience. Likewise the man who is obedient to God's commands will live in them, i.e. they will become an integral part of his way of life (Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29; Ez. 20:13,21 etc.). The further we go in God's way, the clearer and more obvious it all becomes, and the fewer agonies we face over decisions, as perhaps we did in our early days of believing. The way of wisdom is "plain to him that understands" (Prov. 8:9). Some seek for wisdom but can never find it; for others, "knowledge is easy unto him that understands" (Prov. 14:6).

Because we are walking the Kingdom road, and the end direction is certain, the very fact we are walking that road means that while we are walking it, our salvation is assured; so clear is the road to the Kingdom, so certain the final destination, that whoever is on the road is effectively in the Kingdom: "In the way of righteousness is life; and in the pathway thereof there is no death" (10:28). And we come to realize this; the logic of total dedication to the one way is increasingly evident. And the experience of love, peace and joy which we have on the

road confirms us in this: " Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17). The Lord is the supreme example. He set His face to go to Jerusalem, and the final sacrifice which would be there (Lk. 9:51). He hardened His face like a rock (Is. 50:7); and yet the wicked similarly harden their faces like a rock to go in the way of the flesh (Jer. 5:3). We are hardened in our path, one way or the other. Jeremiah had his face hardened in response to his own hardening of face (Jer. 1:17; 5:3), and the wicked in Israel likewise were hardened (Jer. 3:3; 4:30)

The Strongest Imperative

The two roads in Proverbs have different aspects. It will be noticed that sometimes the Proverbs speak of roads / paths / ways in the plural, other times in the singular. This indicates not only that our overall way in life is comprised of many separate routes, which all come together under one general classification (thus our 'way' at work, our 'way' in the ecclesia, our 'way' at home, are all basically the same way, although outwardly some may seem more 'spiritual' than others). It also indicates that " paths" is being used as an intensive plural, to outline the two great ways which there are in life. The Lord Jesus based many of His parables on the Proverbs, and His words concerning the wide road to destruction and the narrow road to the Kingdom (Mt. 7:13,14) are surely based on the frequent descriptions of the ways / great way to life, and that to death, which Proverbs so often mentions. The road / way of life which we are on is really leading somewhere. " The way of the wicked" is opposed to the way of him " that followeth after righteousness" (Proverbs 15:9 cp. seeking the Kingdom and God's righteousness, Mt. 5:47).

Yet life has a manner of feeling so monotonous, whether we are spiritually strong or weak. Bible readings are read, bread broken, meetings attended, children fed, holidays had... all in the same basic pattern. And yet this is all leading us somewhere; we are heading somewhere fast, screaming along the highway of life, either to eternal death or the eternal Kingdom. It's rather like the fact that our planet is hurtling through space at a huge speed, with us pinned to the surface of earth by some form of centrifugal force. Yet as we watch fluffy clouds wander lazily across the sky, as we watch the world go by, this really doesn't seem the case. And even more so spiritually. And yet we are here for these few brief years to be developed, to be conformed to the image of the Son of God, to be prepared for the eternity and spiritual glory of the Kingdom of God. It is a wonder that our time here is so short, that the average time a believer spends in Christ is probably only around 35 years. God wishes to pack so much, so intensely, into our everyday experience. And yet for the most part, tragically, we are blind to this. We don't feel it. We don't sense the urgency for spiritual growth. We don't perceive God urgently, vitally at work on our characters in everyday incidents.

2-8-2 The Logic Of Devotion

The fact there is no middle road is the most powerful imperative to total devotion. The Lord foresaw that it would be possible for His men to be as salt which had lost it's savour; to appear as His, but for this to have no practical effect at all; and such salt is to be "cast out" in the end (Lk. 14:34,35). Israel were told that *because* they were the people of God, in covenant with Him, *therefore* they *had* to be obedient. If they were disobedient, they would be cursed. And if they backed out of being God's people, they were also cursed (Dt. 27:9,19,26). There was no way back: total devotion to obedience. God would either rejoice over them to bless them, or rejoice over them to curse them (Dt. 28:63). He isn't passive; His

energy will be expended upon us one way or the other. There are only two types of builder, the wise and the foolish; two types of tree, yielding either good or bad fruit. As with Israel, the ways of life and death are set before us (Dt. 30:15-20; Jer. 21:8). Moses, on the day of his death and at his final spiritual maturity, realized that this was the ultimate choice. His appeal to *therefore* chose life is painfully evident in its logic. We are either on the road to the Kingdom, or to eternal death; from God's perspective. We may not see the issues of life that clearly; we may not see our direction as clearly as God does. Consider Rev. 3:15,16: "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth". We know that from God's perspective, we *are* either cold or hot. We either serve Him or mammon. We are either on the road to the Kingdom or to death. So surely the Lord is speaking from *our* viewpoint; He wished that those believers would have the attitude that they were either cold or hot, rather than thinking there was a middle course. In essence, their weakness is ours; for time and again, we hide behind the philosophy of 'balance' in order to justify a "neither cold nor hot" attitude. Our lack of serious devotion, both individually and as a community, rests in this sophistry of 'balance'; lukewarmness has become respectable, both in the brotherhood and in the world; total commitment is branded as fanaticism and dogmatism. The brother or sister who rejects the opportunity of university in order to concentrate on the Lord's work, who spends their annual holiday studying the word, who devotes all their spare cash to putting adverts in newspapers, who turns down promotion because it will mean less time for the Truth, reorganizes their business because they realize it's getting a grip on their soul, turns away a contract because they're speaking at a Bible School, who spends their Sunday afternoons distributing leaflets rather than lazing away the hours as the world does, who gets rid of the temptation of the TV... such behaviour is seen as fanaticism, as over the top. And yet in God's eyes, this is what we are; either totally committed, 'fanatics' in the eyes of the world and some of our brethren- or stone cold. And if *we* think that we don't have to be like this, that we can serve both masters, travel both roads, be hot and cold at the same time; we will be rejected. This really is the strongest imperative to the life of total dedication. It's absolutely everything, or totally nothing. This is the choice facing us. And it's the choice we put before men by our preaching, both in and out of the ecclesia: "We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2 Cor. 2:16 RSV). "And who is sufficient for these things?" , Paul comments- as if to say, 'We simply don't appreciate the power and the implications of the logic we are putting before men'. In the end, the rejected will have all that they have taken from them, and be eternally "sold" for their sins (Mt. 18:25); but the very same words are used about how those who truly find the hope of the Kingdom will sell all that they have for it in this life (Mt. 13:44,46). The total abandon and loss of all in the last day must be ours now.

For it's a powerful, powerful logic. We either love God and hate the world, or we hate God and love the world. We either love wisdom, or we hate wisdom and thereby love death (Prov. 4:6 cp. 8:36). God's Truth which we possess will either save us or destroy us, as new wine is put in either new or old bottles. If we are not wholeheartedly with the Lord, He sees us as against Him (Mk. 9:40). We would rather there were a third way. But *as far as God is concerned*, there is none. None would say they hate God; not even the atheist. Yet God sees those who love the world as hating Him. Likewise the Bible speaks of the world as being sinful and actively hating God, whereas to human eyes the world is for the most part ignorant. Thus the Canaanite nations did not know much about the God of Israel, and yet they are described as actively hating Him (Num. 10:35 NIV; Ps. 68:1). The mixed worship of the Samaritans is almost derided by the all demanding Yahweh: "So these nations feared the

Lord, and served their graven images...as did their fathers, so do they unto this day...unto this day they do after the former manners: they fear not the Lord" (2 Kings 17:33,34,41). Did they fear Yahweh, or didn't they? They did, but not wholeheartedly; therefore from God's perspective, they didn't fear Him at all. The Lord wasn't just trying to shock us when He offered us the choice between hating God and loving Him (Mt. 6:24 cp. James 4:4); He was deadly literal in what He said. The Lord hammered away at the same theme when He spoke of how a tree can only bring forth one kind of spiritual fruit: bad, or good (Mt. 7:18,19). James likewise: a spring can either give sweet water or bitter water (James 3:11). We either love God, or the world. If we love the world, we have *no* love of God in us (1 Jn. 2:15). The man who found the treasure in the field, or the pearl of great price, sold *all* that he had, in order to obtain it. If he had sold any less, he wouldn't have raised the required price. These mini-parables are Christ's comment on the Law's requirement that God's people love Him with *all* their heart and soul, realizing the logic of devotion. Samuel pleaded with Israel: "Serve the Lord with all your heart; and turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things [i.e. idols]" (1 Sam. 12:20,21). If we don't serve God whole-heartedly, we will serve the idols of this present age. There's no third road. If we are God's people, we will flee from the false teacher (Jn. 10:5). If we do anything other than this, we reflect our basic attitude to God's truth. The Lord told a telling, terrifying parable. A rich man so loved a pearl which he saw that he became a pauper by selling absolutely *all* he had- his business, his transport, his expensive clothes- in order to buy a pearl. And, finishing off the story, we are to surely imagine him living the rest of his life in some humble dwelling amongst the poor of this world, daily admiring the beauty of his pearl, totally unrealized by the world around him, caring for it as the most important thing in his whole existence, realizing that in it was the epitome of absolutely all his being: his love, his wealth, his future, his joy of life day by day. And this is how we should be with the Gospel; nothing less.

This theme is to be connected with the many passages in John which speak of the believer as being in a state of constant spiritual strength; e.g. "he that followeth me shall never (Gk.) walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (Jn. 8:12). These kind of passages surely teach that God does not see us on the basis of our individual sins or acts of righteousness; He sees our overall path in life, and thereby sees us as totally righteous or totally evil. Thus Proverbs contains many verses which give two alternative ways of behaviour, good and evil; there is no third way. Thus, e.g., we *either* guard our tongue, *or* we speak rashly (Prov. 13:3). At baptism, we changed masters, from 'sin' to 'obedience'. It may seem that we flick back and forth between them. In a sense, we do, but from God's perspective (and Rom. 6:16-20 describes how *God* sees our baptism), we don't. The recurring weakness of natural Israel was to serve Yahweh *and* the idols (1 Sam. 7:3; 2 Kings 17:41; Zeph. 1:5). For the new Israel in the first century, the temptation was to break bread with both the Lord Jesus and the idols (1 Cor. 10:21,22). But there is no lack of evidence that this was actually counted as total idol worship in God's eyes; thus the prophets consistently taught the need for wholehearted devotion to Yahweh, and nothing else. In essence, we have the same temptation; to serve God and mammon, to have a little of both, to be passive Christians; to flunk the challenge of the logic of devotion. As the reality of Christ's crucifixion made Joseph and Nicodemus 'come out' in open, 100% commitment, come on them what may, so serious contemplation of the Saviour's devotion ought to have a like effect on us. It has been well observed: "that air of finality with which Jesus always spoke [meant that] everything he said and did constituted a challenge to men to reach a decisive conclusion"⁽¹⁾. Examples of this are discussed in *The Demanding Lord*.

Notes

(1) W.F. Barling, *Jesus: Healer And Teacher* (notes of the Central London Study Class, 1952), p.16.

2-8-3 Unfulfilled Believer Syndrome

Tragically, we so often read of Yahweh's people carrying the names of Baal or other gods within their own names- e.g. Merib-baal (1 Chron. 8:34; 9:40); Ishbaal (1 Chron. 8:33; 9:39); Baal-yada (1 Chron. 14:7); and perhaps worst of all, Baal-Yah (1 Chron. 12:5). Is our 'name' or personality before God the same tragic mixture of flesh and spirit?

We suffer, I suggest, from the 'unfulfilled believer' syndrome. The anger and resentment which there evidently is in our community stems from this. Many of us seem to partly believe, but not fully; we are trapped by our conscience. We can't openly resign our faith; for "Lord, to whom shall we go?" . And our conscience simply won't let us. Especially for those born in the Faith, to quit often isn't an option. And yet those in this position aren't fully committed to the Lord's way either, they won't let themselves go in the life of total devotion. And so a sense of being trapped arises, a sense of unfulfilment, a sense of being unwilling to go forward to total devotion but unable to go back to the world; unable to completely dedicate themselves to the world's way, and yet unwilling to throw themselves in wholeheartedly to the Lord's way; and so passive anger, envy, jealousy and resentment develops, often against those who have decided clearly and openly which way they have dedicated themselves to. But the fact is, *in God's eyes* there's no third way, no sitting in the middle. We are either passionately for Him, or pitted against Him. Whether or not *we* see it like that doesn't change how *He* sees it, and therefore how it ultimately *is*.

This unfulfilled believer syndrome is especially evident in the context of serving mammon. The brother or sister who give themselves unreservedly to the building up of their career or business *while still claiming to believe* will have this problem. They are trying to make a third way, to have a little of both, when actually this position doesn't exist in God's eyes. You either give your soul, the very core of your being, to Him and Him alone; or you turn away from Him, on the slippery road to Wigan Pier, to nowhere, to eternal, eternal oblivion. A practical warning ought to be sounded about even choosing to train for careers, or even attempting to obtain jobs, which evidently require the employee to give their soul to the job, and nothing less. The high salaries paid are tacit recognition of this.

But this unfulfilled believer syndrome is also true on a more abstract level. There is what I'd call 'The harder side of God'; the God who (according to His word) doesn't save unbaptized children (or adults), the God who will only resurrect a few of all those billions of humans who have lived, the God who allows the most terrible suffering to come upon men, children and animals who are not in His purpose, the God who allows countless millions to think from His word that they know Him and His salvation, when in fact they don't; and those "many" people will be met with the dismissive comment: "I never knew you: depart from me" (Mt. 7:23). This is the harder side of God, the side we'd rather not see. God almost seems to underline the hardness of it in the way He records His word; thus He emphasizes that the "little ones" of the Canaanite cities were to be killed by the sword (Dt. 2:34), the male babies of the Midianites were to be killed by God's command (Num. 31:17; which was exactly what Herod ordered). The unfulfilled believer will accept the gracious side of God (which is undoubtedly the aspect more emphasized in the Bible), but refuse to really accept this other side, while passively admitting that this harder aspect of God is revealed in His word. But it's

all or nothing. We either accept the self-revelation of God in the Bible, or we reject it- that's how *He* sees it. Our temptation is to think that God sees things as we see them, to think that God is merely an ideal human being. But the day of judgment will reveal otherwise (Ps. 50:21). He is God, not man. It is not for us to set the terms. As the Lord taught in His parable of the approaching army, it's either total, abject surrender before the King of Heaven, accepting *whatever* terms He asks, or a foolhardy attempt to meet Him in head on confrontation (Lk. 14:31). Those who challenge the harder side of God are often called 'brave'; but their 'bravery' is foolhardy rebellion against the sovereign Almighty.

Unfulfilled believer syndrome also surfaces in a refusal to face up to truly loving and accepting our brother. We take a third road of indifferent tolerance to far too many. We don't sort out the issues we perceive to be between us. We let the separation and cold contact drift on. Straight after teaching His men to pray, the Lord immediately added a comment about the need to forgive our brother. It's as if He was saying: 'OK, I know that part of the prayer will be hard for you. But you've got to do it'. Having spoken of the need to tolerate our brother, the Lord Jesus repeated His common theme: that there is no third road: " Why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye...? For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Lk. 6:41-43). There's no third position. Either we love our brother, and bring forth good fruit; or we don't get down to it, and bring forth bad fruit. We can't sometimes bring forth good, sometimes bad. At heart, we are either loving or selfishly hateful. Anything less than following Yahweh with all our heart is seen as doing evil in His eyes (1 Kings 11:6).

2-8-4 Self Examination

Consider the connections between the following: " *Ponder* the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established" (4:26). " For the ways of man are before the eyes (Angels) of the Lord, and He *pondereth* all his goings" (5:21). " Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the Lord *pondereth* the hearts" (21:2). " Her ways are moveable...lest thou shouldest *ponder* the path of life" (5:6). Surely we are being taught that we ought to examine our path in life, bearing in mind that we will naturally think there is nothing wrong with it, because *God* examines it; our self-examination must mirror His. This is also taught in 1 Cor. 11:28-31; if we examine / judge / condemn ourselves now in our self-examination, God will not have to do this to us at the day of judgment. The spirit of man is in this sense the candle of the Lord, searching the inner recesses of a man's life (Prov. 20:27); i.e. there is a link between a man's examination of his own conscience, and the Lord's examination of him. And yet if we are in the ways of the flesh, those ways are " moveable" , always leading on to something else, something new, and *therefore* this militates against self-examination; " her ways are moveable...lest thou shouldest ponder the path of life" . The implication is that being in the way of the flesh means in itself that you won't examine yourself; whilst those in the way to life, ponder the path of their feet (4:26). This has been proved true time and again in the experience of weak believers; life has a way of ever presenting new, pressing problems. Her ways are moveable. And in the rush of the world, no time is left for serious self-examination. And so the downward spiral deepens. The path of the weak believer, by its very nature, stops him from true self-examination: " There is a way which seemeth right unto a man; but the end thereof are the ways of death" (14:12); " all a man's ways seem innocent to him" (16:2 NIV). It should be noted that these verses do not mean that self-examination is impossible; they mean that for the man who is on the road to death, self-examination is impossible. A disinterest in analyzing what road we are on will lead us to death at the end: " He that despiseth his ways shall die" (19:16). The crucial importance of life and living, of the every

day decisions we make, the ways of thinking we slip into; the crucial, eternal importance of all this is easily overlooked. "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes" (10:15); "The way of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble" (4:19).

Real self-examination is painful- it has to be. It's no half hearted moment of introspection as, e.g., we prepare to partake of the bread and wine at communion. The parallelism of Prov. 20:27,30 suggests that the stripes of our "wounds" cleanse away evil and affect "the inward parts"- and yet "the spirit of man", as the Lord's candle, searches "all the inward parts". Rigorous self-examination reveals ourselves to ourselves; and yet so do trials and "wounds". This is how tough real self-examination has to be- it should have the same effect as painful trials, revealing the same things which they do.

On the other hand, serious self-examination is part of the road to the Kingdom; it will characterize *every* successful believer: "The wisdom of the prudent is to understand his way" (14:8); "the prudent man looketh well to his going" (14:15); "whoso is preserving his soul, is watching his way" (16:17 YLT); "A wicked man puts up a bold front ("hardeneth his face", AV); but an upright man gives thought to his ways" (21:29 NIV). This last reference suggests that a lack of self-examination is associated with a hardness, a brazenness, which is the result of a refusal to face up to the real issues of personal spirituality and our very personal relationship with God. It is more than possible to drift through the Christian experience with no thought at all for these things. We live in a world which is anaesthetized to the possibility of personal sin, a world which drifts, only criticizing those who dare to criticize, a world which dare not think about tomorrow, a world without any sense of responsibility, with no fear of God and His judgment before their eyes. Inevitably, we will be affected by this spirit. Self-examination is perhaps what we are most urgently in need of in these last days; a real self-knowledge, a true humility, a real sense of where we are going, and of the utter impossibility of travelling two roads.

"I am *the* way", the Lord Jesus said, possibly with His mind on the one great way of Proverbs. The whole way of life which leads to the Kingdom, the things we do, our deepest thoughts, our daily decisions; these are all "the way" which leads to the Kingdom; and yet Christ is "the way". This clearly means that all these things, the very essence of our being, the fibre of our thought processes, the basis of all our works; must be the Lord Jesus Christ. The fact God's ways and principles are unchanging encourage our self-examination; for there is always the rock of God and His way against which to compare our ways. The Lord Jesus is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Prov. 5:6 puts the opposite case to us: "Lest thou shouldest ponder the path of life, her ways [the way of folly] are moveable, that thou canst not know them". Time and again one sees the personal moral breakdown of those who turn away from accepting God's word as the ultimate touchstone of truth and human behaviour.

Grace

Because "a man's goings are of the Lord, how then can a man understand his own way?" (Prov. 20:24). Because ultimate self-knowledge isn't possible, the whole difficulty of self-examination drives us back to grace; the element of uncertainty in our own self-examination is necessary, because otherwise we would not be grace centred, and would be tempted to rely upon our own purity as a basis for salvation, rather than God's grace.

Conclusions

Reflection on the tragic brevity of human life is a sure fillip to our realization that there's no third road. The Law taught this; a man had to bring a burnt offering, of his own voluntary will, in symbol of his own dedication to his God. It was to be consumed by the flames of the Christ-altar, until all that was left was a pile of ashes. And he was to see in this a parable of his own life; totally consumed in service, until at the end, we're left a pile of ashes. We are as water spilt upon the ground that cannot be gathered again. The Man we follow is the supreme example. He knew himself that "the zeal of thine house hath *eaten me up*" (Ps. 69:9); the same Hebrew word is used as in Lev. 6:10: "take up the ashes which the fire hath *consumed*". Even in his life, he felt that he had reached this point of total consumption (Jn. 2:17). One day, if the Lord doesn't return, you will die. And your children will. So will I. One day someone (somewhere, on this lonely planet) will chisel D-U-N-C-A-N H-E-A-S-T-E-R on a gravestone. Probably many of you wouldn't be at my funeral. In time, all those I've known, those I've loved, loved in the Truth, the hands I've shaken, everything my eyes have seen, the streets I'm familiar with, the things I've created and destroyed, will all be gone. We only pass through life once. This alone gives rise to self-examination. Already, we want to stop thinking about it. Our nature and our world programs us to shy away from the ultimate realities. I was once in a children's hospital in Russia. I saw a teddy bear lying near a dustbin. The thought flashed through my mind: 'A little boy maybe really loved that teddy, and now he's dead, and teddy's thrown away'. And my mind, right on the ball, *forbad me* to think that. *We are programmed to shy away from the ultimate realities*, in the same way as men hid their faces from the terror and dastardly horror of the crucifixion of God's Son (Is. 53:3), and as "none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding" to realize the idiocy of worshipping a piece of wood as an idol (Is. 44:19). But all these things are all too tragically true- on a human level. But *we*, through the Truth, really *do* have the hope of sweet resurrection to eternal days, that *is* where our road leads. The Truth is the only thing. There's nothing like the Truth. Let's give ourselves to it with all we have. We almost hear the frustration of both God and Elijah when they pleaded with Israel: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If Yahweh be God, then follow (Heb. to walk, go in the way of) Him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word" (1 Kings 18:21). How long will we halt between the two paths, never facing up to the choice? It's an agony to God, as was Laodicea's "neither hot nor cold" attitude. I sometimes wonder if say 90% of our prayer, our Bible reading, our spiritual activities, are all wasted because we are only half hearted about it. We don't (often) pray the prayer of dominant desire, or (often) read or (often) break bread with that spirit of total, total dedication and concentration. You must have, as I do, those all too fleeting moments of grasping the logic, the wonder, the imperative urgency of the fact there's no third way; that total devotion is the only choice. Cling on to those moments. Organize your life decisions around this spirit. Look well to the path of your feet. One day, we will run in this path and never be weary, we will walk in it and not faint, we will renew our strength (Is. 40:27,31). The last days will make our choice all the more evident: we either receive the mark of the beast and ultimately face torture and the wine of God's wrath; or we refuse it and face Babylon's wrath (Rev. 13:16,17; 14:9,10). Now is the time for self-examination.

And remember. At the day of judgment, nobody will be passive and indifferent. Everyone will want to be accepted. All of us who come there will see there is only one way we want. Self-examination will be the order of the day. The virgins will knock on the door and plead for it to be opened. The first century Jews will say "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Lk. 13:35). They will want to be on Messiah's side then. None of us will be vacillating between total commitment and the lazy drifting of our human nature. And our judgment seat is going on now, today. "This splitting of the decision between only two

alternatives may seem an over-simplification: we fondly think of ourselves as faced with a continuous range of possibility over which to decide, but in the ultimate that range may be broken down into a number of discrete two-way choices, each one a decision between good and evil”⁽¹⁾.

Notes

(1) R.T. Lovelock, *Salvation In Jesus* p. 33.

2.9 The Logic Of Endurance

On a cold December night in 1984, a group of six young brethren huddled together in a flat in South London- engaged in deep Bible study, as they regularly did on alternate Fridays. It was me who threw out the following point for discussion: Reading back through the news from ecclesias as recorded in our church magazine, for every three baptisms there is one person who leaves the Faith- and the ratio is worsening. In other words, many who start the race just don't hold on. The parable of the sower says just the same. Noticing the shock among the other five brethren, I recall saying something along these lines: " Of course, that's only an average, it doesn't mean that a third of *us* here tonight will leave the Faith" . But now, many years later, there are only two of us left.

Realism

This may seem extremely discouraging for those of you recently baptized. But the reason we came to be baptized was because we were realists, we saw the emptiness of this life, we were unafraid to face up to the desperate need we have for salvation. So the fact that the spiritual life is difficult, a wilderness journey, and that many find it too hard, should be something else we are prepared to face up to. I find it significant- if that's the right word- that those who turn away do not usually go to other churches or doctrines, but return to the temporal pleasures of this world. Surely this in itself proves that our beliefs are firmly founded on God's word of Truth.

Yet God is not trying to make the way to the Kingdom impossibly difficult for us; the yoke of Christ is easy, His burden is light. " Our *light* affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" . The fact God has done so much for us, above all in giving His Son to die for us, is proof enough that He will not make it too hard for us to attain the great salvation which Christ has enabled. And yet in other ways, it is hard. Christ himself often warned of the hardness of the road, telling people to think twice before they decided to follow Him. He speaks of the spiritual life as carrying his cross, day after day. The picture of a man carrying a cross is the picture of a man who finds it hard to carry on, a man who finds endurance increasingly difficult. This means that we must face up to the real need for endurance, " patient continuance" as Paul puts it.

The Logic Of Endurance

There are a number of passages which powerfully put before us the logic of enduring. In a sense, the greatness of the Kingdom ahead should be our motivator. And yet God has seen fit to reason with us another way: if we seek to please ourselves in this life, we will suffer

anyway, just as much as if we chose to suffer for the sake of living a spiritual life. Therefore there is a glaring logic in choosing to suffer for the sake of righteousness rather than for the sake of sin. The implication of this is that the happiness of the sinner is only on the surface, as it appears to men.

So let's review some of the passages which speak of the logic of endurance in this way:

- " They that will be rich...have erred from the faith, and *pierced themselves through* with many sorrows" (1 Tim. 6:9,10). The Greek translated " pierced themselves through" is related to the verb 'to crucify'. We are asked to crucify ourselves, to give up the brief materialism of this life. Yet if we refuse to do this, we still pierce ourselves through, we crucify ourselves, with the pain which comes from a mind dedicated to materialism and self-fulfilment, a life devoted to reaching the end of a rainbow. So what is the logical thing to do? It's crucifixion either way. The idea of piercing self through with sorrow is actually a direct quote from the LXX of 1 Kings 21:27, where Ahab was pierced with sorrow as a result of his coveting of Naboth's vineyard. And yet when Naboth was dead, Ahab tore his clothes and put on sackcloth, in sorrow for what he had done (1 Kings 21:16 LXX- omitted in the AV); but these very words are used in describing how when Ahab heard the words of his condemnation, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth (21:27). His sin brought him to tare his clothes, just as he did when his condemnation was pronounced. In his seeking for happiness he pierced himself through with the sorrow of condemnation.

- Thus the cross is described as a *skandalon*, an offence (Gal. 5:11). Either we stumble (are offended) on it, or we stumble and are offended in the sense of spiritually falling away. Either we share the Lord's cross, shedding our blood with His "outside the gate" of this world; or we will share the condemnation of those whose blood is to be shed in destruction outside the city (Rev. 14:20). It's Golgotha now, or later. The cross makes men stumble; either falling on that stone and being broken into humility, or the uncommitted stumbling at the huge demand which the cross implies. Paul had all this in mind when he wrote of the lust / affections of the flesh (Gal. 5:1), using a word elsewhere translated " sufferings" in the context of Christ's cross. The sufferings, the lust, the cross of the flesh... or the cross of the Lord Jesus. We either bear our iniquities and their result (Lev. 19:8), or we bear the cross of the Lord Jesus. It's a burden either way. The Lord played on this fact when He spoke of there being two roads, one which *leads* to death, and the other to life (Mt. 7:13,14). The Greek word translated 'lead' is in fact part of an idiom: to be led is an idiom for 'to be put to death' (cp. Jn. 18:13; 21:18). Indeed, the very word translated " lead" in Mt. 7:14 is rendered " be put to death" (Acts 12:19). So, we're led out to death either way, as the criminal made his 'last walk' to the cross. We're either led out and put to death for the sake of eternal life, or for eternal death. The logic is glaring. The Hebrew of Ps. 139:24 reveals a telling play on words which makes the same point: " Wicked way" is rendered in the AVmg. as 'way of pain'; the way of wickedness is itself the way of pain.

- Jeremiah used this kind of logic in appealing to Israel to humbly repent: " Say unto the king and to the queen, Humble yourselves: *for* (i.e. because) your principalities shall *come down* " , i.e. be humbled (Jer. 13:18). The pride of man will be humbled by Yahweh; if we refuse to humble ourselves, then God's condemnation of us in the day of judgment will humble us. Therefore it is logical to humble ourselves now.

- John the Baptist had a clear perception of this logic: " He (Jesus) shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit (even) with fire: whose fan is in his hand, and...he will burn up the chaff with

unquenchable fire" (Mt. 3:11,12). John put a choice before them: fire, or fire. Either we are consumed with the fire of devotion to God, or we face the figurative fire of the judgment.

- The Lord Jesus picked up on the same idea. He spoke of the destruction of the unworthy in Gehenna fire, and went straight on to comment: "For every one shall be salted with (Gk. 'for the') fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted" (Mk. 9:48,49). Unless we become a living sacrifice, wholly consumed by God's fire, laying ourselves down upon the altar, then we will be consumed by the figurative fire of Gehenna at the day of judgment. Again, there's no real choice: it's fire, or fire.

- And it's bankruptcy, or bankruptcy. Paul spoke of spending and being spent in the Lord's service, alluding to how the prodigal spent himself in dissipation (Lk. 15:14). That sense of losing all must come- either in sin's service, or in that of the Lord.

- The tongue / words of both the Lord Jesus and the "strange woman", an epitome of the devil, are "sharp as a two-edged sword" (Prov. 5:4). We must be cut open one way or the other.

- The wicked "coveteth greedily all the day long: but the righteous giveth and spareth not / unsparingly exercises pity and compassion" (Prov. 21:26 LXX). The desire to extend oneself, to get much further than where we presently are, is inherent to human nature. We must harness it in a never ending desire to give out, rather than to receive.

- We must have tribulation, either in the condemnation of the judgment (Rom. 2:9), or now, in order that we will enter the Kingdom (Acts 14:22). We must bear the burden either of our sins (Am. 2:13; Is. 58:6; Ps. 38:4) or of the Lord's cross (Gal. 6:4 etc.). We will experience either the spiritual warfare of the striving saint (Rom. 7:15-25), or the lusts of the flesh warring in our members, eating us up with the insatiability of sin (James 4:1; Ez. 16:28,29). Either we will mourn now in repentance (Lk. 6:25; the Greek for "mourn" is often in a repentance context), or we will mourn at the judgment (Mt. 8:12 etc.). Having foretold the inevitable coming of judgment day, Yahweh Himself pleads with Israel: "Therefore also *now*...turn ye even to me...with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12).

- The day of the Lord will result in the wicked being "in pain as of a woman that travaileth" (Is. 13:8; 1 Thess. 5:3). The Lord seems to have alluded to this when He spoke of how the faithful just before His coming would be like a woman in travail, with the subsequent joy on delivery matching the elation of acceptance at Christ's return (Jn. 16:21). So, it's travail- or travail, especially in the last days. If we choose the way of the flesh, it will be travail for nothing, bringing forth in vain (this is seen as a characteristic of all worldly life in Is. 65:23). We either cut off the flesh now (in spiritual circumcision), or God will cut us off. This point was made when the rite of circumcision was first given: "The uncircumcised [un-cut off] man...shall be cut off" (Gen. 17:14).

- "Whosoever shall fall on this stone (Christ) shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder" (Mt. 21:44). There is an unmistakable allusion here to the stone destroying the image, the Kingdoms of men, in Dan. 2:44. The choice we have is to fall upon Christ and break our bones, to get up and stumble on with our natural self broken in every bone; or to be ground to powder by the Lord at His return, to share the judgments of this surrounding evil world. Yet strangely (at first sight) the figure of stumbling on the stone of Christ often describes the person who stumbles at His word, who rejects it (Is. 8:14,15;

Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:7,8). In other words, through our spiritual failures we come to break ourselves, we become a community of broken men and women; broken in that we have broken our inner soul in conformity to God's will. As Simeon cuddled that beautiful, innocent baby Jesus, he foresaw all this: " Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again (resurrection) of many in Israel...that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Lk. 2:34). If we are to share His resurrection, if we are to experience such newness of life in this life, we must fall upon Him, really feel the cutting edge of His word. We must be broken now; or be broken and ground to powder at the judgment.

- The whole of Romans 6 plays on this idea. We are slaves to sin, and through entering Christ, we become slaves of righteousness. Total freedom to do what *we* personally want is not possible. We are slaves, we can't serve two masters. So why not serve Christ rather than the Biblical devil? Likewise Moses offered Israel the choice of bondservant to either Yahweh or their enemies (Dt. 28:47,48). And Mic. 2:3 likewise reminds Israel that they will be under the yoke of judgment if they reject Yahweh's yoke. The Lord spoke of His servants having a light yoke (Mt. 11:30). The Bible minded among His hearers would have thought back to the threatened punishment of an iron yoke for the disobedient (Dt. 28:48). 'It's a yoke either way', they would have concluded. But the Lord's yoke *even in this life* is light, and has promise of the life which is to come! The logic of taking it, with the restrictions it inevitably implies (for it is a yoke), is simply overpowering.

- We must be living sacrifices, devoted to the Lord (Rom. 12:1); but if we flunk out of this: " His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins" (Prov. 5:22). We're a sacrifice either way, tied up without the freedom of movement as we would wish. There's therefore and thereby an element of sorrow, either way in life: " Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of (i.e. that gift you will really, eternally enjoy): but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

- The land of Israel had to be rested every Sabbath year. God's people thought they could quietly ignore this inconvenient requirement of their God, and get away with it. But God has His way, in everything, all the time. Eventually the whole land had to go through 70 years laying desolate, to compensate for the 70 Sabbaths (over 490 years) which His people had ignored to keep (2 Chron. 36:21).

- The Biblical records of those who took the easy way (as they thought it) often emphasize that they ended up in essence with the same experience of suffering which they would have had if they followed the way of the Kingdom. Those who worshipped idols forsook their own mercy (Jonah 2:8). Rachel demanded children, unless she would die; but she died in child-birth. Israel utterly corrupted themselves in their idolatry (Dt. 31:29); the Hebrew for " corrupt" also means 'to destroy'. They destroyed themselves by their sin. " O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help" (Hos. 13:9), if only they would take it.

- Not only is the logic of choosing God's way so powerful, but the way of the flesh is not satisfying. Sin became a weariness to Israel even before they reaped the punishment for it (Is. 57:10); their mind was alienated from the lovers they chose; they left the one they left the God of Israel for (Ez. 23:17). They always wanted *new* gods; they were never satisfied with their idols (Jer. 44:3).

- The sacrifices taught Israel that God especially valued the fat- the best parts of their lives were to be freely offered to Him. But the wicked at judgment day will be as the fat of lambs,

consumed upon the altar (Ps. 37:20). We either give our best to the Lord's service now, or He will ultimately take it from us anyway. Cars, houses, flats, valued jewellery, banknotes stashed away, bank accounts, our innermost emotions, jealousy, love...we either give them now, or He will take them from us in the day of judgment.

- Having spoken of the need to take up the cross daily, the Lord Jesus employed this form of logic to encourage people to really take on board what He was suggesting: " Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross...*for* whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, and the gospel's, the same shall find it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own life (AV " soul")? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mk. 8:34-37). If we follow Christ, we must lose our natural life. If we don't, even if we gain the whole world, we will lose our natural life. *I must lose my life, one way or the other.* We need to go through life muttering that to ourselves. God asks our life, our all. If we hold it back in this life because we want to keep it for ourselves, He will take it anyway. The cross was a symbol of shame (Heb. 12:2 speaks of the shame of the cross). In this context verse 38 continues: " Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed" at the day of judgment. We either go through the shame of carrying the cross now, especially in our personal witnessing to those around us; or we will suffer the eternal shame of rejection (Dan. 12:2); our shame will then be evident to all (Rev. 16:15).

- The Greek text in Mt. 16:25,26 and Lk. 9:25 can bear a re-translation and re-punctuation which quite alters the sense as found in the English translations. It shows the Lord emphasizing the evident and compelling logic of losing our lives for His sake: " Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For how much a man is profited if he shall gain the whole world (in the Kingdom) and lose his own soul (now, as I asked you to do, to lose your soul for me)!...for the Son of man shall come... and then He shall reward every man according to his works" , i.e. the losing of our soul is through our everyday works. Lk. 9:25 makes the same point: 'How is a man advantaged if he gain the whole world (the Kingdom) and lose himself (now)!: *or* - be cast away, be condemned at the judgment, because he tried to keep his soul, he didn't see the logic of all this!' .

- We must lose our lives, one way or the other. If we lose them for Christ, we will find eternal life. If we keep them for ourselves, we will lose that eternal life. This teaching is picked up by the Lord in Lk. 21:16-18, in stating that some of His people would be put to death, but actually, not a hair of their heads would perish. Surely He was saying that yes, they would lose their lives, but in reality they would find eternal life. Those men and women who died on crosses, were burnt as human torches, were thrown to the lions...the Lord foresaw them, and implied that their sacrifice was *in principle* the process that must be gone through by each of us: a losing, a resigning, of our life and all the things that life consists of in everyday experience. Either we die to sin now, living out in practice the theory of baptism, or we will die to sin in rejection at judgment day; sin has it's end in death (Ez. 21:25; Dan. 9:24), either now, or then. So we may as well die to the things of sin in this life.

- Israel were told to " throw down" , " break in pieces" and " utterly destroy" the idols and altars of Canaan. There were times during their history when they obeyed this command by purging themselves from their apostasy in this. The Hebrew words used scarcely occur elsewhere, except very frequently in the context of how God " broke down" , " threw down"

and "destroyed" Israel at the hands of their Babylonian and Assyrian invaders as a result of their not 'breaking down' (etc.) the idols. "Throw down" in Ex. 34:13; Dt. 7:5; 12:3; 2 Chron. 31:1 is the same word in 2 Chron. 36:19; Jer. 4:26; 31:28; 33:4; 39:8; 52:14; Ez. 16:39; Nah. 1:6. "Cut down" in Dt. 7:5; 12:3; 2 Chron. 31:1 later occurs in Is. 10:33; Jer. 48:25; Lam. 2:3. So Israel faced the choice: either cut down your idols, or you will be cut down. The stone will either fall on us and destroy us, or we must fall on it and become broken men and women (Mt. 21:44). For the man untouched by the concept of living for God's glory, it's a hard choice. God will conquer sin, ultimately. When a man dies, it isn't just a biological, clockwork process. It is God's victory over sin in that individual. Either we must be slain by God; or with His gracious help, we must put sin to death in our members through association with the only One who really did this- and thereby rise to life eternal. The inevitability of God's conquest of sin is brought out in Ez. 6:4-6: "Your altars shall be desolate, and your images shall be broken...in all your dwelling places, the cities shall be laid waste, and the high places shall be desolate; *that* your altars may be laid waste and made desolate, and your idols may be broken and cease...and your works may be abolished...I will lay the dead carcasses of the children of Israel before their idols". The people of Israel had to be destroyed because their idols had to be destroyed. *The inevitability of God's ultimate conquest of sin* is evident: and we are asked to side *with* Him, not against Him. *God will have His way.* God will achieve His glory is us anyway, either by our destruction or by our salvation; He will have His way. This means we must put to death our sinful works *now*, not leave it for Him to destroy us so that He might destroy them. The secret sins of every human soul, those things we wrongly allow ourselves, those untackled, unacknowledged habits, will all ultimately be destroyed by the Lord: either through our response to His hand in our lives, or through His destruction of us so that they might be destroyed.

- There is reason to think that a latter day tribulation is to come upon us, which will really test our appreciation of this principle which is so embedded throughout God's revelation. Those who will refuse to worship the beast will be killed (Rev. 13:15); but those (responsible) who try to avoid this death will themselves be *tortured* to death by the Lamb, because they worshipped the beast (14:9-11; 16:2).

- The breaking of bread is intended to bring the logic of all this powerfully before us. The cup of the Lord is a symbol both of His condemnation, and also of His blessing and forgiveness. We take it, week by week, either to our condemnation, or to our salvation. There is no third way. We may as well realize this. The Lord Jesus *hates* the fact that some think there is a third road; He would that we recognized, as He does, that there is really no 'lukewarm' position- only hot or cold. He seems to ask us to realize this: "Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt" (Mt. 12:33).

The endless lack of fulfilment and constant lusting for something else was recognized by Freud in his theory of sublimation. His idea was that desire has its limitations, and because we don't get what we desire, we escape the problem by setting our desire upon something greater. Examples of this sublimation of desire are all around us. Like it or not, Freud's observation of human thought and life were correct on this point. But the call of Christ cuts through all that. We're called to a life set upon different aims, knowing that the path of indulging the flesh is insatiable, and leads only to more and more desire. Seeing this is indeed the way of the flesh- that it is insatiable and unfulfillable- the logic of going God's way is indeed compelling.

Beyond Logic

I don't think any of us would seriously argue with any of this. To give our lives to God, because we know if we don't, they will be taken from us; to bear the shame which comes from preaching, from publicly living a Christ-like life, because we know that if we don't, we will be even more ashamed at the judgment; to recognize we are slaves, to accept our lack of ultimate freedom; to break and humble ourselves now, knowing that this is our ultimate end anyway- the logic of all this is glaring indeed.

Indeed, the whole argument is even rather human: we've got to suffer anyway, so why not suffer for the sake of the Kingdom rather than the brief emptiness of the flesh? There are times when the Spirit uses this kind of human logic- Paul spoke "after the manner of men" (Rom. 6:19). "He that getteth wisdom loveth his own soul...he that keepeth the commandment keepeth his own soul...whoso provoketh to anger sinneth against his own soul...the merciful man doeth good to his own soul; but he that is cruel troubleth his own soul...wherefore commit ye this great evil against your own souls?" (Prov. 19:8,16; 20:2; 11:17; Jer. 44:7). Israel made idols "against herself" Ez. 22:3). It's in our own interest to be spiritual and reject the flesh- that's the simple message. And yet by nature we are so obtuse when it comes to spiritual things. We desperately cling on to the satisfaction of the moment, at *whatever* cost. Yet by the very fact that we are baptized, I am confident that each of us sees the foolishness of this; we see the logic of endurance. Sometimes the obviousness of it all comes rolling home to us, like a huge wave breaking in on a quiet beach! We *are more* than conquerors through Him that loved us, God is *beseeking* men to see the obvious logic of responding to His word (2 Cor. 5:20), *pleading* with us to see the greatness, the magnificence of His love towards us in Christ (Is. 1:18), *begging* us to realize that if He gave up His Son for us while we were yet sinners, how much more will He give us *all* things now that we are reconciled to Him through baptism (Rom. 5:6-10)! This is more than logic, way beyond the limits of linguistic reasoning. This is the pure "grace of God which bringeth salvation". Let it *convict* you, let the love of Christ *in itself* "constrain" you to hold on, to "hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end".

2.10 The Upward Spiral

2-10-1 The Upward Spiral

It is a feature of God's dealings with men that He confirms the degree of spiritual success or failure which we achieve or aim for by our own freewill effort. Thus we read nine times that Pharaoh hardened his own heart; but ten times that God hardened his heart. Similarly, God adds iniquity unto the iniquity of those who wilfully sin (Ps. 69:27; Rev. 22:18). Conversely God imputes righteousness, adding His own righteous characteristics to us, in response to our faith. This is the key idea of 'justification by faith', being counted righteous although personally we are not. The briefest reading of the Gospels will likewise reveal that people were both attracted to and repulsed from Jesus at the same time. Jeremiah often makes a play upon the Hebrew word *shub*- it can mean to turn away (from God), and also to 'turn back' or repent (e.g. Jer. 3:1,7,10,12,14,19,22; 4:1). If Israel turned in repentance, then God would return them to their land (Jer. 15:19); if they turned away from Him, He would turn them out into the Gentile world. Our lives are a twisting and turning, either to or away from God; and God is waiting to confirm us in those twists and turns. Jer. 8:4-6 comment that if one turns from the right road, then they must turn back. We all know how when we miss the way in

finding an unfamiliar address, there's a tendency to keep on going along the wrong road- because turning back is so psychologically difficult. And this is the image that God uses here- to appeal to Israel, and ourselves, not to foolishly 'backslide', keep on turning away, from Him- just because that's the course we're set upon.

In keeping with all this, there is ample indication in Scripture of there being an upward spiral in our spiritual development, epitomized by the principle, " he that hath, to him shall be given" (Mt. 13:12). This theme is repeated elsewhere:

- Dt. 4:2 tells us that the exact nature of God's requirements and commandments is designed to enable His people to yield obedience: " Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that (i.e. in order that) ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" . This would explain David's desire to have God's requirements and commands revealed to him more fully. Contrary to thinking 'I can't keep the commandments I know, so don't reveal any more to me', he actively sought to know God's expectations of him: " I have sought Thy precepts...give me understanding, that I may know Thy testimonies...I panted: for I longed for Thy commandments...hide not Thy commandments from me...I shall not be ashamed when I have respect unto all Thy commandments. I will praise Thee with uprightness of heart when I shall have learned Thy righteous judgments" (Ps. 119). Thus David sought to know more of God's requirements because they are designed to help us be more obedient to all of them *in toto*.

- This theme is often found in Ps. 119. David inclined his own heart to be obedient to the word (:112), but God inclined his heart that way in response (:36). David's meditation on the law gave him understanding (:99), but he was given understanding by God (:34). He kept his feet in the way of God's word (:101), but God made him walk in that path (:35).

- Dt. 12:28 " Observe and hear all these words...that it may go well with thee...when thou doest that which is good and right" , as if to say 'When you are obedient, you will be even more obedient'. " Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall even live in them" (Lev. 18:5) seems to mean that if we seriously try to be obedient, then obedience becomes a way of daily life, and the individual acts of obedience are not so difficult. This was undoubtedly the Lord's source of victory over the flesh. He lived a life that was in harmony with an atmosphere of obedience.

- "If you do not stand firm... you shall not be made firm" (Is. 7:9) is clear enough.

- Rom. 6:19 speaks of how the ever increasing downward spiral of obedience to sin is turned round at baptism, so that we begin an upward spiral of obedience to righteousness. God does good unto those that are good, but leads those who turn aside even further astray (Ps. 125:4,5). Those who are "[born] of God" are able to hear and understand God's words (Jn. 8:47)- and baptism is surely how we are born of God (Jn. 3:3-5). This seems to open up the possibility of yet higher growth once we are baptized- it's all an upward spiral, like any functional relationship.

- " Let patience have her perfect work...let brotherly love continue" sound as if we must allow the process of righteousness inspired by spiritual acts of love and patience. We can obstruct that process (James 1:4; Heb. 13:1). One aspect of spirituality leads to another. Thus the Lord commends the one who is watching for His coming, and then speaks of how those who are to be accepted at His coming are those busy preparing spiritual food for their brethren (Lk.

12:39,42). The implication is that he who is watching, truly watching, for the return will be busy about the brotherhood's needs.

- Jn. 3:21: " He that doeth Truth (i.e. obeys the word, Jn. 17:17) cometh to the light" (the word, Ps. 119:105). Again, obedience to the word leads to more understanding of it.

- The book of Proverbs is a good example of spiritual knowledge creating even more. The purpose of the Proverbs is to enable us " to perceive the words of understanding" (1:2); the words of the Proverbs make one more sensitive to other " words of understanding" . The Proverbs themselves were given in order that men might be able to " understand a (i.e. another) proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings " (1:6). Therefore " A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels" (1:5). " Righteousness keepeth him that is (already) upright in the way" (Prov. 13:6). "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser...the words of my mouth...are all plain to him that [already] understandeth" (Prov. 9:9; 8:9). If, as suggested earlier, Proverbs is a commentary on the Law, then we can see why the book opens by explaining that its purpose is to allow greater perception of other parts of the word. The very experience of wisdom and obedience creates a sweet palate for it, as eating honey does (Prov. 24:13,14 LXX). The man of knowledge "increaseth [Heb. 'confirms / adds to'] strength" (Prov. 24:5).

- Moses seemed to realize all this when he asked for a deeper revelation of God: " If I have found grace in Thy sight, show me now Thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in Thy sight" (Ex. 33:13). He already knew God, he already had found grace before Him; but he asks to be taken up to a higher level on the basis of what he has already been shown.

- "The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another...to the end He may establish your hearts" (1 Thess. 3:12,13) gives an insight into the upward spiral of development which the Lord wishes us to partake in. It's quite a theme in 1 Thessalonians: "abound more and more...increase more and more" (4:1,10).

- The land which has drunk in the rain gives forth "herbs meet for them by whom it is tended" (Heb. 6:7 RV). The parallel is intended with "those who have tasted the good word of God" (Heb. 6:5). If the land represents those who respond to the Gospel, as in the sower parable, who are those who tend it? Surely the preachers and pastoral carers. They benefit, they are encouraged, by those whom they have cared for and converted. I've seen this so very often- one goes to exhort, and comes back home exhorted. But this is all part of the intended upward spiral in functional ecclesial life.

- Faith is perfected / matured by the process of works (James 2:22,23). The works, the upward spiral of a life lived on the basis of faith, develop the initial belief in practice. Thus Abraham believed God in Gen. 15, but the works of Gen. 22 [offering Isaac] made that faith "perfect".

- Jn. 8:47: " He that is of God (by being born of the word, 1 Pet. 1:23) heareth God's words" summarizes this theme. In the same discourse the Lord reasoned " If ye continue in my word...ye shall know the truth (the word- Jn. 17:17)" (Jn. 8:31,32).

- Through his correct response to the early promises given him, Abraham was imputed "the righteousness of faith". But *on account of* that faith inspired by the earlier promises, he was

given “the promises that he should be heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13). That promise in turn inspired yet more faith. In this same context, Paul had spoken of how the Gospel preached to Abraham in the promises leads men “from faith to faith”, up the upward spiral (Rom. 1:17).

- Zech. 11:11 says that the righteous remnant who were already responsive to the prophetic word spoken by Zechariah, would have their strength and belief confirmed by Zechariah's prophecy of the broken staff (Zech. 11:11 cp. Is. 14:32; Zeph. 3:12). The Jews returned from Babylon to the land of their own volition; but it was Yahweh who *gathered* them back (Ps. 147:2), as if He called them almost of *His* volition rather than theirs. They rebuilt Jerusalem; but actually, Yahweh did, through His confirmation of all the freewill effort of men like Ezra and Nehemiah (Ps. 147:2).

- David mentions God's giving of the Law to Israel as an assurance of His forgiveness of them, a sign of His love to them despite their sins (Ps. 103:7)- indicating that the more righteous we are, i.e. obedient to the word, the more the word will be revealed to us?

- Paul heard of the spiritual development of the Ephesians (1:15-19), therefore he prayed that God would grant them more knowledge and understanding (v.16,17). The dynamic in this Divine confirmation of their freewill effort was God's Spirit power. Paul repeats the prayer in Eph. 3:14-21: " ...be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; that...(ye) may be able to comprehend...to know...to be filled with all the fullness of God" . It is thus by God's Spirit word acting on our " inner man" that this greater comprehension of our glorious calling is achieved. He tells them later to be " renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph. 4:23), alluding to the Ezekiel passages which speak not only of Israel making themselves a new heart / spirit / mind, but of *God* giving this to them (Ez. 18:11; 36:26), in confirmation of their efforts. There are examples galore of God acting on the minds of men to give them a certain attitude which they would not otherwise have had (consider how He gave Saul another heart, or gave Israel favour in the eyes of the Egyptians so that they lent to them, Ex. 12:36).

- " Every one that is of the truth (born of the word- Jn. 17:17; 1 Pet. 1:23) heareth My voice" (Jn. 18:37)- a response to the word makes us all the more sensitive to the shepherd's voice in future.

- " Then shall we know, if we follow on (an intense Hebrew verb with the implication of hunting / persecuting) to know the Lord...(because) He shall come (down) unto us as...the latter and former rain unto the earth" (Hos. 6:3). Thus the Spirit/word blessing (the rain) of knowing God would come on the people (" the earth") if they zealously desired to know the Lord. Similarly in Hos. 10:12: " Break up your fallow ground...seek the Lord (then) He will come and rain (imputed) righteousness upon you" . Note how the hard effort to desire the knowledge of God is required first. The Lord's sower parable interprets the breaking up of the ground as a preparation of our hearts by our own freewill to respond correctly to the word.

- 2 Pet. 1:5-9 speaks of " knowledge, temperance...charity...if these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... and (can) see afar off" - i.e. the correct application of knowledge in practical terms leads to being even more fruitful and having even greater knowledge and spiritual vision. The RV reads: “In your faith supply virtue, and in your virtue knowledge”; and the Greek definitely means that we should develop one virtue through the exercise of another. Strength leads to strength.

- The Hebrews failed to break into this upward spiral because they were "dull of hearing" the word (Heb. 5:11). The Greek word for "dull" implies 'lazy', and yet comes from the same root as the Greek for 'bastard' ('*nothros*' cp. '*nothos*'). Thus because they were not being properly born again by the word of the Gospel they were unable, in subsequent spiritual life, to receive the real power of the word.

- In the final conflict between Israel and her enemies, God's confirmation of men will be clearly seen. The Gentile nations will be gathered to make the final invasion by the Lord's evil spirits confirming their evil spirit, whilst the repentant remnant of Israel will be confirmed in their regrets by having "the spirit of grace and supplications" poured on them (Zech. 12:10), i.e. a desire and ability to powerfully supplicate the Father for forgiveness. If men wish to turn from their sins, God will turn them. Thus "the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob" (Is. 59:20) is changed by the Spirit into: "There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom. 11:26). Those who turn from sin are turned from sin by the Lord. The blessing promised to Abraham was not only forgiveness of sins, but that the Lord Jesus would *turn away* Abraham's seed from their iniquities (Acts 3:26). Yet we only become Abraham's seed by repentance and baptism. Our repentance and desire not to sin is therefore confirmed after our baptism.

- The Lord commented on the various types who heard John's preaching. Finally He addressed Himself to those few who had truly perceived His message: "But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you...verily I say unto you..." (Mt. 11:9,11); it was to those who perceived that John was speaking God's words, who were impressed by that more than anything else, to whom Christ gave a fuller exposition of John's purpose. Thus He concluded: "If ye will receive it...he that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mt. 11:14,15), stressing the same principle that if any had that initial disposition towards the real spirit of the word, then they should take careful note of the additional help He was therefore offering them. It would seem that the Lord taught the crowds with parables, and then those who came to hear Him early in the morning, or in a private house, or high in the mountains- these were the ones whom He took further up the spiral of knowing Him.

- "Do not my words do good to him that (already) walketh uprightly?" (Mic. 2:7). The power of the word will only strengthen those who are already disposed to obey it. These words of Mic. 2:7 are in response to the Jews' query: "Is the Spirit of the Lord straitened?" . The answer was that God will only use His Spirit/ word to do good to those who live a word-guided life.

- If we stay as babes, taking only milk, we will be unable to discern good and evil (Heb. 5). The idea is that as a baby will put anything in its mouth, so does the immature convert. Those who don't mature on from the milk of the word run the risk of poisoning their spirituality. The drive to maturity isn't optional; if we lack it, our spiritual health will suffer. And by contrast, the more we grow, the more we will be able to discern what is harmful and what is nutritious.

- When a [Jewish] man turns to the Lord Jesus, the veil of obedience to the Law is taken away (2 Cor. 3:16 RVmg.). Yet the Law also led men to Christ; and yet it also veils Him from them- depending whether they read it as God intended.

- Israel would be provided with more cities of refuge if they were obedient (Dt. 19:9); the way of escape from sin would become easier.

- Visiting the fatherless and widows will result in the believer keeping himself unspotted from the world (James 1:27 Gk.).

- The Lord castigated the audiences of John the Baptist, that they did not “repent, that ye might believe” (Mt. 21:32). Repentance would lead to faith... and yet it is faith which leads to repentance. The two things work together to form an upward spiral of growth.

- Marriage is a great example. As a couple "cleave" to one another, so they become one flesh (Gen. 2:24). But this becoming one flesh is interpreted by the Lord Jesus as meaning that God actively joins the couple together (Mt. 19:6); as *they* cleave to each other in the process of married life, so *God* joins them together. Clearly the Lord understood Gen. 2:24 as speaking of the process of marriage, rather than simply the ceremony of a wedding. In passing, note that the Hebrew idea of two becoming one has already been used in Genesis- the morning and evening, the day and night, were fused by God into one day (Gen. 1:5- the same Hebrew phrase is used). Similarly we read of the waters becoming, or being made one, by God (Gen. 1:9). It's as if the immense power of God in creation is unleashed in His bonding of man and wife together. To put that asunder is to fight against the very creative power of God.

- Paul asked Titus to visit the Corinthians. He himself "of his own accord" decided to visit them. But God put the idea in the heart of Titus (2 Cor. 8:6,16,17). The freewill desire of Titus was confirmed by the hand of God operating on the heart of Titus. It could be argued that it was God who put the idea there in the first place, foreknowing that of Titus's "own accord" he would wish to do this work.

- The good example of others contributes to our experience of the upward spiral. And yet if we don't respond to them, we can be held accountable for it and slip into the downward spiral. Thus the Lord held the elders of Israel guilty because when they saw the whores and tax collectors repenting at John's preaching, "you, when you had seen it, repented not" (Mt. 21:32). They should have been influenced by the repentance of those people; they should've allowed repentance to be contagious. But they didn't, and so they were held guilty for that.

- Rom. 6:19-23 makes the contrast between how serving sin leads to ever increasing sin, whilst serving Christ results in ever increasing righteousness. We are all too aware of the upward (downward!) spiral of sin- we well know the feeling of losing our spiritual grip for an hour, day or week, and sensing how sin is ever increasing its hold over us. But by our union with Christ in baptism it is quite possible, indeed intended, that we should get into an upward spiral of obedience, in which one spiritual victory leads to another.

- We bear spiritual fruit by God's word abiding in us. If this happens, then God will purge (clean) us through His word so that we will bear more fruit (Jn. 15:27; Eph. 5:26). Thus response to God's word leads to that word being even more powerful to us.- Paul taught Timothy that by nourishing others with good teaching, he would himself be “nourished up in the words of faith” (1 Tim. 4:6). Caring for others on whatever level is what stimulates an upward spiral in our personal spiritual growth.

- We either depart from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12), or we depart from iniquity (2 Tim. 2:19, 22; 1 Tim. 6:5). We're always moving in one direction or the other.

2 Pet. 1:5-9 speaks of "knowledge, temperance...charity...if these things be in you and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... and (can) see afar off" - i.e. the correct application of knowledge in practical terms leads to being even more fruitful and having even greater knowledge and spiritual vision. The RV reads: "In your faith supply virtue, and in your virtue knowledge"; and the Greek definitely means that we should develop one virtue through the exercise of another. Strength leads to strength. "Faith is wrought by love" (Gal. 5:6 RVmg.) in that the fruits of the Spirit reinforce each other in an upward spiral. Faith leads to humility, and vice versa. Realizing we of ourselves are insufficient results in humility, which in turn develops faith. Hence Prov. 20:6 comments that a man of faith will not "proclaim his own goodness". Following through Paul's reasoning in Rom. 15:9-13, he seems to be saying that "hope" (RV) leads to joyful praising, which in turn leads to hope and trust. It's an upward spiral, a positive circle. And each of those fruits of the Spirit become more gripping upon us the more we develop them. If we are "rooted and grounded in love", then we come to appreciate yet more "the love of Christ" (Eph. 3:17,18). And indeed all spiritual endeavour leads to the Lord inviting us deeper into that endeavour; thus it was *as* Barnabus and Paul went about their ministering to the Lord that they were invited to go on a missionary journey (Acts 13:2). Likewise it was *as* the Levites were in process of collecting funds for repairing the temple, that they found the book of the law- perhaps because they needed more space in which to store the donations, and whilst making space they found the scroll (2 Chron. 34:14). In the process of being a deacon, faith is developed (1 Tim. 3:13). The very process of service and obedience leads to greater faith in practice. It was *whilst* Zacharias went about his service to the Lord that we was given the news that he would finally have a son (Lk. 1:8). And we all find this true. As we enter more deeply and more passionately into the things of the Lord, so He leads us further into new understandings and fresh areas of endeavour. Faith without works is "barren" (James 2:20 RV)- the implication being that if we do the works which our beliefs elicit from us, yet more creative fruit is brought forth. And James goes straight on to speak of Abraham offering Isaac (James 2:21)- as if to say that Abraham and Sarah's 'barrenness' was overcome by their faith, and this led them to the 'opportunity' to show yet more faith in being prepared to offer Isaac.

He who fears the Lord, "him shall he teach in the way that he [God] shall choose" (Ps. 25:12). The Father opens up new ways of understanding for us each, of His choosing and according to our individual needs, in response to our living a God-fearing life. If our hearts are knit together in brotherly love, the more we will understand- for true understanding is, in the end, to fathom the depths of God's love (Col. 2:2).

Phil. 1:9,10 gives more insight into what exactly goes on in the upward spiral. Our love abounds more and more through "discernment, so that ye may prove the things that differ" (RVmg.). We grow by being given different situations to respond to, in order to develop our judgment- what Eph. 5:10 calls "proving what is acceptable unto the Lord". By reason of use our spiritual senses are exercised to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:14). This is why, be it in church or family or deeply personal life, our consciences are constantly being probed and exercised by the situations which Providence leads us into. And thus we grow in sensing more keenly right and wrong, more victoriously overcoming all the temptations whose strength lies in the fact that in the heat of the moment we waver as to what is right and wrong... and the end result of this increased and heightened discernment, Paul says, is a love which abounds "yet more and more" (Phil. 1:9).

We're familiar with the references to God hardening the heart of Pharaoh (Ex. 14:8 etc.). However, the same Hebrew words occur in a positive context- for God also hardens or strengthens the hearts of the righteous (Ps. 27:14; Is. 35:4). Indeed, Is. 35:4 speaks of how the righteous shouldn't have a weak or [Heb.] 'fluid' heart, but rather a hardened one. Clearly enough, God solidifies human attitudes, one way or the other. This is a sobering thought- for He is prepared to confirm a person in their weak thinking. But on the other hand, even the weakest basic intention towards righteousness is solidified by Him too.

The upward spiral is of course far harder to get into than the downward spiral. Hag. 2:11-13 seems to have this idea in mind- Judah were reminded that if a person carries a holy thing, it doesn't mean that their clothes become holy and thereby make everything holy which they come into contact with; whereas something which is unclean, under the Law, made everything unclean which it touched. And this reminder was so very relevant to the returned exiles, just as it is for us. For so much had been made potentially possible for them, and yet they slipped time and again into a downward spiral.

2-10-2 Spiritual Potential

Those who know God's word will find encouragement there in their experiences of life- but that encouragement is dependent upon their appreciation of the word, and their ability to see the similarities between their situation and that of others who have gone before.

1) Thus the Angel tells Peter to *gird himself* and get up and *walk* (Acts 12:8). If Peter saw the connection with Jn. 21:18, he would have realized that this was another way of saying that his time of death was still far off: " When thou wast young, thou *girdedst* thyself, and *walkedst* whither thou wouldest" , but only when he was old would he be unable to do this and would therefore be executed.

2) Another example is to be found in the way the Lord told the disciples to feed the crowd, when they had nothing to give them (Mk. 6:37). He was actually quoting from 2 Kings 4:42, where the man of God told his servant to do the same. He gave what bread he had to the people, and miraculously it fed them. The disciples don't seem to have seen the point; otherwise, they would have realized that if they went ahead in faith, another such miracle would likely be wrought. But it seems that God almost over-ruled them to make the response of the faithless servant of 2 Kings 4:43: " Shall we...give them to eat?" (Mk. 6:37). They were almost 'made' to do this to make them later see the similarity with the 2 Kings 4 incident. If they had been more spiritually aware at the time, the Lord's quotation would have been a fillip for their faith.

3) Israel were told *three times* that Saul would have many chariots (1 Sam. 8:11,12). If they were spiritually aware, they would have realized that by multiplying horses and chariots, he was going to be a King who ruled in studied disobedience to the Mosaic Law (Dt. 17:16-21). They were given the spiritual potential to grasp this. But they were already hard bitten in their rebellion, and this potential spiritual help went unheeded (although God still gave it to them potentially, even at a time when it seemed pointless. He is so *ever* willing to coax His people back!).

4) Stephen's enemies " gnashed on him with their teeth" , and his Biblical mind would therefore have raced to Job 16:9, describing the behaviour of the wicked towards the faithful:

" He teareth me in his wrath, who hateth me: he gnasheth upon me with his teeth" . The context goes on: " Now, behold, my witness is in heaven and my record is on high" (v. 19). Surely Stephen had thought ahead to this, for as his enemies gnashed their teeth against him, " he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). He looked up to Heaven and saw His witness, faithful and true, standing there as he expected.

5). A lack of rain was one of the Law's curses for idol worship (Dt. 11:10-12,17). Elijah's response to Israel's idolatry was to tell them there would be no rain (1 Kings 17:1 cp. 16:32,33). Those reflective upon God's Law would have realized the implied criticism which this carried; the more unspiritual would have just cursed Elijah for bringing about a devastating drought.

6) The Lord asked the confused Mary: "Whom seekest thou?" (Jn. 20:15). He had used these words three times in His ministry (Jn. 1:38; 18:4,7). He used words which she ought to have recognized as a catch phrase of the Lord, and thereby have realized that it was the Lord speaking to her. She did, eventually, make the connection; she lived up to the spiritual potential which the Lord realized in her. She replies by exclaiming: Rabboni! When three years earlier the Lord had "*turned* [as He did again to Mary]...and saith...What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi...' (Jn. 1:38). And now Mary sees the similarity which the Lord has set up, and joyfully realizes the reality of His resurrection through it.

7) There is quite some internal evidence that the book of Job preceded Moses, or was just before his time. If this is so, Israel's appreciation of Job 26:12 would have been proportional to their faith in the Red Sea deliverance: "He divideth the sea with his power, and by his understanding he smiteth through the proud [Egyptians]".

8) The 'devil' of the Lord's own nature tempted Him to apply Ps. 91:11 in a wrong context, and jump off the pinnacle of the temple. But if the Lord had gone on, as surely He did, He would have found the words: "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet" (Ps. 91:13). This promise would have been of wonderful comfort, as throughout the wilderness temptations the Lord "was with the wild beasts" (Mk. 1:13).

9) The Lord several times quoted an OT passage which if quoted further would have made a telling point. Thus He quoted Is. 56:7: "My house shall be called an house of prayer", leaving His hearers to continue: "...for *all* people". He recited Ps. 8:2: "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise", leaving them to complete: "...that thou mightest still [through their witness] the enemy and the avenger". For the Bible minded, these things ought to have taught them. There is reason to think, in the subsequent response of a Jewish minority after Pentecost, that at least some did make these connections. They made use of the spiritual potential they had been given.

10) Above all, the events of the crucifixion were so packed with fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and shadows that the Lord's discernment of them must have given Him a wonderful boost of strength, in knowing who He was and where He was destined. For example, when they put a broken reed in his hand as a mock sceptre, His mind would have flown to the Messianic Is. 42:3: "A bruised reed shall he not break...he *shall* bring forth judgment", as they mocked him for his apparent inability to do.

11) God said He would “cut off from [Jerusalem] the righteous and the wicked” (Ez. 21:3). Yet Abraham had observed that it was “far” from God to do such a thing. Surely the point of this language was to send the mind of the Biblically-aware back to Sodom, and to realize that therefore this was *not* what God wanted to do, and fervent prayer after the pattern of Abraham’s *could* save the city.

12) When Gideon received the golden earrings of the Ishmaelites (Jud. 8:24-27), his mind should have flown back to how golden earrings were turned into the golden calf (Ex. 32:2). He was potentially given the strength to resist the temptation to turn them into an idol. But he must have blanked out that Biblical precedent in his heart; he ignored his spiritual potential.

13) When Joshua told the spies “Go and walk through the land...” (Josh. 18:8), they ought to have perceived that he was asking them to walk in the faith of Abraham- to believe that this land truly had been promised to them, as his seed.

14) When Zedekiah called Jeremiah out of the prison house to meet him and show him the word of God, he ought to have perceived that he was going through the very experience of Pharaoh with Joseph (Jer. 37:17,20). Jeremiah’s desperate plea not to be sent back to prison to die there surely echoes that of Joseph to his brethren; for Jeremiah was let down like Joseph had been into a pit with no water in, so reminiscent of Joseph (Gen. 37:24). But Zedekiah didn’t want to see all this; he should’ve listened to Jeremiah, as Pharaoh had listened to Joseph and saved himself. It was all potentially set up for him; but he refused to take note.

15) The Lord’s parable of the vineyard is shot through with allusions to the vineyard parable of Is. 5. When the Lord asks “What will [the owner of the vineyard] do?” (Mk. 12:9), those who picked up the Isaiah 5 allusions would have found the answer in Is. 5:4,5: “What...to do...what I will do”.

Because of this, it is apparent that the experiences of believers are often suggestive of those of other believers. Insofar as we appreciate this, we will find strength to go the right way. Consider, for example, how Hezekiah was intended to see the similarities between himself and the earlier king Ahaz his father, and learn the lessons:

<i>Ahaz</i>	<i>Hezekiah</i>
Threatened by invasion; tempted to turn to human help (Is. 7:2)	Ditto (Is. 37:1)
Visited by Isaiah and told to not fear (Is. 7:4-9)	Ditto (Is. 37:6,7)
Ahaz was unfaithful by “the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the fuller’s field” (Is. 7:3)	Here in just the same place Hezekiah’s faith was tested and he learnt the lessons of Ahaz’ failure (Is. 36:2).
Given a sign by God and promised deliverance (Is. 7:14)	Ditto (Is. 37:30).
Ahaz refused to ask for a sign when offered one (Is. 7:11)	Hezekiah learnt, and asked for a sign (Is. 38:7,22). Thus his asking for a sign was

not a sign of faithlessness but rather his
seeking to not be like Ahaz.

“The zeal of the Lord of hosts will
perform it” (Is. 9:6)

Ditto (Is. 37:32).

Awareness of God’s word and reflection upon Biblical history allows the upward spiral to operate, it triggers our spiritual potential. A thoughtful reflection upon the hand of Providence in our lives does likewise. Take the healing of Jairus’ daughter. The Lord’s rush to heal her was interrupted by a woman, whom He addressed [unusually] as “daughter”. She had been sick for 12 years. And she was healed because of her faith. To the unspiritual man, this would have been nothing but an irritating interruption, to be sworn about under the breath. But to the spiritual man, there was ample encouragement here for faith; for another beloved daughter lay sick, and she was 12 years old, and she likewise could be healed by faith... The Lord’s question: “Who touched me?” was therefore also a rhetorical device to spur faith in Jairus and his family. Who? Another “daughter”, 12 years afflicted... It is only by our spiritual laziness in not providing that freewill input, that desire to understand, that crying for the knowledge of God which is in His word (Prov. 2:3-5), that this marvellous equation will fail. What greater motivation could each of us want in inspiring us to a total commitment to the word, rising early and staying up late to find that knowledge of God to overcome the sin which we hate? If we can only continue to desire to make the effort, to bruise the flesh more through that glorious word of God, then this spiral of growth will catch us up with ever increasing speed. As we go up the spiral, we will find the true life- perceive, see, realize (Mt. 10:39 Gk.) the real, spiritual life, as the wayward son " came to himself" , he found himself, when he repented. And we will come to see that actually, there is no third way: we are either on the upward spiral, or the downward spiral. Bright light illuminates the surroundings, but also casts dark shadows which otherwise would not be there. And the brighter the light, the greater the contrast between the two. The surpassing brightness of the Lord had this effect upon men; it brought (and brings) out the best in good men, and the very worst in bad men.

Jer. 8:5 puts all this in another way: “Why then is this people of Jerusalem slidden back by a perpetual backsliding? they hold fast deceit, they refuse to return”. The Hebrew words for “slidden back” and “return” are identical. The image is of a man on a muddy slope; he slides back either into sin, or into the way of the Lord. We must ‘slide’ one way or the other; every micro decision which makes up the stream of daily life is confirmed by God one way or the other.

" What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who (or what) *can* be against us?" . Paul caught the gloriously positive spirit of all this, and reflected it in his fondness for words with the *hyper-* prefix (Rom. 8:37; 1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Cor. 7:4; Phil. 2:9; 4:7; 1 Thess. 3:10; 4:6; 5:13; 2 Thess. 1:3). God is not passively waiting for us to act, indifferently offering us the possible futures of salvation or condemnation according to our deeds. He earnestly desires our salvation, He wills and wishes us into the upward spiral of relationship with Him; He has given us spiritual potential and strength. Having specifically told Ezekiel that Israel would *not* hearken to His word, He tells Ezekiel to act out his parables in front of them- for " it may be they will consider, though they be a rebellious house" (Ez. 3:7 cp. 12:3). Here we see the supreme *hopefulness* of God, to the point of even being willing to deny His own words. Having spoken of how our attitudes to God's word will elicit from Him varying responses, the Lord *cried*, loudly, " he that hath ears to hear, *let him hear*" (Lk. 8:8). There is then the

sickening anticlimax of v. 9, where the disciples ask Him whatever His parable meant. One senses a moment of silence in which the Lord composed Himself and camouflaged the pain of His disappointment; and then His essential hopefulness returns in v. 10: "Unto you it is given (potentially, anyway) to know (understand) the mysteries (parables) of the Kingdom of God" .

2.11 "The loss of all things..."

12-11-1 Serving God Or Mammon

Materialism: Epitome Of The Flesh

The very structure of the Hebrew language suggests that we ought not to focus upon things as merely things- material-ism in the literal sense. Rather the world of [perceived] things in which we live should be interpreted by us as a world of persons, of ideas beyond the material things. "There is no equivalent for the word "thing" in Biblical Hebrew. The word *davar* , which in later Hebrew came to denote thing, means in Biblical Hebrew: speech, word, message, report... promise, story, utterance, acts, manner, reason, cause... but never "thing". [This is] an indication of an unwarped view of the world, of not equating reality (derived from the Latin word *res*, thing) with thinghood" (1). It has been pointed out that only one of the ten commandments is repeated twice: "You shall not covet". In the days before underlining or italic print, emphasis was achieved by repeating a word twice- e.g. "Justice, justice" (Dt. 16:20); "Comfort, comfort" (Is. 40:1). This sober emphasis upon not coveting was surely a reflection of how God perceived the huge danger of His people seeking to 'possess' things as theirs.

There is fair evidence that in God's eyes, our attitude to materialism is the epitome of our spirituality. The Lord places before us only two possible roads: the service of God, or that of mammon (Aramaic for riches / wealth, Mt. 6:24). We would rather expect Him to have said: service of God or the flesh. Indeed, this is the choice that is elsewhere placed before us in the NT. However, the Lord evidently saw "mammon" as the epitome of all the flesh stands for. It is probably the view of many of us that while we have many areas of spiritual weakness, materialism is not one of them. But according to the Lord, if we are reading Him rightly, our attitude to the flesh generally is reflected in our attitude to wealth. This is why the Bible does have a lot to say about the sacrifice of 'our' material possessions; not because God needs them in themselves, but because our resignation of them to His service is an epitome of our whole spirituality. So great is the Lord's emphasis about this, that He suggests in the parable of the crafty steward that if we use our worldly things prudently, when we spiritually fail, the fact we have used them wisely will bring us into the Kingdom (Lk. 16:9). This implication that we can almost buy our way into the Kingdom is hyperbole. This is a device the Lord commonly used in His parables: an exaggerated statement to make a point. When He spoke of the good shepherd leaving the 99 good sheep to go chase the foolish one, this doesn't really mean that He does in fact leave us. He will never leave us. But so great is His love of the lost that it's *as if* He leaves us for the sake of finding them. Or the command to gouge out our eye if it offends us. This is a gross exaggeration; but our self-deprival of those things which lead us into sin requires the same self-will and self-mastery. So in Lk. 16:9, the Lord is saying that the use of our

material possessions is so important that it's *almost as if* (in the hyperbole) we can buy our way into the Kingdom. He made the point in so many words in Lk. 11:41: " Give alms of such things as ye have (i.e. regardless of how small); and, behold, all things are clean unto you" . Paul seems to have these words in mind when says that to the pure, all things are pure (Tit. 1:15)- as if he saw the epitome of purity as being in giving what we have. "The ransom of a man's life are his riches" (Prov. 13:8) likewise suggests that our attitude to riches is one of the things that decides our eternal destiny. David likewise perceived the vital importance of *truly* giving, not just on a surface level: " Thou shalt grant it me for the full price, *that* the plague may be stayed" (1 Chron. 21:22). He saw that God's response to his request would only be if he gave fully to the Lord, rather than using another man's generosity with which to approach God. The crucial choice is serving God or mammon.

Speaking in the context of serving *either* God *or* mammon, the Lord uttered some difficult words: " Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth...the light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness...how great is that darkness!" (Mt. 6:19-22). All this is in the context of not being materialistic. The Lord is drawing on the OT usage of " an evil eye" - and consistently, this idiom means someone who is selfishly materialistic (Prov. 22:9; 23:7; 28:22; Dt. 15:9). The NIV renders some of these idioms as " stingy" or " mean" . A single eye refers to a generous spirit (1 Chron. 29:17 LXX), and a related Greek word occurs in 2 Cor. 8:2; 9:11,13 with the sense of " generous" . So surely the Lord is saying that our attitude to wealth controls our whole spirituality. Whether we have a mean or generous spirit will affect our whole life- an evil [stingy] eye means our whole body is full of darkness. Just let this sink in. If we are materialistic, our whole life will be filled with darkness, whatever our external pretensions may be, and there is a definite link to be made here with the " darkness" of rejection. The riches of Jericho are described with a Hebrew word which means both a curse, and something devoted (to God; Josh. 6:18). This teaches a powerful lesson: such riches of this world as come into our possession will curse us, unless they are devoted to the Father. Mammon is an "abomination" (Lk. 16:13,15)- a word associated in the Old Testament with idol worship. We are to not only be free of such idolatry, but despise materialism.

In line with the above evidence, there are not a few Bible passages which confirm this view of materialism, as *the* besetting temptation of every human soul, and which confirm that therefore our attitude to materialism, serving God or mammon, is the litmus test of our spirituality. The parable of the sower teaches that for those who begin well in the Truth, who don't fall away immediately or get discouraged by persecution, " the deceitfulness of riches...the cares and pleasures of this life" will be their temptation. I would have expected the Lord to either speak in more general terms about the flesh, or to reel off a list of common vices. But instead He focuses on the desire for wealth as the real problem. The love of wealth is the root of *all* evil behaviour (1 Tim. 6:10). And I would go further, and suggest that so many of the excuses we hear which relate to " I haven't got time" (for reading, preaching, meeting, writing...) are related to this desire for material improvement. The desire for advancement takes an iron grip on a man's soul. As we move through life, our thinking is concerned with prices, with possibilities, with schemings... what *ought* to be the surpassingly dominating aspect of our life, the Son of God and His Truth, takes a poor second place. Eph. 5:3-5 has some surprises for the attentive reader; the black words on white paper have an uncanny power: " This ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, *nor covetous man*, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ" . These are the sort of words we whisk past, in the relieved confidence that *they* don't apply to us. But covetousness is there listed as a carnal sin, along with sexual perversions. That's how bad it is. No one who

is covetous will be in the Kingdom. And therefore it's hard for a rich man to be in the Kingdom. In fact, the Lord says, it's humanly impossible for a rich man to get there; it's only through God's gracious working to make it possible that it can happen, that a rich man will scrape into the Kingdom (Mt. 19:23-26). *Every one of us has the elements of covetousness very close to the surface.* Materialism is perhaps the direct equivalent of idol worship under the old covenant. They were to not even desire "the silver and gold that is on them...for it is an abomination to the Lord thy God...thou shalt utterly detest it; and *thou* [like God] shalt utterly abhor it" (Dt. 7:25,26). God despises idolatry; and we also must go a step beyond merely avoiding materialism; we must despise it.

So serious is the tendency to material acquisition that the Lord uses a telling hyperbole in Lk. 16 (in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus): He implies that the rich man was condemned just for being rich. This is hyperbole, an exaggeration to make a point. And the point was, that being rich is *very likely* to lead you to condemnation. The rust of riches is likened to the fire of condemnation and rejection (James 5:3); as gold is rusted, so the rejected at the day of judgment will be burnt. It's as if they then will be treated like the wealth with which they identified in this brief life. The possession of those rusting riches means that our judgment is going on *now*- "your riches *are* corrupted" (James 5:2). Likewise the fire of our unwise words in this life is to be seen as the fire of our future condemnation (James 3:5,6). Serving God or mammon is a choice that has eternal consequences.

It's therefore hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom. Mk. 10:24 speaks of the man who trusts in riches; the parallel Lk. 18:24 speaks of him who *has* riches. To have riches is, almost axiomatically, to trust in them. This is the nature of wealth 'possession'. For the man who has / trusts in riches, he must bow down like the camel wriggling through the small gate on its knees, having shed *all* its mountain of goods. This parable was given in the context of the Lord's straight statement: "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Lk. 18:14 cp. 25). As the camel rose up from its knees the other side of the gate, so within the Kingdom's gates, those who have shed their trust in possessions will likewise be exalted.

(1) Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005) p. 7.

2-11-2 The danger of materialism

The Deception Of Possession

The connection between the desire for riches and the devil (our nature) is powerful. The devil is a deceiver. And 'riches' is also a deceiver, or "delusion" (Mt. 13:22). That we know for sure. Seeing that all ultimately belongs to God, it is an utter delusion to think that we totally own anything. But the possession of wealth leads to just that illusion; because wealth is of itself a delusion. The very possession of wealth tempts us to amass more of it- it truly is potentially addictive of itself. The Hebrew word translated "treasure" is also that used for "store"- hence Ex. 1:11 AV "treasure cities", RV "store cities". The rich fool is a visual presentation of this fact; the more wealth is possessed, the stronger is the desire to store it, amass it- but not use it. The desire for material things, for the false security of bank balances, the excuse that we are allowing ourselves to be so preoccupied for the sake of our families, the idea that we are only human beings and so God will let us be dominated by these worries...all this is the deception of the flesh. God *does* remember that we are dust, and yes,

of course we *must* provide for our own, some thought (but not *anxious* thought) must be given to tomorrow (Mt. 6:25,31,34). But these facts must never make us push God's Truth into *second* place. The lilies of the field are fed and dressed by God without anxiously worrying about it. Israel on their wilderness journey were miraculously provided with food *and clothing*, surely to prefigure God's basic material care of His spiritual Israel of later years. David, all his life long, never saw the seed of the righteous begging bread (Ps. 37:25). Those Old Testament promises are surely relevant to us: "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said (to you, as well as Joshua), I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 1:5). Notice once again that it isn't the actual possession of wealth that is condemned, but the way of life that seeks more than what we have been given. This is the real danger of materialism.

If we are faithful with the riches we have been given, *then* we will be given the true riches of eternal salvation (Lk. 16:11). This "unrighteous mammon" is not our own, it is the wealth of "another man", i.e. God; whereas in the Kingdom, we will have our very own "true riches". This is an altogether lovely idea. Whatever we have now is not ours; we come into this world with nothing, and at death we carry nothing out (1 Tim. 6:7). We must give our all if we are to attain the Kingdom. The weak king who sends ambassadors asking for conditions of peace is understood by the Lord as the man who forsakes all he has in order for peace with God. This is the importance of forsaking wealth (Lk. 14:33), as the merchant did (Mt. 13:44-46), as the blind man left his garment (Mk. 10:50), as the widow threw in her two mites, rejecting the temptation to be 'prudent' and keep one for herself to use as capital for the future (Lk. 21:2), as Matthew "left all, rose up and followed" (Lk. 5:28), and as the disciples in that beautiful childlike innocence could say "Lo, we have left all...?" (Mk. 10:28). What this surely means is that in our *attitudes* we must be as if we possessed nothing, as if we have in our heart of hearts resigned everything, even the very concept of personal 'possession'. Paul could say that he was *as if* he possessed nothing (2 Cor. 6:10), although he evidently had at least some money to his name (Acts 24:26), and could offer to re-imburse Philemon for any damages. There is a great freedom in this, if only we would know it. We have nothing now, we own nothing, all we have is given for us to use wisely, so that when we fail (morally, in the failures of our lives), our use of these things may prepare the way for our entry into the everlasting place of the Kingdom (Lk. 16:9). We fall so easily into the trap of thinking 'this is *my* money...I worked for it, saved it...'. It's God's money. The danger of materialism is to think it is *ours*. Israel were told that every 7th year they were to cancel debts, release each other from the debt they had; and yet it was "the *LORD's* release". You released a man from his debt, Yahweh released him. What it meant was that your money was Yahweh's money. He released the debt, you released it. In being generous spirited, then, and realizing 'our' money is God's, we are Yahweh-manifest. We are invited to see ourselves as the Levites-whose inheritance was Yahweh, and not anything material in this world. Relationship with God and the honour of doing His service was seen as the ultimate antidote to materialism. Eliphaz seems to have perceived this when he told the wealthy Job: "Lay thou thy treasure in the dust...and the Almighty shall be thy treasure" (Job 22:24,25 RV).

The importance (the *eternal* importance) which attaches to our attitude to materialism is certainly stressed. All that we have is not our own. It's not '*my* money', it's not '*your* car', it's not even '*my* toe' which *you* accidentally trod on. Yet we all cling on to what little we have; we get offended and upset if we 'lose' it, or if we feel it is demanded of us. But not only is our material possession not '*ours*'; "ye are not *your own*. For ye are bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19,20). This is said in the context of warning against abuse of our sexuality; it's not *our* body, so follow God's teaching concerning it. We ourselves, the very essential me, and you,

have been bought with the blood of the Lord Jesus. If I don't own even myself, I certainly don't own anything material. *Now*, I am not my own. I am a slave, bought by the Lord Jesus. The fact He is Lord *of all* means He is owner of absolutely everything to do with us (Acts 10:36). At the judgment, this fact will be brought home. The Lord will ask for " my money...mine own" ; we will be asked what we have done with our Lord's money (Mt. 20:15; 25:27). All we have is God's; it is not our own. Therefore if we hold back in our giving, we are *robbing God*. Israel thought it was absurd to put it like this: But yes, God insisted through Malachi (3:8-12), you are *robbing me* if you don't give back, or even if you don't give your heart to Him in faith. *And will a man rob God? Will a man...?* We must give God what has His image stamped on it: and we, our bodies, are made in His image (Mt. 22:21); therefore we have a duty to give ourselves to Him. We are not our own: how much less is 'our' money or time our own! Like David, we need to realize now, *in this life*, before the judgment, that all our giving is only a giving back to God of what we have been given by Him: " Of thine own have we given thee" (1 Chron. 19:14). The danger of materialism is the assumption that we are ultimate owners of what we 'have'. When Eli and his sons kept part of God's sacrifices for themselves, he was condemned: "You trample upon My sacrifice and My offering" (1 Sam. 2:29 RVmg.). This is what we are doing by considering that anything that is God's is in fact ours- we are trampling upon that which is His. And this verse is alluded to in Heb. 10:29,30- we can indeed trample upon God's sacrifice today.

But the time is soon coming when I will be given that which *is* my own (Lk. 16:12)- the things associated with being in the Kingdom. We are slaves now, owning nothing, but then we will be gloriously free (Rom. 8:21). So this idea of owning nothing, not even ourselves, is only true of this life; the day of release from slavery will dawn, we will receive that true freedom and that true concept of personal possession- if *now* we resign it. Abraham really grasped this idea that we now can own nothing. He swore to Yahweh as " the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take anything that is thine..." (Gen. 14:22,23). He knew that Yahweh is the owner of all, and *therefore* he was not going to yield to the temptation to increase what appeared to be 'his' possessions. Solomon likewise had the theory straight at least: " Labour not to be rich...wilt thou set thine eyes on that which is not? for riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven" (Prov. 23:4,5). The riches men seek don't exist, material possession is a pure fantasy. " He that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes" (Hag. 1:6- note that paid employment wasn't the norm then. Haggai is targeting the graspingly-materialistic of his times). Real personal ownership of wealth, or anything, is impossible; because God owns all, and like an eagle soaring back upwards, all will return to Him. If we don't give back what we have to God, He will ultimately take it back from us anyway by death- or before. " All that is not given is lost" , as an Indian proverb says. We should consider what we buy as not really being possessed by us (1 Cor. 7:30). Paul practised what he preached: although he evidently had some financial resources (Acts 24:26), he acted and felt as if he possessed absolutely nothing (2 Cor. 6:10). The early brethren in Jerusalem had the attitude that nothing they possessed was really theirs (Acts 4:32), and therefore as a result of this, many sold what superfluous things they had. But those who didn't, we later learn, had their possessions and lands stolen during the persecution of the Hebrew believers that soon followed (Acts 11:19 cp. Heb. 10:32-34). God took back what He had lent them, even before their death. Their realization that they owned nothing was not just a temporary height of enthusiasm; they appreciated a principle which was true before, then and now. That principle applies today just as much as it did then.

All this said about the deception of possession and the danger of materialism, we need to consider the implications of the terrible judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira. When they sold their property, the Holy Spirit's comment in Acts 5:4 was that the money was "their own" and "under their own power" [Gk. *exousia*]. They could have chosen to give all or part of that money to God. It was theirs and not God's, the implication was. This is a startling insight. What wealth we have has been genuinely entrusted to us by the Lord, and in that sense it is indeed 'ours', under our power. Yet we are to realize that of course as those under the sphere of God's rulership / Kingdom, we are under *His* 'exousia'. Absolutely *all* power of *exousia* in any part of Heaven or earth has now been given to the Lord Jesus (Mt. 28:18; Jn. 17:2; Col. 2:10). And yet He has given "authority" or *exousia* to us His servants, and will judge us on His return as to how we have used this (Mk. 13:34; Jn. 1:12). We need to make this connection- that although He has delegated to us wealth, and placed it under our power or *exousia*, if we are truly part of His Kingdom, we are to give back the *exousia* or power / authority over our wealth to Him.

"The ransom of a man's life is his riches" (Prov. 13:8) could imply that our attitude to wealth is one of the things which ends up affecting our eternal destiny. It's not the *only* thing- but there are many, Solomon tragically included, who have allowed their riches to divert them from the path to the life eternal.

2-11-3 The Snare Of Riches

The Snare Of Materialism

Twice in 1 Timothy, Paul speaks about a snare; the snare of the devil (1 Tim. 3:7), and the snare of wanting wealth (6:9). The desire for wealth in whatever form is the very epitome of the devil, our inherent sin which we must struggle against. The idea of a snare is that it results in a sudden and *unexpected* destruction. The unexpectedness of the destruction should set us thinking: surely the implication is that those who are materialistic don't realize that in fact this is their besetting sin, and therefore their rejection in the end because of it will be so tragically unexpected. It's rather like pride; if you're proud and you don't know it, then you really are proud. And if we're materialistic and don't know it, we likewise really have a problem. The idea of riches being a snare connects with copious OT references to idols as Israel's perpetual snare (Ex. 23:33; Dt. 7:16; Jud. 2:3; 8:27; Ps. 106:36; Hos. 5:1). Paul's point is surely that the desire of wealth is the equivalent of OT idolatry.

But there is another, even more telling Biblical usage of the " snare" . The day of the Lord will be a snare to the unsuspecting worldling, who will suddenly find that the Lord has come and destroyed him (Is. 8:14; 24:17,18; Jer. 50:24; Lk. 21:35). Yet the materialistic believer falls into the snare of riches here and now. Surely the point is that our attitude to riches is a preview of the judgment; the materialistic believer has condemned himself, right now. Not only does such a man fall into the devil's snare, but he pierces himself through with sorrows (1 Tim. 6:10), which is the language of crucifixion. This connection suggests a powerful logic. We face a cross either way; either the cross of the Lord Jesus, with the matchless eternity it heralds; or the cross, the twisting, unsatisfied pain of a life devoted to material advancement, which finally results in the darkness of rejection.

Snared Men

The association between the love of wealth and *all* sin is demonstrated by the fact that Judas's offer to betray the Lord was conditional on how much the Jews would pay: "What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you" (Mt. 26:15). He above all was caught in the snare of riches. The decision of Judas to make this offer is recorded as coming straight after the record of the woman anointing the Lord's feet with the expensive ointment. Judas's heart cried out as he saw all that money wasted; he knew that the perfume could have been sold for much and the money entrusted to him as the treasurer, and therefore he would have had the opportunity to take some for himself. As I read the records, the motivation of Judas was *fundamentally* financial, whatever we may like to speculate about his other reasons. It's almost too far fetched to believe; that a man who walked in the company of the Son of God, who entered into deep spiritual conversation with him, who is even described by the Spirit of Christ as "a man mine equal, my guide and mine acquaintance" (Ps. 55:13,4), could steal the odd few dollars (in our terms) out of the bag of those 12 travelling men. It couldn't have been any great sum that he notched up in those three years. And yet this led Judas to betray the Lord of all grace, for a sum no more than at most a few thousand US dollars (in our terms). They valued the Son of God at 30 pieces of silver (Mt. 27:9)- and *all it could buy was a field*. And Judas was happy with that. The way he later hurled those coins down and stalked off to hang himself suggests that he saw the essence of his failure as being tied up with that money. "The reward of iniquity" was what Peter contemptuously called it (Acts 1:18). The chief priests wanted Lazarus put to death simply because "many of the Jews went away" from the synagogue because of him, and it would have meant the tithes were lost or at least put in jeopardy (Jn. 12:11). And this cannot be ruled out as a major factor why they wanted Jesus out of the way too, and why they persecuted the early church so fiercely, seeing that thousands of tithe-paying members were being turned against them.

That a man should betray the Lord Jesus just for a bit of money is incredible- almost. But this is the iron grip of the snare of riches. And our community is littered with the spiritual wrecks of those who have likewise been snared by their pursuit of wealth, on whatever level. And Scripture brings before us so many others: Hezekiah is one of the more tragic. One reason why Israel failed to drive out the tribes, and thereby lost the Kingdom, was simply because they wanted to take tribute from them (Josh. 17:13). Ez. 7:19 defines "silver and gold" as Israel's stumblingblock- moreso than idols. They just so loved wealth. The men of Bethshemesh looked into the ark to see if there were any more jewels left in it (1 Sam. 6:19 cp. 6,15); they trampled upon the supreme holiness of God in their crazed fascination with wealth. The early corruption of Christianity was due to false teachers who like Balaam "loved the wages of unrighteousness" (2 Pet. 2:15); they taught false doctrine "for filthy lucre's sake" (Tit. 1:11). Time and again the NT warns against elders who would be motivated by the love of "filthy lucre" rather than the Lord Jesus and His people (1 Tim. 3:3,8; Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2). The Greek translated "filthy lucre" is hard to understand; it doesn't just mean 'money'. It suggests profit that is somehow filthy, morally disgusting. This is what money turns into, in God's eyes, when men so love it.

2-11-4 Forsaking All We Have

Practical Conclusions

It's easy to think that all this teaching applies to the yuppies, to the *nouveaux riche*, to the rich brother with the big business, to the poor brother who's always talking about what he wants to have...but not to me. Because we know people (and brethren) who are richer and more wealth-seeking than we are, it's fatally easy to conclude that therefore we aren't rich, therefore we aren't materialistic. This is part of the subtle snare of materialism; that we all think that this is an area where we're not doing too badly; that really, we don't care *that* much where we live, or what the furniture's like, or whether we have money to take a holiday... But remember, our attitude to materialism is the litmus test of all our spirituality. None of us should be so quick to say that we're OK in this area. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break (Gk. dig) through and steal" (Mt. 6:19) was spoken to a huge crowd of Jewish peasants. The Lord wasn't only referring to the few rich men who might be hanging around on the edge of the group. He was talking to all of them. He knew their mud walled homes which thieves could so easily dig through. That little cheap bangle, that ring, thinly buried under the bed mat after the pattern of Achan, that prized tunic...the petty riches of the poor which they so strove for, which *to them* were priceless treasures. This is what the Lord was getting at; and His point was that *every one of us*, from beggar to prince, has this 'laying up' mentality. He is almost ruthless in His demands. He warns a similar crowd not to everlastingly worry about where the next meal was coming from; and then in that very context, tells *them* to sell what they have (Lk. 12:29-33). He wasn't just talking to the rich. He was telling the desperately poor to forsake what little they had, so as to seek His Kingdom. He probably didn't mean them to take His words dead literally (cp. cutting off the offending hand or foot); what He surely meant was: 'Resign, in your mind, the possession of everything you have, concern yourselves rather with the needs of others and entering my Kingdom'. No wonder those crowds turned round and soon bayed for His blood.

So let's not think that all the Bible teaching about materialism and forsaking all we have refers to those who we may consider to be 'rich'. The Mosaic Law countered this idea that only the rich can be generous. They all had to tithe. And it's possible to argue that they had to give around 27%, not just 10% (10% to the Levites, 10% of the rest to support the feasts; and 10% of the rest for the poor). The purification after childbirth and the cleansing of the leper allowed a lower grade of offering to be made by the very poor- to underline that *no one* is exempted from giving to the Lord, no matter how poor they are. Consider the emphasis: "Every man shall give *as he is able*...he shall offer *even such as he is able to get*...then the disciples (consciously motivated by these principles?) *every man according to his ability*, determined to send relief...let *every one of you* lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him" (D^U) (Dt. 16:17; Lev. 14:30,31; Acts 11:29; 1 Cor. 16:2). God reckons a man's generosity according to what he has; if there is the desire to give, a generous spirit, then this is seen as generosity. This is exemplified by the Lord's high estimation of the widow's giving. The amount was not as important as the spirit behind it. "The Lord blesseth a cheerful giver, and will supply the deficiency of his works" (Prov. 22:8 LXX; although not in the Hebrew text, this passage is quoted in the NT as inspired). This may mean that God is so sensitive to generosity that such love covers a multitude of sins, in His estimation. Or it may mean that if the giving is done with the right, cheerful spirit, the "deficiency", that which the giver would like to give but simply doesn't have, is counted by God *as if* it has been given. We must ask: do we have a spirit that *would* give if we could? Or are we all too taken up with coldly calculating what we think we can afford to give?

From the evidence presented, there is no doubt that our attitude to materialism is a sure indicator of our real spiritual position. We are to make friends of mammon [riches] by giving

it away (Lk. 16), forsaking all we have- the implication being that riches / mammon are our enemy, no matter how little of them we possess. And yet we are surrounded as never before by a materialistic, money *loving* world. The believers who were in slavery were told not to 'purloin', not to steal little bits of property and money in the hope that one day they would save enough to buy their freedom (this is the background to Tit. 2:10). And yet we in the twentieth century with our mortgages and pension schemes are in just the same desperate, petty, small minded position! It is the Lord's will that we His people should be ready for Him; the harvest is reaped when it is ripe; His apparent delay in returning is in order to give us time for spiritual development. It seems not coincidental that in these last days there is now unparalleled opportunity for giving up what material wealth we have for the Lord's cause. To heap up possessions (in whatever way) in the last days is absurd; it's like a cow eating just before he's slaughtered (James 5:5), or in Jeremiah's terms, like a bird building up its nest just before it flies off in migration. There are concrete opportunities galore to give to the Lord's work, whether it be a postage stamp per week in one context, or trying to pay one's fares to a Bible School rather than presume on the generosity of others, to a large regular donation of cash in another believer's context. Who we leave 'our' property to (if we have any) is something else we can ponder. We have been given all that we have from the Lord, it is not our own, and He watches our attitude to it carefully. What we have is not ours because we worked for it- although that, I know, is how it feels. It is ours on loan. Surely this of itself ought to mean that each of us leaves our property, if we own any, to the work of the Truth, or to a brother or sister who we know will use the resulting funds in the Lord's work (after the pattern of how David left all his personal wealth to the work of the temple, rather than to Solomon personally- 1 Chron. 29:3 NIV).

Leaving All

In Lk. 14:33, the Lord appears to make discipleship dependent upon giving up our possessions and forsaking all we have. But it's quite apparent that His disciples didn't literally do that. Zacchaeus only gave away half of his possessions (Lk. 19:8); and other disciples of Jesus clearly retained their homes and some possessions. The Lord must therefore mean that He expects us to *in our minds* resign all personal ownership of absolutely everything which we have- even if those things remain, to human appearance, 'ours'. This is really a challenging thing, in this world of savings and acquisition. In appealing for the Corinthians to be generous, Paul points out that the Lord Jesus became a pauper for our sakes, and therefore, because of the riches of salvation He has given to us, the *least* we can do is to reach out into the lives of others with what riches we may have (2 Cor. 8:9 Gk.). This is why in 2 Cor. 8:1,19; 9:14, Paul uses the word "grace" to mean both the grace of God and also our grace (gifts) in works of response. Thus he talks of bringing the "grace" of the money collected for the poor saints; he is talking about the gift they had made; but in the same context he speaks of God's grace in Christ. If we have received the grace of God's forgiveness and salvation (and so much more) in Christ, we must show that grace, that gift, by giving. Our heart tells us to give, our heart is in our giving, it's a natural outcome of a believing mind (2 Cor. 9:5-8, J.B. Phillips). Our giving is a quite natural outcome of our faith in and experience of the cross. Material giving to the Lord's cause was associated with the breaking of bread in the early church (Acts 2:42-46; 1 Cor. 16:1,2), after the pattern of how every male was not to appear empty before Yahweh (Heb. 'to appear for no cause') at the Jewish feasts (Dt. 16:16). We cannot celebrate His grace / giving to us without response. Because Israel had been redeemed from Egypt, they were to be generous to their brethren, and generally open handed (Lev. 25:37,38). This is why the Acts record juxtaposes God's grace / giving, and the giving of the early believers in response (Acts 4:33 cp. 32,34-37). The

bread and wine of the drink offerings were to accompany sacrifice; they were not the sacrifice itself. And likewise the spirit of sacrifice must be seen in us as those emblems are taken. The Laodiceans' materialism resulted in them not realizing their desperate spiritual need for the cross (Rev. 3:17,18); Lemuel knew that riches would make him ask "Who is Yahweh?" ; he wouldn't even want to know the Name / character of the Lord God (Prov. 30:9). The Jews' experience of redemption from Haman *quite naturally* resulted in them giving gifts both to each other and to the poor around them (Es. 9:22). "You shall lend unto many nations" has often been misread as a prediction of Jewish involvement in financial institutions and banking (Dt. 28:12). But the context is simply that "The Lord shall open unto you *His* good treasure, the heaven to give the rain of your land... and *you* shall lend unto many nations". If God opens His treasure to us, we should open our treasures to others, even lending with a spirit of generosity, motivated by our experience of His generosity to *us*. Because Yahweh had redeemed Israel, they were not to be petty materialists, cheating others out of a few grams or centimetres in trading. The wealth and largeness of God's work for them should lead them to shun such petty desire for self-betterment. God gives to all men with a single eye (James 1:5 Gk.); and in response, we too must be single eyed in our giving (Mt. 6:22 s.w.- this is one of James; many allusions to the sermon on the mount).

There is an amazing ability in human nature to believe that wealth lasts for ever. That's why we recoil in horror at the idea of forsaking all we have. James 5:3 says well that gold rusts. Yet we know it doesn't rust. But in the very end, it does in the sense that it doesn't last in our hands for ever. Especially in the perspective of the soon return of Jesus, materialism is totally inappropriate for the believer awaiting Him. James 5:3 RV says it so clearly: "Ye have laid up your treasures in the last days". It's as if it's self-evidently inappropriate to build up wealth in the last days. Period. The men of Beth-Shemesh were smitten because they looked into the ark (1 Sam. 6:19). I suspect this was because they wanted to find any more jewels which the Philistines might have placed there. In the face and presence of the things of the supreme glory of Jehovah of Israel, they scavenged around in a spirit of petty materialism- just as men gambled for the clothes of Jesus at the foot of His cross.

In the beauty and depth of His simplicity, the Lord comprehended all this in some of the most powerful sentences of all time: *It is very hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom*. He *must* shed his riches, like the camel *had* to unload to pass through the needle gate (Mt. 19:24). This is such a powerful lesson. And it's so simple. It doesn't need any great expository gymnastics to understand it. Like me, you can probably remember a few things very vividly from your very early childhood. I remember my dear dad showing me this as a very young child, with a toy camel and a gate drawn on a piece of paper. And I saw the point, at four, five, maybe six. It is *so clear*. But what of our bank balances now, now we're old and brave? It's easier for a camel, the Lord said. Why? Surely because someone else unloads the camel, he (or she) has no say in it. But in the story, surely we must be the camel who unloads himself, who shakes it all off his humps, as an act of the will. And as we've seen, the spirit of all this applies to every one of us, including those without bank accounts. In this matter of giving, there are (once again) different levels on which we may respond to the Man who gave all. We can give on some kind of proportionate level to what we have. Or we can give *more than we can afford*; the kind of giving the Philippians are commended for (and no, Paul didn't scold them for being irresponsible): "In their deep poverty...to their power...yea, and *beyond their power*" (2 Cor. 8:2). The basic message of so many of the parables is that our generosity to the Lord's cause should be offered without a calculated weighing up process first of all, and with a recognition that such giving may be contrary to all human wisdom. Thus the rich man sells *all he has* and buys a pearl- he's left with nothing, just this useless ornament. He

doesn't sell what he has spare, his over-and-above...*all he had* went on that pearl, for the sheer joy and surpassing, all-demanding excellence thereof. His wife, colleagues, employees would have counted him crazy. He acted against all the conventions of human wisdom. Likewise the shepherd leaves 99% of his flock unguarded and goes chasing madly after the one weak, straying one. This was crazy, humanly; one per cent loss wasn't unreasonable. But he risked all, for love of the one. And in this He set us a pattern for forsaking all we have.

A true appreciation of the Lord's work on the cross, a real ability to say that the Son of God loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*, will reflect itself in our attitude to materialism. The Lord gave His blood in order to purchase our body and our spirit for himself (1 Cor. 6:19,20; Rev. 5:9 RV). *Therefore* we must surrender our body and spirit, all that we have, to Him. We are not our own. To hold *anything* back is to deny the cross; to deny the Lord what He paid so terribly to possess: our lives, our hearts, our bodies. 1 Pet. 1:18,19 sets the blood of Christ in utter opposition to materialism; the very historical fact of His cross of itself means a rejection of material things. We are familiar enough with the way in which Israel's crossing of the Red Sea represents our redemption in Christ. Their response when they got the other side was to willingly sacrifice the riches of Egypt which they had brought with them; they gave them to the Lord's work, so that the tabernacle could be built up. Israel's exodus and establishment as God's Kingdom at Sinai was the prototype of the early church's experience. They too, for the sheer joy of the Truth, resigned their material possessions. The merchant man for the sheer joy of finding the beautiful pearl sells *all* he has, for the pure excellency of possessing just that one pearl (Mt. 13:44-46). And that man is to symbolize every one of us who would fain attain the Kingdom; "whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not *all that he hath*, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:33). The Lord had recently taught that to him who overcomes, He will give *all that He has* (Lk. 12:44). This is yet one more example of the wondrous mutuality between a man and his Lord; we sacrifice all that we have for Him, and He will give us all that He has. The very height and wonder of all this motivates me at least to want to lay absolutely all before Him, to make Him the One to whom I can say I have committed all. Not just so that according to the covenant I'll therefore get all *He* has; but just from realizing the sheer wondrous grace of it all.

Despising Material Advantage

Moses and Paul were likewise motivated, although unlike me they pulled it off. Paul could have been such a high flyer; he profited (materially, the Greek could imply) in the Jews' religion above any one else (Gal. 1:14). But he resigned it all. He wrote some majestic words which ought to become the goal of every one of us: "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss *for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord*: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Phil. 3:7,8). Why did he do it? Not just because he wanted to get salvation. "For the *excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord*". For the *excellency* of who Christ is, as *my Lord*, he did it. Grasping the wonder of our salvation in the Lord Jesus should do even more than motivate us to write out a cheque; Paul not only gave, but he counted the things of this life as *dung* (and that's just what it means); he *despised* material advantage. This is a stage beyond just being generous. God Himself 'detests' the mammon which man so highly esteems (Lk. 16:13-15 NIV). A day will come when man *will* despise material possession. "In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold...to the moles and to the bats; to go into the clefts of the rocks...for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty" (Is. 2:20,21). But for us, today is the day of the Lord's coming in judgment. If we will be forsaking all we have in that day; we ought to now,

in spirit. The parable of the unjust steward surely teaches that our attitude to the “mammon of unrighteousness” will determine our eternal destiny. The wealth of this world is called “that which is least...that which is another’s [i.e. God’s]” (Lk. 16:10,12 RV). We are told: “make to yourselves friends by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when it shall fail [at the Lord’s return], they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles” (Lk. 16:9 RV). There will come a day when money will fail, and when we will despise it for what it was- “that which is least”.

The man who built greater barns realized on the night of his death that all his laid up treasures could not be his after his death (Lk. 12:20). And yet this is couched in the very language of Ecclesiastes. We can come to that attitude and understanding right now; and if we don’t, we will come to it on our deathbeds or at judgment day. The parable of the pounds may be intended to describe our dealing with wealth. This is how it would have appeared to the Lord’s first hearers. At His coming, He will “require” of us our use of wealth (Lk. 19:23). The man who did nothing with his pound should have at least lent it out on usury, the Lord said- even though this was illegal according to Moses. He should have done at least *something* with his money, even if it involved taking a lower level of service than the Lord ideally expects.

Many of the Psalms (Ps. 49 is a classic) teach us to almost despise material advantage as crass folly. The comparison between present wealth and eternal possession of the earth is presented as absurd and only not perceived by the fool. Dt. 24:15 is one of many examples of the utter inversion of values to be found in the sphere of God’s dealings with men: The rich are to almost fear the landless poor labourer, in case he feels hard done by and prays to God against the rich. The power, in ultimate and spiritual terms, is with the poor- and the balance of power is against the wealthy.

The Gift Of Joy

Paul wrote a telling comment about wealth in 2 Cor. 9:10. He likens generosity to sowing seed. If we do this for our poor brethren, then God will multiply our seed for sowing (RV); He will give us yet more with which to be generous with. We are “enriched unto all liberality” (2 Cor. 9:11 RV)- this is *why* we receive anything, to be liberal with it. And thus he writes in conclusion of “the proving of you by this ministration” (2 Cor. 9:13 RV). This brief but vital teaching of Paul here is a proof of our spirituality. Our response to ministering to others is a proving of us. It’s as simple and as clear as that. And remember that Paul was writing these words to a *poor* ecclesia, amongst whom there were not many wealthy folk (1 Cor. 1:26-28). Paul speaks of joy as a motive for generosity. He writes of how the abounding joy of the poor brethren in Macedonia abounded unto a generosity which was actually beyond their means (2 Cor. 8:2). And when he goes on to speak of how God loves a “*cheerful* giver” (2 Cor. 9:7), he uses a word which James Strong defines as meaning ‘hilarious’. And yet our giving tends to so often be a matter of phlegmatic planning, to salve an otherwise uneasy conscience. But the picture Paul paints is of a man or woman *hilarious* in their giving to the poor. This isn’t the giving which watches for the response, and is offended if it isn’t what we expect. This is a picture of giving from the joy of giving, reflecting the Father’s generosity to us. And this, Paul says, *God loves*. Quite simply. We touch the heart of Almighty God by such giving. And yet this hilarious giving isn’t merely the emotion of a moment, the sort of thing played upon in many a Pentecostal gathering. It is to be a giving as a person ‘purposes in their heart’ (2 Cor. 9:7); and again, Strong challenges us with his definition of the Greek word translated ‘purposes’: “to *choose* for oneself *before* another thing (*prefer*), that is, (by

implication) to *propose* (*intend*)". But having made this conscious decision, to put, say, Sister Svetlana's need before your preference for a new piece of furniture, we are to perform the actual giving with the hilarity of the cheerful giver. And as we know, Paul makes the point that such acts of generosity are acts of sowing, bringing forth fruits of righteousness; and the Lord will grant us yet more seed to sow in the same way. Forsaking all we have may not mean we are left with nothing.

Paul seems to have based his life decisions on the pattern of Moses, of whom he commented: "...[Moses] *refused* to be called the son of Pharaoh...*choosing* rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the *reproach of Christ* greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward" (Heb. 11:24-28). Moses could have been the next Pharaoh; according to Josephus, he was the commander of the Egyptian army. But he walked away from the possibility of being the richest man on earth, he "refused" it, because he valued "the reproach of Christ" and the recompense of the Kingdom to be *greater* riches. Yet what did he know about the sufferings of Christ? Presumably he had worked out from the promises of the seed in Eden and to the fathers that the future Saviour must be reproached and rejected; and he saw that his own life experience could have a close association with that of this unknown future Saviour who would surely come. And therefore, it seems, Moses counted the honour and wonder of this greater than the riches of Egypt. Both Paul and Moses rejected mammon for things which are abstract and intellectual (in the strict sense): the *excellency* of the understanding of the Lord Jesus Christ and His cross, and the Kingdom this would enable. Living when we do, with perhaps a greater knowledge of the Lord's victory and excellency, our motivation ought to be even stronger.

Notes

(1) This would explain why Paul took up his baggage at Ephesus and went on to Jerusalem (Acts 21:15 RV); the baggage would have been the bits and pieces raised by the donors to the Jerusalem Poor Fund. Those who couldn't send money had sent what little they could spare in kind—presumably clothes and even animals, or goods for re-sale in Jerusalem.

2.12 Our Desperation

2-12-1 The Problem Of True Humility

I sense there is a certain energy, a certain dynamism, which is missing in our spiritual lives. We read of the possibility of "all joy and peace through believing", of living a truly dynamic spiritual life, of the matchless devotion of Paul... and we see a great gap between these high ideals and our own spiritual experience. We may have a sense of boredom, of comfortable numbness which enables us to go on living at our present spiritual level without growing any stronger. Why don't we experience the dynamism which we should? What are we missing?

One of the fundamental reasons, it seems to me, is that we fail to appreciate the seriousness of sin; we fail to know and feel *our utter desperation*. Because of this we fail to appreciate the depth and length and height of the love of God in Christ; we don't come to really *know* the *height of the excellence* of the grace of the Father and His Son; we fail to appreciate the

wonder and yet the terror of the cross; we read the account of the crucifixion, or Paul's expositions of the atonement, and somehow it fails to move us any more. And most crucially, we are left with what I would call *the problem of a true humility*. We appreciate the need for a thorough-going humility and yet somehow there seems nothing we can consciously *do* to acquire it. We are happy to trundle along as we are, rather than experience any fire of devotion to God, any flame of praise springing up deep within us, as a result of realizing the urgency of our position and that great salvation which has been brought to us. We all too often come to the end of a day feeling that we have at worst been only little sinners. We sin, yes, we admit it, on an almost abstract level. But life simply goes too fast to stop and consider that we used or thought a bad word, showed indifference rather than a true love... and so the day slips by, nothing pulls us up in our tracks, we read and mentally make a few notes, we hear our Bible studies, we attend, and reflect a very little; we break bread, and hold our attention for a few uncomfortable minutes on the cross and our redemption and our response and yes our failings *and then* off we go, back to another week, of the same. Serious self-examination just isn't on our agenda. As the days, the months, the years slip by, we become self-righteous, critical of others without an awareness that we are living by grace, lacking that true humility which is vital for our salvation... a sense of haziness descends, as the terror of sin recedes in our perception. Things which earlier pricked our conscience gradually become accepted as part of life, both individually and collectively. The self-anesthesia of sin is part of that downward spiral of spirituality which our nature is so capable of. We come to see humility as something altogether abstract, something which is necessary; and yet the real thing becomes somehow distanced from us.

There are three aspects of Bible teaching concerning sin which, if meditated upon, should help us; lead us on, overcoming the problem of a true humility, towards the sense of true desperation with our natures and subsequent zeal of response which we fain would have. It is true that life goes just too fast to stop and formally repent of every sin. And yet there must be an overall sense and awareness of sin's seriousness and our subsequent desperation, which makes us *know* that sinfulness and feel it's weight, and *thereby* enable us to feel and know the sense of the lifted weight which there is through Christ. According to the Lord's own teaching, there are in some ways only two types of believer: either we are the self-righteous Pharisee, or the publican who beats his breast in self-loathing, hating his corrupt heart, begging for "mercy" [Gk. propitiation], confessing that he is *the* sinner (Lk. 18:13 Gk.). Paul, in one of his many allusions to the Gospels, reached the same height of contrition when he said, in total honesty, that he was " [the] chief of sinners" . Note too how the Greek word for "mercy" occurs only in Heb. 2:17- Jesus as High Priest makes "*propitiation* for the sins of the people". "The people", all of us, are cameoed in that man.

2-12-2 Sin Is Serious

1. Sin is serious. This is one of the most recurrent themes in the Bible. Yet with the characteristic blindness of human nature, it is one which fails to register with us as it should. 'Just' one sin in Eden led to death- and so much more than death. Time and again people missed the Lord's attempt to convict people of their sin. When He tells the Samaritan woman of the five men she'd had in her life, she responds by ribbing Him about whether God should be worshipped on Gerazim or in Jerusalem. She tried to move off the delicate issue of her morality into theological argument and strife about conflicting traditions (Jn. 4:18-20). Later, the Lord warned the Jews that "I go my way, and you shall seek me, and shall die in your sins: whither I go, you cannot come. Then said the Jews, will He kill Himself? Because He says 'Whither I go, you cannot come'? And He answered them... I said therefore unto you,

that you shall die in your sins: for if you believe not that I am He, you shall die in your sins. Then said they unto Him, Who are you?" (Jn. 8:21-25). Here the Lord twice seeks to confront them with their sin, and yet they ignore this matter and get lost in speculation about His more cryptic statements. And this is why a man can spend hours or even a lifetime in 'Bible study' and come out with a conscience untouched as to his personal sin. Because humanity has a terrible way of footnoting the Lord's conviction of our sins and getting endlessly lost in striving about words and their interpretations. As we daily read, almost every chapter hammers home the same point: that God sees sin as far more shocking than we do. Consider these almost random examples:

- Even with very sinful men, their continual sins still register in the feelings of God. The way God progressively senses the weight of accumulated sin is reflected in His description of the Amorites' iniquity filling up (Gen. 15:16); or Israel marrying Gentiles "to increase the trespass of Israel" (Ezra 10:10). "The iniquity of Israel is bound up, his sin is kept in store" (Hos. 13:12). God sees some wicked men as more wicked than others; for He is sensitive to every one of their sins (e.g. 2 Kings 17:2). "For three transgressions and for four" of Israel or the Gentiles, God would still punish Jew and Gentile alike (Am. 1,2)- i.e. He still feels the fourth sin, He doesn't become insensitive after the third sin. And this doesn't only apply to His people; but to all sin, committed by anyone, anywhere. Thus Herod "added yet this above all" when he imprisoned John after also sinning with another man's wife (Lk. 3:20). We have an uncanny ability to become numb to sin the more we see or do it. But not so Almighty, all righteous God. This is a feature of His nature that needs meditation. "The Lord hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob [i.e. Himself, so important is this], Surely I will never forget any of their works" (Am. 8:7). "They consider not in their hearts that I remember all their wickedness" (Hos. 7:2). Sin is serious.

- The sins of the Gentile world still register with God. Jerusalem sinned more than the nations around her- implying that their sins also registered with God (Ez. 5:6). Tyre is condemned for not honouring her covenant with Edom (Amos 1:9); Moab for being too harsh in judging Edom (Am. 2:1); Gaza likewise for being too cruel (Amos 1:6). Even amongst the Gentiles, God sees some as sinning more than others (Ez. 7:24). And even amongst God's people, some sins are "greater abomination" than others (Ez. 8:13). This doesn't mean that the 'smaller' ones don't count. But it reflects God's great sensitivity to human sin. The varying scale of sacrifices for various sins reflects this too. And of course our Lord Himself spoke of the man with "greater sin", and of other men who owed varying amounts to the Father.

- The casual rejection of the message of the prophets was likened to the hearers actively beating and killing the prophets (Mt. 22:7). The man who deceives his neighbour and passes it off as 'Just kiddin!' is described as a man is madly throwing around firebrands and arrows (Prov. 26:18,19). This apparently extreme language is surely to highlight the seriousness of sin.

- God *will* judge sin. This will be the terror of His latter day judgments. I would paraphrase Am. 3:6,7 like this: 'If there's evil in a city, God will do something, i.e. He will punish it. But He *now* does nothing, but He reveals His future judgments to His servants the prophets'. In the context, Amos has been forth-telling judgments to come on various cities (Am. 3:9,12,14,15).

- Therefore God's eye did not spare or pity Israel, *because* they thought that sin was a light thing to Him (Ez. 8:17,18). They thus insulted His essential nature.

- Ezekiel goes on to speak of how every act of idolatry was seen by God as the fickle wife of a faithful husband deceitfully liaising with another, worthless, man. And there is a similar shocking terror associated with our infidelities to the Lord who bought us for His own. The self-hatred of repentant Israel before they accept the new covenant is described with a purposefully terrible idiom: *a woman plucking off her own breasts* (Ez. 23:34). These words must be seen in the context of Israel offering these parts of her body to the hands of the Gentiles (Ez. 23:3,8). And now, with her own hands, Israel would fain pluck off her breasts in realization of her degradation. This self-loathing must be part of every true repentance; for we too, in advance of Israel, ought to have repented a like repentance, and entered the very same covenant. Just reflect upon the self-loathing in repentance of Ez. 6:9; 20:43; Job 40:4; 42:6. This is how sin is serious.

- We will either be crushed and broken by the Lord at His return, or *now* fall upon Him and be broken (Mt. 21:44). Yet falling upon Christ is a figure for sinning against Him (Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:7,8). So for those who will not be destroyed by Him at the final judgment, we must inevitably stumble, but rise up again unto salvation. Simeon foresaw all this when he spoke of how the Lord Jesus would be for the fall and rising again of those whom He would save (Lk. 2:34).

- The world is therefore seen by God as actively sinful. For the man who does not accept salvation in Christ, "the wrath of God *abideth* on him" (Jn. 3:36)- it isn't lifted. We are therefore subject to the wrath of God until baptism (Eph. 2:3). It doesn't seem or feel like this. And yet God experiences this sense of anger with sin, albeit unexpressed to human eyes.

- The servant hopelessly, desperately in debt to his Lord is a picture of the believer's debt to God (Mt. 18:25). The Lord didn't say 'Well, don't worry about it, I've got plenty, just forget it'. He reckoned up the exact debt, calculated it with the servant progressively panic stricken as the full figure registered: and "his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made". Only *then*- and this is a crucial feature of the story- "the servant therefore fell down, and besought him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all". This was of course a nonsense; he had no way of paying it. But in his desperation, at the very and utter limits of human feeling, he fain would pay it all. And only then, "the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him". This is not to say that the Lord is a hard man. But His frank forgiveness is not lightly given. Remember that God is elsewhere described as the magistrate who is to be feared, "lest he hale thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and the officer cast thee into prison. I tell thee, thou shalt not depart thence, till thou hast paid the very last mite" (Lk. 12:58). And yet again, the Lord is not a hard man. In the context of our spiritual bankruptcy, "He constantly lendeth to thee" (Job 11:6 Heb.); and yet He demands our deep recognition that He deserves and in a sense should be given it all back. This will be our attitude, if we appreciate that indeed sin is serious..

- To not honour ones' parents is, in the Lord's book, to actively curse them, even though it is doubtful those He was criticizing ever actually did so (Mt. 15:1-6).

- Paul reels off an awful list of sins in Romans 1, and builds up to a crescendo at the end of the passage. We're left waiting, with dropped jaws, for him to come out with some yet more awful sin. And Paul fulfils that expectation by listing the sin of having pleasure in those who commit sin (Rom. 1:32). Immediately we who are not grossly perverted and immoral are shaken from our seats. For in our generation like no other, one can secretly view sin, in

movies, novels and on the internet, and vicariously get involved with it whilst not 'doing it' with our own bodies. This sin really is serious. It tops and caps and concludes the list of awful sins.

- James 4:9 tells some believers in the Jerusalem ecclesia that their joy ought to be turned to heaviness, implying the downcast look of the publican who could not so much as lift up his eyes to God (Lk. 18:13). This man is held up by the Lord and James as some kind of hero and example to us.

- Rom. 5:17,21 draws a parallel between Adam's sin and ours. His tragedy, his desperation, as he looked at his body, at his wife, with new vision; as his wide eyes wandered in tragedy around the garden: all who fall are in that position, eagerly reaching out to the clothing of the slain lamb.

- A man who deceives his neighbour and then laughs it off as "I was just kiddin'!" is described as a madman casting firebrands, arrows and death (Prov. 26:18,19). What we may shrug off as a small sin is perceived by God as deeply wounding.

- After his sin with Bathsheba, David was a desperate man. Sin is serious. He had to die, and he was shamed before all Israel. What he had done could not be undone, nor could it be forgiven through sacrifice. No amount of re-interpretation of the texts could get round it. Having been confronted by his desperation for 9 months, he found a miraculous forgiveness. And he uttered a soliloquy: "Blessed is he (himself- David) whose transgression is forgiven" (Ps. 32:1). Rom. 4:6,7 slightly changes this, with the preface that these words describe "the blessedness of [any] man" who finds true forgiveness: "Blessed *are they* whose *iniquities* [plural] are forgiven". The point is plain: David's desperation is that of every one redeemed in Christ. Through his experience, David came to know what he calls 'truth in the inward parts' (Ps. 51:6): that he "was shapen in iniquity", and the required sacrifice was a desperately broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). According to Paul's use of the Bathsheba incident, David's learning curve *must* be ours. There are other links which show that David's sin, desperation and restoration are typical of the experience of all God's true people (e.g. Ps. 51:7 = Is. 1:18).

- Job repented at the end, in dust and ashes. And yet, of what did he repent? He was, on God's own admission, a just and upright man. He hadn't committed any gross sin. And yet his 'little sins', the general sinfulness of the otherwise upright believer- *this* is what he had to suffer so much to be convicted of. And this is a powerful, powerful pattern for comfortable, upright living (or appearing) believers. Moses too was an upright man. But he had to be humbled, until he cowered in the rock as sinners will do before the excellence of God's glory (Is. 2:21), before he could appreciate Yahweh's glory. And Elijah too had to go through the same experience (1 Kings 19:9-12). Eliphaz likewise recounted how an Angel had passed before him, as the Angel passed before Moses and Elijah, and through this he came to realize the essential truth of man's sinfulness and desperate need for repentance and God's gracious acceptance (Job 4:16).

- John places complaining about wages [a common human fault] in juxtaposition with doing violence to others (Lk. 3:14)- to show that in his serious call to a devout and holy life, there are no such things as little sins. Ez. 16:49,50 defines the sins of Sodom as including "pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness, neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor...they were haughty, and committed abomination". The abomination of their sexual

perversion is placed last in the list, as if to emphasize that all the other sins were just as much sin. Likewise Paul writes to the Corinthians about their failures, but he doesn't start where I would have started- with their drunkenness at the memorial meeting. Instead he starts off with their disunity. Those things which we may consider as lesser sins, the Bible continually lists together with those things we have been conditioned into thinking are the greater sins. Clearest of all is the way Paul lists schism and hatred in his lists of sins that will exclude from the Kingdom. The Anglo-Saxon worldview has taught that sexual sin is so infinitely far worse than a bit of argument within a church. But is this really right...?

- That sin is serious was shown pre-eminently by the terror of the cross. The Lord in His time of dying was not merely an example; His living and dying in the way that He did, and rising again, was the way to real atonement for sin in all its forms and in all its implications.

All these points need to be increasingly realized and felt by us. For we live in a world that increasingly devalues sin and encourages us to commit 'virtual' sin, vicariously, through the viewing and viewer-involvement in the things which the entertainment industry produces. Legal systems also encourage us to devalue sin. It has truly been observed: "The accepted maxim seems to be that as long as evil can be ignored, it should be; one should only punish as a last resort, and then only so far as is necessary to prevent the evil having too grievous social consequences. Willingness to tolerate evil up to the limit is seen as a virtue" (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 148). Yet God *feels* sin, and His judgments condemn it for what it is. This is so different to how men deal with sin.

God feels every sin, and judges it at the time, searching our hearts even for our motives- and He rewards sin with the death sentence. For the wages of sin is death. And yet, we don't die. The fact God views sin like this, and yet by grace forgives us, makes that grace and forgiveness all the more wonderful. David grasped this wonder: "Unto thee, O Lord, belongeth mercy: for [because] thou renderest to every man according to his work" (Ps. 62:12).

2-12-3 Sins Of Ignorance

2. Because of God's abhorrence of sin, **sins of ignorance** were still counted as offences against God, requiring atonement. This should really humble us- *if we are sensitive to this fact*. It therefore follows that we should lift up our voice for understanding of God's ways, for ignorant sin is still sin to Him- even though His judgment of us may possibly take into account our level of appreciation. In this context we should also be aware that God remembers unforgiven sin. Over time we can forget that we cursed our wife on 6.6.96 or whenever and never bowed down in repentance. But He doesn't. The haziness of our memories can work as a kind of pseudo-atonement for us. With Him there is no distinction between past and present and future. The sin remains before Him. By the law comes the knowledge of sin *to men*, but this doesn't mean they aren't culpable for those sins before God (Rom. 3:20; 7:7)- for sins of ignorance still needed atonement. "Sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Rom. 3:13) most likely means, in this light, that it is not imputed by those who do the sin. But God still notices... We only have to consider the passion of Peter's appeal to Israel in Acts 3:17-19: "I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did your rulers... repent ye *therefore*". His Jewish hearers would immediately have spotted the allusion back to the Mosaic protocol about what to do when you and your rulers realized you'd committed sins of ignorance. But the sacrifice required was now not an animal- it was the sacrifice of a broken heart and a baptism into Jesus.

2-12-4 Sins Of Omission

3. Sins of omission are counted as seriously as sins of commission.

Time and again Biblical history demonstrates that sins of silence and omission are just as fatal as sins of public, physical commission.

- Sarah omitted to say that Abraham was her husband; and was reproved (Gen. 20:16).
- Onan omitted to raise up seed to his brother, and was slain (Gen. 38:10).
- To omit to hate evil is the same as to commit it (Ps. 36:4).
- Because David omitted to enforce the Law's requirements concerning the transport of the tabernacle, a man died. His commission of good didn't outweigh his omission here (1 Chron. 15:13).
- The sin of omitting obedience was as bad as committing witchcraft (1 Sam. 15:23). Even though Saul partially obeyed God's commandments (1 Sam. 15:20), his omissions of some of them led to God declaring that Saul had in fact turned back from following His commandments (1 Sam. 15:11).
- The sin of omitting to care for ones' parents, albeit on the basis of following Jewish tradition and being generous to the temple, was understood by the Lord as active transgression of God's commandment (Mt. 15:3). The commandment [singular] the Lord had in mind was surely to honour father and mother. He saw that this meant that we ought to therefore care for our parents in their old age; and omitting to make that fairly obvious connection and interpretation was seen by Him as active transgression.
- We have a debt to preach to the world; we are their debtors, and yet this isn't how we often see it (Rom. 1:14). Time and again we commit sins of omission here.
- Samuel would have sinned against Yahweh if he ceased to pray for Israel in their weakness (1 Sam. 12:23). We so easily give up in prayer for the weak.
- Adam's sin of commission (i.e. eating the fruit) may well have been a result of his sins of omitting to go forth out of the centre of the garden and multiply. By one man's inattention (Rom. 5:19 Gk.) sin came into the world. This needs some meditation (see Study 6.10.3).
- The Lord taught that to wangle one's way out of caring for their parents by delegating it to the synagogue was effectively cursing them, and those guilty must "die the death" (Mk. 7:10,11). To him who knows to do good but does it not, this omission is counted as sin (James 4:17- written in the context of brethren omitting to help each other). Likewise He said that if Had omitted to heal the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, this would have been 'doing evil' and even 'killing' (Mk. 3:4). That's how seriously He took omitting to do good when it's in our power to do it.
- Because the priests omitted to care for Israel, they were counted as the wolves- their sin of omission was counted as one of commission (Ez. 34:9,10).

- The sin of keeping silence in the face of others' oppression is perhaps the most common sin of omission. So many who have struggled against abusive regimes have come to this conclusion- that the real abusers were all the good people who remained silent and thus empowered abusive regimes. "Do ye indeed in silence speak righteousness?" (Ps. 58:1 RV). Speaking and acting righteously whilst keeping silent about others' abuse is *not* righteousness.

- Ps. 44:20 balances the sin of omission against the sin of commission: "If we have forgotten the name of our God [omission], or stretched out our hands to a strange god" [commission]. It makes a good exercise to watch for how many times the Proverbs treat sins of omission as if they are sins of active commission. "He that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster" (Prov. 18:9)- 'mere' laziness, as we may see it, an omission of working- is the same as the commission of a purposefully destructive person. And to laze away our hours is perhaps a temptation in this generation as never before. He who doesn't help those terminally ill, saying within himself "Behold, we know it not"- will be judged by God "according to his works" (Prov. 24:11,12). The internal turning of a blind eye in our attitude is in fact an active 'work' which will be judged at the last day. And again, our generation has many opportunities to walk on by and claim we never knew. When we did. And there's no generation like ours for rewarding that attitude, when it's actually one that could lead to our eternal condemnation. For we are all terminally ill and need God's urgent, saving attention.

- To not lend to one's poor brother will be counted to us as sin (Dt. 15:9).

- If we omit to 'visit' the fatherless (in the Hebrew sense of coming close to, getting involved with, not just 'popping in to see')- then our religion is defiled and impure (James 1:27).

- "As troops of robbers wait for a man, so the company of priests murder in the way" (Hos. 6:9) is the basis for the Lord's parable of the injured man on the Jericho road. But He turns it round- He makes a difference between the robbers and the priest. And yet according to this Hosea passage, there is no difference between the robbers and the priest who passes by. Surely the point of the allusion to Hosea 6:9 was that the priest who omitted to help was as bad as the robbers who committed the attack. This is how serious are sins of omission.

2-12-5 Our Desperation

The axe is laid to the root of all us trees. It's as if we haven't brought forth the fruit we should, and the husbandman has just tapped us with His axe, ready to cut us down- unless we change and start bringing forth good fruit (Lk. 3:9). This is how serious our position is. We are as the weak army against whom the Lord Jesus comes with an infinitely stronger one, we are as those who have made a quarrel with Him (Col. 3:13). And we must urgently seek reconciliation; for time is short. Those who are thankfully redeemed in Christ, now lovingly reconciled to Him, are described as blind, starving prisoners, bound in the darkness, awaiting execution (Ps. 107:14; Is. 42:7; 49:9; 61:1; Zech. 9:11). Our prayers should be like those of a man on death row in a dark dungeon, waiting to die, but groaning for salvation (Ps. 102:17,20). This is the extent of our desperation. We are "the poor" (Gk. 'the crouchers'), cringing in utter spiritual destitution (Mt. 5:3). And yet we have a terrible tendency to only occasionally *really* pray, content with prayer on a surface level (see *Devotion: A Caveat*). When we come to the New Testament, the Lord's parables invite us to see ourselves as, e.g., the desperate widow woman pleading for deliverance from her oppressive landlord (Lk.

18:3). He had a way of focusing men upon their need. Thus He would have passed by the desperate disciples as they struggled in the storm, He would have gone further on the road to Emmaus, and He asked the blind men the obvious question: "What will ye that I shall do unto you?" (Mt. 20:32). He only partially cured another blind man, to focus that man's mind on the faith that was needed for the second and final stage of the cure (Mk. 8:23-25). He elicited from the father of the epileptic child the miserable childhood story of the boy- not that the Lord needed to know it, but to concentrate the man on his need for the Lord's intervention (Mk. 9:21). He wanted them to focus on their need: in this case, for sight. He let Peter start to sink, and only then, when Peter's whole heart and soul were focused on the Lord, did He stretch forth His hand. The Lord deliberately delayed going to see Lazarus until he was dead and buried; to elicit within His followers the acuteness of their need. And was He *really* sleeping in the boat with the storm all around Him? Was He not waiting there for them to finally quit their human efforts and come running to Him with faith in no other (Mk. 4:38,39)? Only when men were thus focused on their desperate need for the Lord would He answer them. The Lord further focused men's need when he asked the lame man: "Wilt thou be made whole?" (Jn. 5:6). Of course the man wanted healing. But the Lord first of all focused his desire for it. He told the story of the man who had a desperate need at midnight, and because of his utter importunity he was driven to throw himself upon the grace of another; and, the Lord taught, so is a man with God, holding himself back from throwing himself upon Him, until the realization of his desperation compels him. And so is a man with God (Lk. 11:5-8). Indeed, the whole way the Father Himself works with us reflects this way of driving us to know our desperation. God made the Israelites encamp in a place where the Egyptians would hem them in- and *then*, when they knew their desperation, He opened the Red Sea for them.

The Gospel records are full of encounters between the Lord and people in desperate need. The frantic begging of the blind for sight, the leper falling on his face and beseeching, another leper lifting up his weakened voice in desperation, the paralytic desperately hopeful there was some truth in the legend that an Angel stirred up the water, the parents of sick, spastic and dying children... these incidents fill the Gospels. There were doubtless many more 'normal', less highly charged, encounters between the Lord and human beings. But these are somehow de-emphasized. We are surely invited to see in the Lord's encounters with the desperate some prototype of His dealings with us. For those desperate men and women were types of us. And yet we must learn our desperation, as Jacob had to learn his and Samson his, and as snake bitten Israel had to drag themselves in desperation before the bronze snake and fix their eyes upon it. And so likewise we must learn Christ and His cross. For those who were baptized after learning the Gospel as part of their parental upbringing, or as the logical extension of their hobby of Bible study, it is hard to know our desperation. And yet clearly the call of the Gospel is to the desperate. This explains why the poorer nations of the earth are now more responsive to the Gospel than the richer; and why even amongst the richer nations, it is the desperate types, those who know their need, who respond. And it explains why those almost born into the ecclesia must be brought to know the desperation of their need, too. John speaks in his Gospel of those who received Christ (Jn. 1:12,16; 3:32 etc.)- and it is in allusion to this that he speaks of how the disciples 'received Christ' into their ship whilst about to drown on Galilee (Jn. 6:21). Their desperation as they faced death was understood by John as a symbol of the desperation of all those who truly receive Christ. But without perceiving our desperation, can we properly 'receive' Him?

We must balance ourselves against Him who endured such contradiction, and the more freely confess that we “have not yet resisted unto blood (in our) striving against sin” (Heb. 12:3,4 Gk.). Only by a personal reconstruction and reliving of the cross, and a serious, sustained attempt to live out something of its spirit in our lives, will we come to a recognition of the depth of our own failure, our need for His grace, and an appreciation of what really was done for us. And if we realize all this, we will respond- mightily. As the forgiveness suggested by the sin offering led on to the burnt offering (with its message of dedication), so our desperation leads to our dedication (Lev. 5:7). I don't need to list the ways of dedication; for you know, deep within you, how you ought to live: the readings you should read, the money you should quietly give, the phone call you should make, the recurrent wandering thought you should crush... The things you should purge out, the witness you should make, the habits you should form, the rejections and the acceptances you should make. We are taught by the realization of our desperation to go forward, quite naturally, and do all these things. He who is forgiven much, the same will love much (Lk. 7:41-50). The purpose of the Lord's mini-parable was not that the druggies, the hookers, the murderers will love Christ more than you or me. It was to teach that according to a man's *perception* of his sin, so he will love his Lord. All too often we serve Him because we have a conscience that we should do so; and yet the service He requires is service, even the senseless service of that forgiven woman with her precious ointment, simply because we *love* Him. And that overwhelming, overflowing *love* will only come from a true sense of our desperation. By knowing our desperation, we will know the Lord, we will know the grace and fathomless mercy which is so essentially *Him*: "Ye shall lothe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed. And ye shall know that I am the Lord, when I have wrought with you...not according to your wicked ways" (Ez. 20:43,44).

" If we would judge ourselves..."

Even a righteous man must realize his sinfulness if he is to truly comprehend the essential perfection of God. Moses was brought to cower in the rocks, just as the unworthy will do (Ex. 33:22 = Is. 2:21); and he only saw the back, not the face of God, which is the attitude God adopts to those He rejects (Jer. 18:17). And only in this position could Moses see the vision of God's moral glory.

These thoughts come to a climax in Paul's comments concerning the breaking of bread. He urges us to thorough self-examination, because the breaking of bread is a foretaste of the judgment to come. We eat and drink either blessing and acceptance, or damnation (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:29). When they *came together* as the ecclesia before the symbols of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 11:17-20,33), they were *coming together* before Him as it were at the judgment; for we shall all be gathered together unto Him then. Indeed, the Greek phrase translated 'gathering together' in 2 Thess. 2:1 concerning our gathering to judgment is only used elsewhere in Heb. 10:25, concerning our gathering together at the memorial meeting. There was the risk that when they *came together* before the emblems, they would *come together* unto condemnation (1 Cor. 11:34). We must discern the body of the Lord Jesus, and discern ourselves (1 Cor. 11:29,31 same words). Our consideration of Him must be allowed to reflect in a consideration of ourselves; and the extent of our discernment and analysis of Him, will be the extent of our own very personal self-analysis. Hence the connection between the breaking of bread and self-examination. And if in that self-understanding we come to judge / condemn ourselves, we will not be condemned. We must tell ourselves that we are unprofitable servants (Lk. 18:10)- knowing that the unprofitable servant is he who will be condemned (Mt. 25:30). If we realize our utter spiritual desperation, our worthiness of

rejection, our betrayals of our Lord's love, if we condemn ourselves in our own judgment; *then* we will not have to go through this process when the Lord comes. Yet if we don't do this, Paul says, then we are drinking condemnation to ourselves at the last day. It's a powerful, terrifying argument. Such *must be*- not ought to be- our level of self-analysis and knowledge of our desperation. If we so know our desperation now, we will not be condemned. Knowing and feeling our desperation is the key to so many Christian problems: monotony and boredom in spiritual life, problems with our partner, with our ecclesia, pride, a critical, ungrateful spirit, a lack of heartfelt praise, a reserve in witnessing. Even division amongst us would be outlawed by a true sense of our personal desperation. Reflect how the group of ten lepers huddled together, Jew and Samaritan together, their differences sunk in their common appreciation of their desperation (Lk. 17:12). In deep seated humility, we can wait with unfeigned faith for the day of acceptance to dawn, serving with a true love, not interested in feuding with our brethren, thankfully partaking of the emblems with them, not forgetting *how* we were cleansed from our past sins (cp. 2 Pet. 1:9 RV- a sure allusion to the nine ungrateful lepers who forgot the wonder of their cleansing). If we remember how we were cleansed, then there will abound in us virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, culminating in a true love (so Peter's logic runs in 2 Pet. 1:5-9). For our desperation, the cross of the Lord Jesus, the frankness of the Father's forgiveness- these things will ever *live* within our grateful, gracious souls.

And if they do, we will find the strength to forgive *from the heart*, to thereby live without bitterness, without the past existing as an unending source of anger and regret... The Jews had a tradition that one must be patient up to three times; and so Peter thought he was being generous by offering to forgive his brother seven times. The Lord's response is not so much aimed at increasing that seven times to 490 times; but rather to show that one "from the heart" forgiveness is better than 490 forgivenesses, as acts performed from a sense of spiritual duty that well, we have to forgive our brother... True forgiveness can never come from self-effort, designed to meet some standard. It comes from realizing our desperate situation and that our *only* hope is in God's mercy, and then letting this knowledge flow into our hearts.

2.13 Zeal: A Caveat

2-13-1 Zeal: A Caveat

The above studies have spoken of the need to be generous, to shun materialism, to serve God for nothing, to give our lives and hearts without reserve, to make His Truth the supreme, all consuming force in our lives. All this stands true, and follows logically from the fact that the Lord loved us to the end and gave Himself for us. But a warning has to be sounded. At judgment day, the rejected who have nothing will find that even what they have is taken from them (Lk. 19:26). This surely means that the spirituality they appeared to have, what they thought they had, actually they never had, and even the appearance of it will be taken away from them. We can appear to have spirituality, when in fact we have nothing, nothing at all. The man who built his house on the sand had the sensation of spiritual progress; he was building, he was getting somewhere, apparently. Likewise Israel were an empty [fruitless] vine, but they brought forth fruit- to themselves. In reality they had no fruit; but they went through the fruit-bearing process (Hos. 10:1). I write this because I have had all too many good friends in the Lord who at one time seemed so zealous and committed; but now they

don't walk with us, and on their own admission, all their devotion and labour was somehow not really true spirituality. The Greek word *zelos* means both zeal in a good sense (2 Cor. 7:11,12; 9:2; 11:2)- and also it's translated jealousy, strife, envying (Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 3:3; 2 Cor. 12:20). Likewise, *thumos* is used both about righteous anger, and also fits of anger which are sinful. It's clear enough from these linguistic facts, quite apart from our practical experience, that zeal turns into strife far too often and far too easily. The problem is, we so easily defend the strife, the jealousy, the anger... as righteous zeal, Godly anger. The line seems to us very fine, although it isn't in God's eyes. I observe too often brethren who appear so full of anger, but never reveal it openly... until it comes to some matter connected with their religious life. And then, wow, they let it all rip on some poor person, feeling they are justified.

The very experience of the concept of spirituality over time can blunt the cutting edge of God's Truth; we can no longer see things with the clarity of first conversion. It has been truly observed: "...we may cite the transfer of food from plate to mouth with the aid of a fork. When a very young child first assays this task, it is clumsily and inefficiently performed with the aid of intense concentration and full personal attention. A little later in life however, the mere desire that a particular morsel of food shall pass into the mouth produces a smooth harmonious series of motions of which we are not even conscious, often enough carrying on an involved conversation at the same time which is absorbing all our attention...it is a grave danger that even the deeper matters of our religion may become a series of stock phrases which have long since ceased to arouse any cognition in our mind, and which, like the routine motions of Divine worship, pass us by as unaffected as we are by the regular morning tasks of shaving or washing" ⁽¹⁾. And so we want to sound a caveat about zeal and devotion. There is such a thing as zeal not according to the personal knowledge of Christ. The following examples indicate how we can appear to be spiritual, we can do all the right things from apparently good motives, but right down at the bottom line, we aren't very spiritual people at all.

Notes

(1) R.T. Lovelock, *Salvation In Jesus* p. 112.

2-13-2 Love Unfeigned

Unless our 'love' reflects a genuine care and respect for the other person, it isn't love. William Barclay suggests that the Greek word *porneia*, prostitution, is rooted in the verb *pernumi*- to sell(1). If our love is the love which is bought and sold, which goes to the highest bidder, which treats its object as a thing which can be discarded, or 'loved' without truly intimate union... then it's actually a form of prostitution. Each time we ditch a friend because the going got tough, withheld love because we weren't getting from it what we intended... we're essentially showing a spirit of prostitution rather than love. This is why love in the end must always find practical expression in a self-sacrificial way. The Corinthians were to show the sincerity of their love [implying there can be a fake 'love'] by their generosity to the poor believers in Judea (2 Cor. 8:7,8,24).

- We can think that we are devoting ourselves to the Lord's cause over and above that which is required of us- when actually, we do nothing of the sort. We can give to the Lord's cause,

when actually we have only got round the essential intention of God's commandments to be generous-spirited and show a true love (Mt. 15:5,6). The Jews fasted on days which the Law did not require of them; but in God's ultimate analysis, they did this for themselves, to bolster their own spiritual ego, rather than as a fast which he recognized (Zech. 7:15,16). The more active we are in the community, the more we feel we go the extra miles- the more sober is this warning. Peter speaks of the need to use hospitality *without grudging* (1 Pet. 4:9); he foresaw how brotherly love could be shown physically, but with an underlying grudge that in fact we somehow *must* show such love. This is not the "love unfeigned" of which the Scriptures speak.

- 1 Cor. 13 is perhaps the clearest statement of this principle. We can die for our faith, give our all day by day, really really believe; but if right deep down there is no love, then all this means *nothing*. 1 Cor. 13 is a frightening chapter when read like this. "Love" doesn't just mean a warm feeling towards some of our brethren. It is the motive of true and warm and overwhelming and overflowing *love* for the Father and His Son (which inevitably spills over into love for our brethren).

- John perceptively foresaw that a man might say that he loves God, and yet hate his brother (1 Jn. 4:20). He demonstrates with piercing logic that hating our brother means that we hate our God. But it is so easy to adopt the position of the man whom John sets up. We can even think that our love of God is articulated in a hating of our brother, for the sake of God's Truth. It is relatively easy to love God, apparently, any way. But it's hard to love all our brethren. And yet this means that a *true* unfeigned love of God is not quite so natural and easy as we think. 1 Jn. 5:1-3 make it clear that it is axiomatic within loving God that we love all His children. If we don't love them, we don't love Him. So if we think that loving God is easy, think again. Think who He really *is*, of the inclusive and saving and seeking grace which is so central to His character, and the imperative which there is within it to be like Him.

- The Lord realized that it was easy to have an apparent love and peace with our brethren, when actually we have nothing of the sort. In the context of His men arguing with John's disciples, the Lord told a small parable, in which He made having salt in ourselves equal to having peace with our brethren (Mk. 9:38-40; 49,50). He warned that salt which has lost its saltiness looks just the same as good salt; but salt that has lost its saltiness is *nothing*, it's just a lump of substance. Surely He's saying: 'You may think you have peace and love for your brethren, when actually you don't; and if you don't have it, you're nothing, just a lump'. Not without relevance He mentioned that every sacrifice had to have good salt added to it. His point was that all our devotion and sacrifice is meaningless if it lacks the *real* salt of true love for our brethren. Which is exactly the teaching of 1 Cor. 13. Love is a matter of deep attitude as shown in the small things of life, not the occasional heroism of (e.g.) giving our body to be burned.

- The false shepherds of Israel "feed not the flock". They had no real concern for the welfare of others in the community. They were to therefore be punished, "and cause them to cease from feeding the flock" (Ez. 34:2,9). Well did they feed them, or didn't they? They did on the surface, they had an appearance of concern for the welfare of their brethren, as we can so easily have in greeting each other at gatherings, or talking about the misfortunes of our brethren to others. But in ultimate spiritual reality, they didn't feed their brethren at all. And so so easily, neither can we.

- There is repeated N.T. warning against the ease of slipping into a mindset which thinks itself to be 'loving' when actually it isn't. " Let love be without dissimulation" (s.w. " unfeigned" ; Rom. 12:9). The fact he knew himself to have " love unfeigned" (2 Cor. 6:6) was one of Paul's credentials as a genuine apostle. James 3:17 speaks of the true spirituality, including gentleness, patience, kindness etc., as being " without hypocrisy" (s.w. " unfeigned"). A true response to the doctrines of the basic Gospel will result in " love unfeigned" (1 Pet. 1:22). Israel of old failed in this: " With their mouth they shew much love; but their heart goeth after their covetousness" (Ez. 33:31). This is all some emphasis. It helps explain why both in ourselves and in others it is possible to behold a great emphasis on love whilst at the same time harbouring a very unloving attitude. I think all of us with any ecclesial experience will be able to recall conversations where 'love' has been advocated, or 'unloving behaviour' criticized, in language which simply *breathes* bitterness and contempt!

- The experience of emotion on reflection at the Lord's sufferings can be yet another area where our spirituality isn't genuine. The scene of those 11 grown men mourning and weeping at the loss of their Lord makes me think 'They were a soft hearted lot really, behold how they loved him...'. But then the Lord appears to them and upbraids them for being *hard* hearted and indifferent to His words (Mk. 16:10,14). His upbraiding of them must have really hurt- for they must have been sure that they were anything but hard hearted towards Him.

- Love in its human form can hardly exist without hatred as well. Thus Ezekiel was to the people as "a very lovely song", they loved to hear him and be with him; and yet at the very same time they spoke *against* him (Ez. 33:30-33). No wonder Paul exhorted us to let love be without dissimulation; to have the love *of God*, love unfeigned, and not merely human love for each other.

Notes

(1) William Barclay, *Flesh And Spirit* (London: SCM, 1962) p. 24.

2-13-3 Acceptable Sacrifice

- The ecclesia of Israel failed miserably in this. They did spiritual works externally, but within they lacked that deeper spirituality which is so vital for acceptable sacrifice. They honoured with their lips, but their heart was far from God; they kept His commandments, but they frustrated their intention by not letting them influence their essential selves (Mk. 7:6-9). They fiercely guarded the pronouncement of His Covenant Name; but in reality, they forgot that Name (Jer. 23:27). And so with the temple; they so loved it, it was the apple of their eye; but in real principle, they desecrated all that it stood for. The Gentile destruction and desecration of it was only a material reflection of what they in principle had done; and the invasions were doubtless intended to teach Israel this. Stephen pointed out, by the inflection which he gave to his OT quotations, that Israel's service of God was meaningless because at the same time they worshipped their idols: " O ye house of Israel, *have ye offered* to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness? Yea, ye took up the tabernacle of Moloch" as well as Yahweh's (Acts 7:43). This was a rhetorical question. They offered the sacrifices, but actually they didn't. And what is the difference between " slain beasts" and " sacrifices" ? Aren't sacrifices only slain beasts? The point is that the animals they gave were only slain beasts; nothing more, not real offerings, not real, acceptable sacrifice. " They sacrifice flesh for the sacrifices of mine offerings, and eat it; but the Lord

accepteth it not" (Hos. 8:13). And likewise we can dress up our devotions with the appearance of real sacrifice when there is nothing there at all. Like Peter, we can seem to desire to enter deep into the meaning of the cross (Jn. 13:36 'where are you going?'), when actually we do nothing of the sort (Jn. 16:5 'none of you ask me where I'm going'). We can 'sacrifice' only in ways which happen to reinforce our own personality type. The Jews in Babylon were like this: "When ye fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh month, even those seventy years, did ye at all fast unto me...? And when ye did eat and when ye did drink [in sacrifice] did not ye eat for yourselves, and drink for yourselves?" (Zech. 7:5,6). I cannot help but make the point that there has been such a huge emphasis on 'coming to the meetings' and 'attending the breaking of bread' *in themselves*, that the new Israel are in danger of going where the old Israel went: to an external observance of ritual, a concentration on the surface level rather than on the essence. There are many who find it hard to mix with their brethren, and yet intensely believe and express their spirituality in more private ways. Their attendance at public functions may be minimal. But let's not write these off as spiritually inferior to those who, perhaps for social reasons, if the truth was known, revel in the social ambience of a Christian gathering.

- And let us all be *especially* careful of our attitude to the memorial meeting. The Corinthians went through the motions of the breaking of bread; but they were told that in spiritual reality, they weren't doing it at all: "When ye come together therefore into one place, this is *not* to eat the Lord's supper" (1 Cor. 11:20)- although externally, that was what they were doing. They drank the cup of the Lord and also that of idols (10:21)- but in reality, they didn't drink the Lord's exclusive cup of grace. Israel kept their Passovers throughout the wilderness years, one would assume- but they never remembered the day that God brought them out of Egypt (Ps. 78:42)- although notice how although Israel didn't remember God, yet He remembered them in His grace (Ps. 106:7, 45). We can read of the cross, speak of it; and yet totally fail to realize the powerful imperatives which abound in its' message. Andrew and John heard John the Baptist call Jesus the "lamb of God", and followed Him, in apparent acceptance that He was the Messianic sacrifice. And yet in reality, they could not at that time accept the saying that Jesus was to die at Jerusalem in sacrifice, and that they were to shoulder His cross and follow Him there.

- Paul exhorted the Corinthians to give money to the Jerusalem Poor Fund, "as a matter of bounty, and not as of covetousness" (2 Cor. 9:5). We can give money generously, apparently, but do so from a motive of *covetousness*- the very opposite of true generosity and acceptable sacrifice. We can covet respect, admiration from our brethren...and not give as a pure and private reflection of the endless grace we have received.

- In a Levitical family, any male child was dedicated to the Lord from birth. But Hannah vowed that if God would "give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord" (1 Sam. 1:11). She was saying: 'I'll *really* do it, I won't just offer my children to You on a surface level'.

- The sensation of working for the Lord can be so self-deceptive. He draws the difference between doing many wonderful works in His name, saying "Lord, Lord"; and *really* doing the will of the Father (Mt. 7:21,22). The parallel Lk. 6:46 has that men will say "Lord, Lord" but not really hear His words. To hear them is to do the will of the Father. Putting all this together, it is perfectly possible to bear His Name, call Him Lord, work hard for Him- and yet never really hear His words, and thereby never really know the will of our Father.

- One can appear to be zealous for their Lord, risking life even. And yet this may not necessarily be truly motivated, self-sacrificial zeal. At times one can't tell their courage from their desperation, their faith from their deep inner fears which motivate bold and unusual actions.

- Israel were not to grow some crops, or raise some animals, just for God, and others for themselves. They were not to make this difference. They were to give Him e.g. lambs "out of their flock"; and "let the fullness of the fruit be consecrated" (Dt. 22:9 RVmg.), the idea being that they were to consecrate their personal fruit to God, not enforcing a difference between that which is for God and that which is for ourselves. In other words, they were not to make a difference between spiritual and personal life; it is us, our daily lives and situations, which God wishes to be part of.

2-13-4 True Repentance

- True repentance is another example. John the Baptist's audience responded to his preaching by being baptized "with the baptism of repentance" (Mk. 1:4); and yet the Lord Jesus built on this by appealing to people to repent because the Kingdom was at hand (Mk. 1:15; Mt. 3:2). Their repentance was therefore only surface level. The Lord cursed the fig tree (cp. Israel) because they had only leaves, an appearance of repentance and spiritual fruit, but actually there was not even the first sign of real fruit on that tree when it was really analyzed. Earlier, Israel had appeared to have fruit, when actually, they didn't have any at all (Hos. 10:1). The man in the parable built his spiritual house, but in fact he didn't get down to the real nitty-gritty of obedience to the Lord's words; and so it miserably, pathetically fell at judgment day. The seriousness of sin becomes de-emphasized in our lives (as it is becoming in our community), until repentance comes to mean a vague twinge of guilt. This, again, was the problem of Old Testament Israel. "They return, but not to the Most High" (Hos. 7:16); they had the sensation of regret, of turning back- but it wasn't real repentance. A few verses earlier God had commented: "They do *not* return to the Lord their God" (7:10); but they on a surface level *did* return to Him. Hosea continues his theme: "Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself" (Hos. 10:1). Did they or did they not bring forth fruit? They did- but only in their own eyes. They felt they had repented, and brought forth spiritual fruit. But not in God's estimation. And we too can have the sensation of spirituality and even spiritual growth, but only in our own eyes. "Though they called them to the Most High, none at all would exalt him" (Hos. 11:7) in the way which true repentance requires. "Judah hath not turned unto me with her *whole* heart, but feignedly" (Jer. 3:10). They did turn back to Yahweh- but not in their heart. Israel rejoiced in the light of John's teaching- and he taught real, on-your-knees repentance. They thought they'd repented. But the Lord describes John as mourning, and them not mourning in sympathy and response (Lk. 7:32). They rejoiced in the idea of repentance, but never really got down to it. The repentance of Judas is often passed off as a mere change of mind; but I suggest that in a *moral* sense he did actually repent, in the way we would use the word today, but the repentance was only on the surface- and therefore it wasn't the real thing (Mt. 27:3). At the same time, Peter was going through a *true* repentance for, in essence, the same sin. The Jews left in the land just after the Babylonian invasion had a sense of guilt, a knowledge that they were sinners and were suffering for their sin; but they had to be exhorted to truly *repent*: "This is what you are saying: 'Our offences and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?'. Say to them...I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ez. 33:10,11 NIV). Like so many a prisoner, so many a Christian, like Judas and Achan, like you and me, they

had the sense of desire to come back to God, the detailed realization of wherein they had failed; but not enough real strength of purpose to seriously repent.

- The reforms of the prophets and righteous kings of Judah provide further illustration. Asa and Jehoshaphat removed the high places, but in a sense they didn't (1 Kings 15:14 cp. 2 Chron. 14:5; 17:6 cp. 20:33). We read of how the land was purged of Baal, Sodomites etc.; but in a very short time, we read of another purge being necessary. Hezekiah, Manasseh and Josiah all made major purges within a space of 80 years. Jeremiah therefore condemns the Jews who lived at the time of Josiah's reformation for not *knowing* God in their hearts. Asa gathered the gold and silver vessels back into the temple- and then went and used them to make a political treaty. He *apparently* treated them as God's riches, but then in reality he used them as his own (1 Kings 15:18, 15). Many a Western Christian has this very same tendency. We too must ask ourselves whether our spirituality is really just a product of the crowd mentality; as the crowd shouted one day "Hosanna to the Son of David", a few days later they wanted Jesus to be delivered rather than Barabbas, but within minutes they were persuaded to cry for the crucifixion of the Son of God. Church life, Bible studies, the breaking of bread... inevitably, there is a crowd mentality developed here. There is a feeling of devotion which wells up within us as a community, as an audience, as we sit there, as we stand in praise and worship together. But the *real* spirituality is far deeper than this. We must seriously ask whether our spirituality, our feelings of devotion, our true repentance, are *only* stimulated by these meetings?

- John the baptist was a popular preacher. All Jerusalem went out to hear him. Even the hardline Orthodox were baptized by him. People liked his hard line austerity, his criticism of them. They lined up to hear it, and to confess their sins to him. But Jesus interpreted it differently. He said John's ministry was like children wanting to play at funerals with some other children- so they started weeping, but the others still wouldn't respond. Jesus came, piping; He wanted them to play weddings. But still they didn't respond in true repentance (Lk. 7:32-35). The Lord judged that Israel didn't respond to John; indeed, *if* they had truly received him, he would have been the Elijah prophet for them (Mt. 11:14 RVmg.). What this teaches is that believers can respond to a tough line, to the ra-ra of an uncompromising moralizing message; and yet not *really* repent nor accept the Lordship of Jesus in their hearts. Mt. 21:32 states clearly that the Jews generally didn't believe John the Baptist, nor repent. And yet they flocked to him in apparent repentance and were baptized. As we all know, repentance is one of the hardest things to be thoroughly genuine about.

2-13-5 Real Prayer

- Prayer is perhaps the area where it is easiest to have only a surface level of spirituality, without getting down to real faith, real perseverance in prayer, real wrestling with God. Elijah "prayed in his prayer" (James 5:17 AVmg.) reflects the Spirit's recognition that there is prayer, and real prayer. "Hear my voice, O God, in my prayer" (Ps. 64:1) seems to say the same: there is our true, pleading voice: and the outward form of prayer. The form of words we use, the outward form, conceals the *real* thing; the real groaning of spirit which is counted by God as the real prayer. The tendency to multiply words in prayer without intensely *meaning* them is probably behind the Lord's teaching about faith as a grain of mustard seed, which could move a mountain (Lk. 17:20). He's surely saying that a little bit of the *real thing* can do such wonders.

- The OT idiom of prayer 'returning into one's own bosom' is surely the quarry from which the Lord dug His image of a man praying *with himself*. It isn't real prayer; it's one part of the brain talking to a black box in another part of the brain, that we call 'God'.

- Nobody who has seriously prayed would say that prayer comes easy. And yet, deceptively, it *can* come almost too easily. It's so easy to rattle off in the Lord's Prayer: "...thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven". But the Lord Himself struggled to say those words in Gethsemane, as He prayed the prayer He had taught others to pray. 'Not my will....but thine...be done' surely took Him quite some minutes to utter, with intense sweating in between. "Not for ease that prayer shall be...".

- The man who knocks is answered, the Lord taught (Lk. 11:7-9). He may have meant that all true prayer is answered in its essence, rather than its particularities. But for our purposes we note that the first knocks weren't heard. Only by continual knocking was the request responded to. And so "knock, and it shall be opened" doesn't just mean 'ask for something and you'll get it'. The first knocks produced nothing. It surely means 'Keep on and on knocking, driven to your utmost desperation and intreaty; *this* is what I call knocking'.

- Just before his final fight with the Philistines, "Saul enquired of the Lord (but) the Lord answered him not" (1 Sam. 28:6), and therefore he went to a witch. But in God's final analysis of Saul, Yahweh says that He smote Saul because Saul sinned against God's word by *not* enquiring of God, but of a witch (1 Chron. 10:13,14). But Saul *did* enquire of God (see 1 Sam. 14:27 s.w.; 28:6), but God didn't answer him (note how often in the records it is stated that David enquired successfully of Yahweh). The point is that although Saul prayed to God and enquired of His word on the surface, in his heart, he did nothing of the sort; and therefore his prayer and enquiry was reckoned never to have happened. And we must ask how much of our prayer and Bible study is seen by God as being only spoken and read on a surface level. This was exactly the problem of natural Israel. "They have not cried unto me with their heart, when they howled (in prayer) upon their beds" (Hos. 7:14). "Though they called them to the Most High, none at all would exalt him" (Hos. 11:7).

- James 4:2,3 says it all plainly: some ask and receive not, because in reality, they don't ask at all. They are playing around with the possible power of prayer for their own benefit. And Old Testament Israel fasted, but only to themselves, not to God (Zech. 7:5,6).

- The Law seems to have foreseen the difference between real and apparent prayer by warning that the true incense was to be burnt [representing prayer], but not any other kind of incense, or incense comprised of other kinds of ingredients (Ex. 30:9).

- The believers in Acts 12 gathered together to hold a prayer meeting for Peter's release. Their prayers were answered; he stood outside, knocking on the door. But they simply didn't believe it. They couldn't conceive their prayer was answered. They mocked poor Rhoda and told her to go back and watch the door and not disturb them any more while they prayed for Peter's release. And having mocked her, they got back on their knees and asked again for his release. We can pray, in faith apparently, but with no very deep faith that the answer in actual reality will happen or may already have been granted.

- Like Israel we can seek God daily, taking delight in approaching unto Him; and yet need the exhortation to urgently seek Him (Is. 55:6 cp. 58:2). We can appear to seek unto Him in prayer and attendance at our meetings, and yet not seek Him in the real sense at all. Likewise

men came to Jesus physically, at quite some effort to themselves, and yet He tells them that they have not truly come to Him at all (Jn. 6:24 cp. 35-37). We can draw near with our mouth, honour Him with our lips, "but have removed [our] heart far from me" (Is. 29:13). Only those who call upon Him "in truth", with "unfeigned lips" will he heard (Ps. 145:18). Men repeatedly 'sought for' the Lord Jesus (Mk. 1:37; Jn. 6:26), but He told them to *truly* seek Him (Mt. 6:33; 7:7; Lk. 12:31). "Strive to enter in [now] at the strait gate: for many [at judgment day] will seek to enter in, and shall not be able" (Lk. 13:24). Our attitude to seeking the Lord now will be the attitude we have then. The emotion and reality of the judgment experience will not essentially change our attitude to the Lord. If we have "boldness" in prayer now (Heb. 4:16), then we will have "boldness in the day of judgment". How we feel to Him now is how we will then.

- Amazingly, prayer in the first century ecclesias was sometimes made with anger and in a spirit of quarrelling (1 Tim. 2:8). The words were said with an agenda, not to God but designed more for the hearing of men. This is an easy pitfall in prayer- to pray to oneself as did the Pharisee (Lk. 18:11), or to pray with attention to how our human hearers will receive the words. To begin prayer with "Our Father" and a few thoughts on the God to whom our words are being directed is surely wise advice from the Lord.

- We can pray with an impure heart; and yet the very practice of prayer can make us think we are somehow spiritually acceptable before God. Thus Paul had to warn that prayer should be made "without wrath and doubting" (1 Tim. 2:8). He knew that a man can pray to God with an angry heart, thinking the act of prayer cancels out his anger.

- Worship like prayer can be on a surface level, or the real thing. Reflect how Saul "worshipped the Lord" merely for the sake of appearances, because this was what his position required of him (1 Sam. 15:31).

2-13-6 Unfeigned Faith

- And the same is true for faith. Faith can become just vague hope for something better, rather than a "confident assurance", a seeing of the unseen. Paul's reference to "unfeigned faith" (1 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 1:5) as the goal of personal and ecclesial life would suggest that he realized the temptation to have a fake, feigned faith. Many of the Jews believed on Christ (Jn. 8:30)- but He rebukes them for not being His "disciples indeed", not really having the freedom which a true acceptance of the Truth will bring, not really being children of Abraham, still living in sin, not really hearing His word, and passively wanting to kill Him (Jn. 8:33-44). Yet He spoke all these criticisms to those whom the record itself describes as believing in Him (Jn. 8:31). It's as if the Spirit wants to show us that belief in Christ can exist on a completely surface level. He says they were Abraham's seed (Jn. 8:37,56); but almost in the same breath, He says they weren't anything of the sort in spiritual reality (Jn. 8:39).

- The nobleman believed Christ's words. But only once his son was healed did he *really* believe (Jn. 4:50 cp. 54).

- Faith comes by hearing God's word. But we can read God's word without faith (2 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 4:2).

- James speaks of the man who says to his poor brother 'Be ye warmed and filled' but does nothing about it practically. This, James says, is dead faith; faith without works is not faith. But the man said those words, so James' logic goes, *in faith* that somehow the poor man would be helped. Yet he did nothing, and therefore his faith wasn't really faith; "can *that* faith save him?" (James 2:14 RV). There is true faith, and 'that' kind of faith which only appears to be faith in the eyes of the person holding it.
- The Lord's self-indulgent servant will be cut asunder at judgment day- revealed for who he really is- and then be appointed his portion with the [other] hypocrites (Mt. 24:41). The Lord used almost identical words earlier in His ministry, but with the conclusion that such a servant would be appointed his portion with *the unbelievers* (Lk. 12:46). The rejected servants, who appeared to believe but who only play-acted, are in fact unbelievers. They have as little faith as the unbelieving world, although they think they believe and serve the Lord.
- Jesus described the unbelieving Jews as having Abraham as their father, and yet He also said that they weren't the real children of Abraham. They appeared to believe in Him, but effectively denied Him (Jn. 8:37,39,56). Like Israel, we can have an appearance of faith, an assumption that we believe because we are through baptism the children of faithful Abraham, when the real, house-on-the-rock faith is unknown to us.
- The records of the Lord's words to the disciples in the sinking ship are significantly different within the Gospel records. Luke's record has Him upbraiding them: "Where is your faith?", as if He thought they had none. Matthew and Mark have Him commenting: "O ye of *little* faith...". Putting them together, perhaps He said and implied something like: 'O you of little faith, you who think you have a little faith, in my view you have no *real* faith. Come on, where is your *real* faith, not the little bit which *you* think you have...?' (Mt. 8:26 cp. Mk. 4:40). The Greek for "little" faith is also translated 'almost'; as if the Lord is saying that they almost had faith, but in reality, had nothing. The Lord spoke of how just a little piece of real faith, like a grain of mustard seed, could result in so much (Mk. 11:12,13)- as if He recognized that there was pseudo-faith, and the real thing.
- Even after the resurrection, they *all* saw Him and *all* worshipped Him; but some of them "doubted". You can worship, see the evidence of the Lord with your own eyes, as Israel daily saw the manna, and yet still doubt.
- Moses doubtless had faith of a sort to hit the rock, having gathered all Israel there, and expect water to come out. Indeed, the water did come out, the miracle happened... but God's ultimate comment was that in that event, Moses actually did not have faith (Num. 20:12).

2-13-7 Humility And Bible Reading

- "The pride that apes humility" says all that is necessary. We can appear to be humble, and by doing so actually express our pride. The point has been made elsewhere that a brother may say to a sister full of praise for his Bible study: "It was nothing really, no, not that good". But if another sister says to him: "I thought your Bible study was nothing really, not much good at all"; how does he react? Did he *really* mean his 'humble' words to his admirer? Ahaz is one of many Biblical examples of this kind of false humility. He refused to ask a sign of Yahweh, when invited to, lest he be like apostate Israel in the wilderness, and tempt Yahweh

(Is. 7:12 cp. Dt. 6:16). But this was actually a 'wearying' of God, and he was given a sign relating to his condemnation (Is. 7:12,13).

- It makes a good exercise to go through Isaiah 2 and look at all the times when words like 'bow down' and 'lift up' are used. Judah are condemned for 'bowing down' before the idols, when in fact they were 'lifted up' in pride (Is. 2:9,11).
- Nebuchadnezzar was made to eat grass like an animal until he learnt that "the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (4:17). But earlier he had learnt this lesson and accepted it, at least momentarily, when Daniel explained the image of chapter 2 to him.

Bible Reading

- Our Bible reading can be so easily performed on a merely surface level, skimming over words without letting their real import be felt at all. Fred Barling truly observed: "Through long familiarity we have come to read [the Gospels] with a phlegm and impassivity which are in sharp contrast to the amazement felt by those who came into actual contact with Jesus, and by those who first read these accounts" ⁽¹⁾. Philip realized this when he quizzed the eunuch, with a play on words in the Greek: "Understandest thou what thou readest?" (Acts 8:31): *ginoskeis ha anaginoskeis?* 'Do you really understand, experientially, what you are understanding by reading?'. James 1:22 plainly states how easy it is to hear the word, and *deceive* ourselves into thinking that this very process justifies us. But if we are not doers of the word, we only "seem to be religious...(deceiving our) own heart, this man's religion is vain" (James 1:26). We are invited to see a parallel between the process of hearing God's word, and seeming to be religious. The Pharisees, who read the Bible daily, letter by letter, were rebuked that: "Have you not read even this..."? (Lk. 6:3 RV). We can read, but not really read. Just as the Pharisees did.

- We can fail to personalize God's word, in the sense of realizing that it speaks to us personally. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar what would happen to him unless he repented; and he wouldn't listen. When his judgment came, God told him: "O King Nebuchadnezzar, *to thee it is spoken*: The kingdom is departed from thee" (Dan. 4:31).

- The good soil is characterized by understanding (Mt.), receiving (Mk.) and keeping the word (Lk.). We can hear the Bible explained and at that point *understand* intellectually. But this is something different to real understanding; for if we truly apprehend the message, we will receive it deep within us and keep that understanding ever present in our subsequent actions. We are to hear *and* give ear to God's word (Jer. 13:15). We can hear on a surface level, but not give the ear of our heart to God's voice.

- The Hebrew word for 'hear' is also translated 'obey' (Gen. 22:18; Ex. 19:5; Dt. 30:8,20; Ps. 95:7). We can hear God's word and not obey it. But if we *really* hear it as we are intended to, we will obey it. If we truly believe God's word to be His voice personally speaking to us (see *The Power Of Basics*), then we will by the very fact of hearing, obey. The message itself, if heard properly and not just on a surface level, will compel action. We can *delight* to know God's laws and pray daily to Him, when at the same time we are forsaking Him and His laws; if we are truly obedient, *then* we will *delight* in God's law (Is. 58:2 cp. 14). We have a tendency to have a love of and delight in God's law only on the surface. John especially often uses 'hearing' to mean 'believing' (e.g. Jn. 10:4,26,27). And yet the Jews 'heard' but

didn't believe. We must, we really must ask ourselves: whether we merely hear, or hear and believe. For we can hear, but not really hear.

- Am. 5:18 and Mal. 3:1,2 warn that just desiring the coming of the Lord isn't enough; for what end will it be, if we don't *truly* love His appearing? Yet Amos goes on to say that Israel "put far away" the reality of the day of the Lord, in their minds (Am. 6:3). And yet they desired it. We can study prophecy, but not really love His appearing in seriously preparing ourselves for that day. Indeed, we can subconsciously put it far from us. When we grasp for a fleeting moment how *very near* is the second coming for us; can we dwell upon it, retain that intensity? Or would we rather put it "far away"? This is surely why the Lord brings the list of signs of His coming to a close with some chilling parables concerning the need for personal watchfulness. It's as if He could foresee generations of believers straining to interpret His words carefully, correctly matching them with trends in the world...and yet missing the essential point: that we must watch and prepare ourselves for His coming, whenever it may be for us. Having given so many indicators of His soon appearing, the Lord then says that His coming will be unexpected by the believers (Mt. 24:36,44). He wasn't saying 'Well, you'll never properly interpret what I've just said'. He meant rather: 'OK you'll know, more or less, when my return is imminent; but all the same, *in reality* it will be terribly unexpected for most of you unless you prepare yourselves. You need to make personal changes, and be watchful of yourselves; otherwise all the correct prophetic interpretation in the world is meaningless'. Those described in Rom. 1:32 know the judgment of God; they know it will come. But they have a mind "void of [an awareness of] judgment" (Rom. 1:28 AVmg.). We can know, know it all. But live with a mind and heart void of it. Tit. 1:16 AVmg. uses the same word to describe those who "profess that they know God" but are "void of judgment". We can know Him, but have no real personal sense of judgment to come. These are sobering thoughts.

- In Lk. 10:25-27, the Lord recited some simple, well known facts of Biblical history: it was to a Gentile, not to anybody in Israel, that Elisha was sent to cure leprosy. But the Lord's doing so raised such a howl of protest that the people thrust Him out of the city and tried to do the Son of God to death there and then. The point is, meditating upon well known facts can really cut us to the quick, and powerfully motivate us. Yet like those people until that moment, we can know these facts and do nothing about them, not *feeling* anything.

- Solomon had the wisdom of God. And yet Ecclesiastes has two contradictory layers of thought- Divine wisdom, and yet a philosophy of life "under the sun" that disregards that wisdom as irrelevant and pointless. I reconcile these by concluding that Solomon knew God's truth and preached it, and yet at the end of his life he concluded it was all just so much theory. When he was younger, as a good king of Israel, he had copied out the portions of Deuteronomy concerning how a king should behave, not making links with Egypt, not loving horses, silver, gold or many ways. And yet early in his reign he flouted these principles on a grander scale than anyone else. He warned "my son" in his Proverbs of the dangers of the Gentile ("strange") woman, but at the same time married them himself, writing an unashamed series of love poems about one of them (in the Song of Solomon). He knew, but simply failed to personally apply all the wisdom to himself. The very sensation of having the wisdom and preaching it world-wide as he did must have lulled him into a sense of numbness to the personal reality of it all. And the greater and deeper goes the Biblical research of our community, the wider we preach, the more the Truth we preach brings joy and salvation to others, the more prone we are to sink into the Solomon syndrome. On a lower level, this, perhaps, is why lung cancer specialists and sportsmen smoke (albeit on the quiet), why

skilled and experienced pilots take incomprehensible risks and crash... The possession of knowledge and truth, when mixed with the perversity and untruth of human nature, can tempt us personally to do the very opposite of that which we know we should do.

- God prophesied that those to whom Ezekiel witnessed would not hear His words (Ez. 3:11). And yet they came and sat before him, desiring to hear God's word (Ez. 33:30-32). They wanted to hear, they heard, and yet they didn't really hear.

- The man who hears and does not appears to be building- he has the sensation of going some place in his spiritual life. He *did* dig a foundation- in sand, where it is easy to dig. But the Lord said that he built "without a foundation" (Lk. 6:49). Are we *really* hearing and doing- or just going through the motion of it, experiencing the sensation of appearing to do it?

Notes

(1) W.F. Barling, *Jesus: Healer And Teacher* (notes of the Central London Study Class, 1952), p. 3.

2-13-8 Genuine Motives

- Time and again, the Bible is full of warnings against doing what seems right before God, when our motives are far from Him. Take the way that Gideon was invited to be king over Israel, but he refused, citing the fact that Yahweh is Israel's King. All well and good... but the record goes on to record how he made an idolatrous ephod in his home town, to which all Israel came (Jud. 8:22-24). And he had a son, Abimelech- which means 'my father is king'!. And indeed Abimelech did try to become King of all Israel (Jud. 9:2). Our behaviour smacks of all this time and time again. We do what is externally right, but our inward motives are impure. There's an urgent need for self-examination at depth within each of us... and yet the busyness of our lives, our poor time management and lack of rigorous regime in spiritual life, so easily leads us not to seriously attempt this. And we end up doing things which are only externally right. The way the Bible record is written sometimes seems to state what happened or what was said in terms of what the inner motives of the person were, rather than recording (e.g.) what words were actually said. Thus when the two harlots stood before Solomon, it may be that when the one said " Let (the baby) be neither mine nor thine, but divide it" (1 Kings 3:26), it may be that this is the Spirit's description of her inner attitude, rather than the literal words she spoke. But her inner thoughts were counted as her words (careful re-reading and reflection make this seem most likely here). The Jews left in the land after the Babylonian invasion begged Jeremiah to tell them God's word: " Whether it be good, or whether it be evil, we will obey the voice of the Lord" (Jer. 42:5,6). But when they heard His words, their response was: " As for the word that thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee. But we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth" (Jer. 44:16,17). Their apparent zeal for Bible study came to nothing when the results were inconvenient to them (and we can take a lesson from this). But I wonder whether they actually said " We will certainly do whatsoever goeth forth out of *our* mouth" ? Maybe they did; but perhaps this is what their rejection of *God's* word was tantamount to, and therefore this is the way their words are recorded. This approach to the Scriptural record may seem strange at first; but when we come to the Gospel records, it's truth is confirmed. A comparison of the different records reveals that the actual words both of the Lord and those to whom He spoke are sometimes recorded slightly differently in different

Gospels; and the differences cannot always be reconciled, if we are to believe that all these words were actually said and recorded verbatim. Surely on these occasions the Spirit is recording the *essence* of what was said, reading motives and expressing men's words from *God's* perspective. There are, of course, other places where the words are recorded from the human perspective, with literal accuracy. And so we must search our own motives- or try to. The Israelite had to offer up the most concealed parts of the animal's body, finding them and cutting them out for himself, and then laying them on the altar.

- In similar vein, God saw David as if *he* had killed Uriah with *his* sword (2 Sam. 12:9); even though David's command to Joab to retire from Uriah and let the Ammonites kill him was carefully calculated not to break the letter of the law.

- Rebekah's apparent zeal against marriage out of the faith was really a cover for her desire to save her son from problems which he had only her to blame for (Gen. 27:46).

- Worship can be performed from a sense of ritual, as a conscience salver...or it can be the real thing from genuine motives. Mt. 28:17 records how all the disciples worshipped Jesus, but at the same time some of those 'worshipping' men doubted.

- There is a common phrase in the record of the Kings of Judah which I admit to being unable to conclusively interpret: "He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord". Many of the men of whom this was said were not very righteous, and some (e.g. Uzziah, 2 Kings 14:3) were punished for their later apostasy. Possible explanations are that they repented at the end, although unrecorded; or that they were initially righteous; or that God counted them as righteous although they did wrong things. I find problems with each of these alternatives. So I am left with the possibility that a man can *do* (and perhaps this is the word that needs emphasis) what is right in God's eyes, but still ultimately be condemned because his *heart* is far from God; which is the teaching of 1 Cor. 13; Mk. 7:6-9 and the other Scriptures considered above. Uzziah "did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, yet not like (i.e. he didn't do his works like) David his father" (2 Kings 14:3) must be paralleled with 2 Chron. 25:2: "he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a perfect heart". Working for God as David did, therefore involved doing the works with a perfect heart, the open conscience which David so often displayed in the Psalms. But Amaziah was deceived by the fact he was doing good works, and the real essence of his relationship with God was thereby overlooked. And we too can project a shadow-self to others, an image of spirituality, which eventually we come to believe ourselves; when our heart is far from God. This feature of human nature explains why a man or woman can reach such heights of devotion and then turn round and walk away from it all, out into the darkness of the world.

- The Pharisees did all the works, but in their hearts they never knew God, and finally went and did His Son to death. The Lord plays on the fact that ultimately, in God's eyes, they did not works at all: "Do not ye after their works; for they say, and *do* not" (Mt. 23:3). We are left to imagine the anger of those zealous men. They *did* do works, as the Lord observed. But to Him, ultimately they did nothing at all. They had no genuine motives.

The inspiration process uses various puns through which to bring home the subtlty of the difference between true spirituality and fake. Take Is. 5:7: "He looked for justice (*mishpat*) and found oppression (*mishpah*), for righteousness (*sdaqah*) and heard cries of distress (*saqah*)". The real aim of our life in Christ, our being a Christian, our prayer, our Bible

reading, our attendance at meetings, our spirituality- however you want to look at it- the real aim is to develop a character in harmony with that of God, to manifest Him. This means not getting bitter, forgiving others, being quick to overlook, to read the best motives, to be patient with your husband, with your dog, with your cat, to be full of meditation on our peerless Lord Jesus, to love the Father's word as He did... this is what it's really all about. The occasional heights of self-sacrifice and devotion, the complete dedication of one's life and thinking to the things of "the Truth", our church (or however we want to describe it), this isn't *necessarily* the same thing as being a really *spiritual*, Christ-centred person. It often takes new converts a long time to realize this; and the quicker we do so, the better. The essential state of our *heart* is what God is ultimately interested in. This is why men may perform the same outward actions, but be judged quite differently. Consider how both Cain and Jonah fled from the presence of God; both Peter and Judas denied the Lord; both Samuel and Eli failed to control their apostate sons.

Indeed, Eli *did* rebuke his sons; but in God's eyes he didn't (1 Sam. 2:24 cp. 3:13 AV mg.). He said words for the sake of saying words, but in his heart he didn't frown upon them. Eli appeared to discipline his sons. But he couldn't have really done this from his heart, or he wouldn't have been condemned for not controlling them. He honoured his sons above God, to make himself "fat with the chiefest of all the offerings". The description of Eli as being fat surely reflects his guilt (1 Sam. 2:29; 4:18). And yet he appeared on the surface to run his family life on a spiritual footing. Jer. 9:25 RV speaks of punishing "them which are circumcised in their uncircumcision". As Paul makes clear, one can be circumcised physically but not spiritually. A person can be circumcised yet effectively uncircumcised at one and the same time. This is the nature of the spiritual schizophrenia which so afflicts us.

Devotion to preaching and the defence of doctrine *is* a vital part of our spirituality; these things *are* part of treading the path of the One who went before us. But when we are first baptized, there is a tendency to make spirituality *solely equal* to these things; we tend not to see that these are only *aspects* of a Christ-like life. Self-mastery, real spirituality, from genuine motives, an *overflowing and overwhelming love* in the face of hatred and coldness...these are down there at the bottom line. Works, especially those involved with preaching and doctrinal contention, can blind us to this, all too easily. Preaching *in itself* can become an obsession (and the same is true of prolonged prayer); some of the early missionaries of the Orthodox churches caught this disease, as have some Christians. I've known several zealous brethren who fell away to J.W.s and the like, not from any real doctrinal persuasion, but simply because they loved the preaching, the thrill of the fight. Think through 1 Cor. 15:12: "If Christ be preached [by you] that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection...[for] then is Christ not raised". We can preach something with apparent zeal and yet actually have no real personal faith in the message. I'm not saying, of course, that the works, the preaching, the protracted prayer etc. are irrelevant. But they must be an outcome of our experience of the spirituality of God Himself, not the result of our being driven by obsession or fear or desire for reward. If they are, then the light of God's truth which is in us will only be counted as the darkness of the world in the end (Lk. 11:35). Our emphasis must therefore be on devotion to spiritual mindedness, to appreciation of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Father whom His cross revealed; and then the works will follow quite naturally from genuine motives.

Time and again we are brought to realize that the same external action can be judged by God quite differently, according to our motives. Uzziah was condemned for acting as a priest; when David did the same, he was reflecting his spirituality. God commanded Jehu to perform

the massacre of Ahab's family at Jezreel, and blessed him for it (2 Kings 10:10,29,30); and yet Hos. 1:4 condemns the house of Jehu for doing that. Why? Presumably because their later attitude to that act of obedience was wrong, and the act therefore became judged as God as something which brought just punishment on the house of Jehu many years later. Why? Because even an outward act of obedience, when perceived through wrong motives and feelings, becomes an act of sin and a basis even for condemnation. All our works need careful analysis once we grasp this point.

Touching The Raw Nerve

Bible reading, breaking bread, fellowshiping with our brethren, all these things are inevitably repetitious. Yet they should touch our raw nerve; every recollection of the Lord's death, every hearing of the Father's word, should be like running a broken nail down a blackboard [go on, imagine it]. The word of God, as it is in Christ and in the Bible, should divide us asunder, right to the marrow, as the priest's knife opened up the sacrifices. This *is* what our contact with the word of God does from God's perspective- it opens us up. But we can turn away from this vision, turn the other way and hide behind a fake spirituality in every area of spiritual endeavour. The difference between truth and error is often apparently minimal. The difference between the error of the trinity and the truth of God manifestation can *appear* just words; but there is an important difference there. Paul therefore described a notable false teacher as Satan himself masquerading as an angel of light. Sheep and goats have the same skeleton, and some goats (especially Angoras) look like sheep. The Lord could have constructed His story using a clean and unclean animal. But sheep and goats were both clean animals; but the rejected are only apparently clean. As outlined above, love, faith, repentance, prayer...in all these things we can have an appearance of true spirituality which is only an illusion. Brethren, sisters: we must examine ourselves. We must shake ourselves from our comfortable numbness, realizing that the call of Christ cuts and calls to the heart. It means more than just attending a few meetings, writing a few letters, telling a few people about our church. We must clear our minds before we read, before we pray, before we break bread. Clear them of all that is superficial and extraneous, even if it is based around our church life; and *determine* to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified. We must let the word bite, the cross of Christ constrain us, *feel the cutting edge*...and not turn around and pretend we just haven't seen.

2.14 “When Israel was a child...”

“When Israel was a child, then I loved him...” is to be paralleled with: “When Ephraim spake trembling, he exalted himself in Israel” (Hos. 11:1; 13:1). When they were humble, then God exalted them. But in the maturity of time, Israel lost her humility, a callousness and fleck of arrogance crept into her walk, she grew old and brave in her own strength, and she plunged headlong in her relationship with God. Humility is vital. A true, thorough-going, unpretended humility, not some fawning, Uriah Heep announcement that of course, we're all sinners. But it's a slippery thing: as soon as we think we've got it, we haven't. And all the rest of the time we spend worrying that we haven't got it. So it's something we need to soberly think about. Time and again, the Biblical contrasts are between the sinners and the humble (e.g. Ps. 147:6)- as if humility is the epitome of the acceptable. It is the meek who shall inherit the earth (Ps. 37:11). This is how significant humility is.

Moses, in his day of final maturity, pleaded with Israel: “Now, Israel, *what doth Yahweh thy God require of thee*, but to fear Yahweh thy God, *to walk in all his ways*, and to love him, and to serve [Him]” (Dt. 10:12). These words are interpreted in Micah 6:8: “*What doth Yahweh require of thee*, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and *to walk humbly* [‘to humble thyself to walk’] with thy God?”. Walking in God’s ways is paralleled with walking in humility, humbling oneself. This, then, is the end result of our obedience to the way of God: a self humbling through regular submission to God’s principles, as hour by hour we experience the provocations of our flesh. The Lord took Micah’s words further, when He spoke of what we “ought” to do (cp. “*what doth Yahweh require...*”) in Mt. 23:23: “...the weightier matters of the law, *judgment, mercy and faith*”. Micah had spoken of *judgment, mercy and walking humbly* with God. Faith, a real and serious belief in the victory of the cross, in our salvation by grace, in a real and regular and meaningful experience of forgiveness, in the ever present “grace to help in time of need” that is available even now...the result of this will be a humbling of self to walk with God. For this was parallel in the Lord’s mind with “faith”. Ps. 45:4 speaks in the Hebrew text of meekness-righteousness, as if meekness is the very essence of righteousness.

Our fear of what others think of us, of their reactions and possible reactions to who we are, to our words and our actions; our faithless worry about where we will find our food and clothing, how we will be cared for when we are old, whether our health will fail...all these things detract us from a simple and direct faith in the basic tenets of the Gospel, which is what should lead us to humility. “The *simplicity* that is in Christ...in *simplicity* and godly sincerity...by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world...[doing our daily work] with *singleness* [s.w. ‘simplicity’] of heart, as unto Christ” (2 Cor. 1:12; 11:3; Eph. 6:5,6). Worries about the material things of life, or deep seated doubt developed during years of atheism or wrong belief...these all so easily distract us from the simplicity of a true and humbled faith. If our eye / world-view / outlook on life is *single* [s.w. ‘simple’ in the passages quoted], then our whole body / life will be full of light (Mt. 6:22). In daily work, in private reflection and planning for our immediate futures and present needs, there must be a direct and undiluted belief of the teachings of the Gospel, connecting those teachings to our daily life of faith. In this simplicity of the life of faith, in a world that makes life so complicated [especially for the poor], we will find humility. With that simplicity and humility will come peace, and the ability to pray with a concentrated and uncluttered mind, without our thoughts wandering off into the petty troubles of life as we frame our words before Almighty God each morning and night. I do so hope we all have that habit, of sustained, concentrated communion with the Father for say 20 minutes or more, especially at night. It worries me when sleeping in the company of other brethren at gatherings, how soon after laying down in bed they are snoring...within minutes they are asleep. And may I also probe: do you teach your children to pray, morning and night...? Forgive this digression. But it’s important.

On at least four separate occasions, the Lord taught that he who *exalts* himself will be *abased*, and he who *humbles* [s.w. abases] himself will be exalted (Mt. 18:4; 23:12; Lk. 14:11; 18:14). This was clearly a major theme in His exposition of the Gospel of the Kingdom; this is what will happen when that Kingdom is established at His return. He paralleled conversion with humbling oneself (Mt. 18:3,4). The humble will be exalted, and the exalted humbled. Because this will happen, we must *now* humble ourselves, so that then we might be exalted. The majority of references to humility in Scripture refer to humbling *oneself*; humility, hard as it is to define, is something consciously done, as an act of the will. Yet the Father confirms us in our efforts. The Lord *humbled himself* to die on the cross (Phil. 2), and yet the cross *humbled him* (Acts 8:33). If we don’t humble *ourselves* now, then God will do this to us

through the process of condemnation at the judgment. In this lies the insistent logic of humility. It was the logic Israel failed to comprehend... " When Israel was a child..." . It is prophesied of those who will be condemned: "Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the LORD, and for the glory of his majesty [as Moses did in this life]. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the LORD alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the LORD of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low" (Is. 2:10-12). "And the mean man shall be brought down, and the mighty man shall be humbled, and the eyes of the lofty shall be humbled: But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment" (Is. 5:15,16). There are many similar passages; the theme of 'bringing down' pride is a major one in the first half of Isaiah (2:17; 13:11; 25:5,12; 29:4; 32:19). They pave the way for the announcement that in man's response to the Gospel of Christ, "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain" (Is. 40:4). By the hills of human pride being brought down, and the giving of confidence to those so low in the valleys of hopelessness and lack of self respect, there is a levelling of all those who respond to Christ. But more than this; in this lifting up of the hopeless and bringing down of the proud, there is a foretaste of what will happen in the future day of judgment. In essence, "we make the answer now" by whether or not we bring down our pride, or whether we summon the faith in God's grace and imputed righteousness to believe that we, who are nothing, are lifted up in His sight. "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low" (James 1:9-10).

There are many brethren and sisters who live lowly lives, stuck in the lowest levels of society, living as they do with grim acceptance of their lot, who struggle with this: that they, really and truly, are seen as clothed with Christ, that they will be without fault before the throne. Or there are others who feel that their past failures really make it hard for them to ever be accepted by God. But believe it! This *is* how God eagerly sees you! We *will* be in His Kingdom, by grace...these are the valleys that must be exalted. And there are so many of us whose mountains of pride must be pulled down to the same level, by the same Gospel. If this happens, we will not need the 'bringing down' of condemnation. Flesh must be humbled- either we do it now, we humble ourselves that we may be exalted in due time; or it will have to be done to us through the terror of rejection. Time and again 'bringing low' or 'humiliation' is the result of condemnation (Dt. 28:43; 2 Chron. 28:19; Job 40:12; Ps. 106:43).

So how, then, can we 'humble ourselves'? When Israel was a child... she was humble, as we should be after our spiritual rebirth at baptism. It is evidently not something natural; for it is a fruit of the spirit we must develop. It isn't a natural timidity or nervousness or shyness. By realising our own sinfulness, we will realise our condemnation, and thereby be 'brought down'. For we are condemned for our behaviour, but saved out of that condemnation. The exact, vast debt is reckoned up- before we are forgiven (Mt. 18). We have been invited through the Gospel to sit down in the Kingdom: "But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 14:10-11). Humbling ourselves is therefore sitting down in the *lowest* place- not just a low place. Strictly, the Greek means 'the farthest' away from the Lord Jesus, who sits at the head of the table. Like Paul we must somehow get that deep and genuine apprehension that we are "chief of sinners"- and sit in the *lowest, farthest* place. This would mean that we 'each

esteemed our brother better than ourselves to be', not in any naïve, meaningless way; not seeing strengths where they simply don't exist; but seeing him [or her] that way simply in comparison to our own lowness. Seeing others as higher than ourselves is a sure remedy for every case of ecclesial friction and division. So often pride develops from a worry about what others will think of us, a desire to be seen as acceptable and not unusual. It leads to a hypersensitivity regarding what others may be implying about us [I am verily guilty of this]. The humbled mind will not see things in these terms. *If only we would each, personally, learn this lesson, or at least grasp the truth and beauty and power of it.* The publican was so worried about his own position before God that he paid no attention, so we sense, to the hypocritical brother next to him: "The publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner...this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for ...he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:13-14). That sin-conscious man is an essay in self-humbling. This is why David sometimes parallels "the meek" and the repentant sinner (e.g. Ps. 25:8,9).

The Lord in His time of dying was and is the definition of self-humbling: "But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Mt 23:11-12). Being a servant to others is the 'abasing' or [s.w.] humbling that will lead to exaltation. The Lord became a servant of all in His death (Mk. 10: 44,45). These things are brought together in Phil. 2:5-11, where we are invited to have nothing less than the mind of Christ in the self-humbling of the cross: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who...thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men...he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name...". The seven stages of the Lord's self-humiliation are matched by seven stages of the Father's exaltation of Him (read on in Phil. 2 and note them!). And this pattern is to be ours. This mind is to be in us. Because of this, "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other... look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil 2:3-4). Every time we look on the things of others rather than just our own, not seeking our own glory but esteeming others enough to see them as worth suffering for...we have achieved the spirit of the cross, we have reached self-humbling. As the Lord died for Himself and others, so we are to look on the things of our salvation *as well as* those of others. This must be the foundation principle of all aspirations to preach or strengthen our brethren: esteeming others, thinking they are worth the effort, seeking their salvation. Be concerned just as much that the guys at work get to the Kingdom, the old woman in the flat next door, that sister in the ecclesia you can't understand...as you are concerned that *you* get there. This will give us the motivation to humble ourselves to suggest meeting to break bread with others, humble ourselves to give a tract to someone or start a conversation, to start a spiritual conversation at a gathering with an unknown brother or sister or one with whom you have difficulties...for it is only pride and self-estimation that hold us back in these things. We live in a world which has made the fulfilment of personal aims of paramount importance. It has affected the fabric of every society, and become embedded in every mind. *To live to serve*, to put oneself down that others may rise...this is strange indeed. John the Baptist had this spirit, for he rejoiced that he decreased whilst the Lord's cause increased. Paul abased himself that others might be exalted (2 Cor. 11:7), after the pattern of the cross. God's gentleness, His humility / bowing down (Heb.) has made us great, lifted us up (Ps. 18:35). And we respond to it by humbling *ourselves*. The man who 'humbled himself' smote upon his breast in knowledge of his own sin and his Lord's grace (Lk. 18:13). The Greek phrase occurs elsewhere only once, again in Luke's thought, in

describing how those humbled by the vision of the cross beat upon their breasts (23:48)- surely in recognition of their sin and contrition before the grace of God outpoured. In the cross, we see self-humbling that we might be exalted. And we respond by likewise humbling ourselves, that others may be exalted. In practice this means guiding our words and example so that others are exalted, not speaking of our own achievements, *considering each other* as to how we may provoke them to righteousness (Heb. 10:24; earlier in 3:1 the writer speaks of *considering* the Lord Jesus, and this leads on to considering each other). And so, brethren dearly beloved...consider Him. Humble yourselves and become as that little child who stood so bashfully in the midst of men. *Know* that when Israel was a child, then God loved him. When he spoke trembling, as we should morning and night, then he was exalted...

2.15 A Way Of Life

2-15-1 A Way Of Life

One of the most beautiful things to behold is a newly baptized brother or sister coming to make the things of God's Truth their *way of life*. The daily reading of the Bible becomes a habit, firmly embedded in the daily routine of life; contact with other believers by letter or meeting means that slowly, the convert's social network becomes focused on other Christians rather than on the world. As a result, worldly friendships and habits slowly fade away; prayer becomes a regular part of life, before meals, morning and evening; slowly, there is the courage to preach the Gospel to others. In particular, a way of thinking develops that is centred upon the Father and His Son, which subconsciously gives priority to their things rather than those of this life. As the Preacher concludes, the life of keeping the commandments of God becomes "the whole man" (Ecc. 12:13). These changes are the natural outcome of the new focus. They simply happen, as a way of life develops that is based around spiritual things. Sadly, not all who are baptized make this change; their belief continues to consist, as it did at baptism, of accepting the truth of certain correct propositions about doctrine, but somehow the things of the Spirit fail to take over. And for all of us, we can find ourselves not living the *spirit* of the Christian life, but rather seeing our relationship with God in terms of certain specific actions or beliefs which we have done and feel comfortable having done...and nothing more. The fabric of our daily lives and thinking can be sadly unaffected by the high things to which we are called, so that our religion becomes a matter of external action rather than the possession of a spirit of life from which all our devotion naturally and joyfully springs.

A Way Of Life

There's no doubt that the Gospel must be a way of life, not certain actions like prayer, attendance of meetings and the breaking of bread which we religiously perform at certain times. God essentially seeks *the heart*, the unshareable self, to be given to Him: "my son, give me thine heart" (Prov. 23:26). The word 'spirit' is used in different senses in different contexts. It can mean the thinking and consciousness, and yet also 'power'. Yet these things are linked, in that as a man thinks and feels and desires in his heart, so he is (Prov. 23:7). Our physical actions, the way we use our 'power', are a reflection of our inner spirit. Likewise, the Spirit of God is *God in action*, God showing His power, and yet in its expression it articulates the inner mind and characteristics of God. Thus tasting the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit was tasting God's word, in that the miracles expressed the essential truths of

God's inner spirit as expressed in His word (Heb. 6:4,5). The miraculous gifts expressed God's will (Heb. 2:3), as His word does. God *is* His Spirit in the sense that all He does and speaks is an expression of His essential spirit. The Jews and Samaritans had the idea that all they needed to do was to occasionally visit a place of worship in order to have a relationship with Him. The Lord, as His manner was, cut right across this by saying that as God is Spirit, so the true worshippers would worship Him in Spirit. If we believe that God is Spirit, if all He does and says constantly expresses His Spirit, then our lives likewise must be of non-stop worship, not through going occasionally into a temple or ecclesial meeting, but in living a spirit of life that worships Him in every situation (Jn. 4:20-24).

The New Testament develops this theme of 'living in the spirit'. We can often understand 'spirit' in the NT to mean the dominant desire, the way of life, the essential intention, the ambience of a man's life. The idea of life in the Spirit is often placed in opposition to that of living under a legal code. We are asked to live a way of life, rather than mere obedience to a certain number of specific propositions. And yet whilst we are free from legal codes, we aren't free to do as we like. We are under "the law of the spirit" (Rom. 8:2), "the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). The law of Christ isn't only His specific teaching, but the person of the real, historical Jesus. This is the standard of appeal which should mould the spirit of our lives. We must live "according to Christ" (Rom. 15:5; Col. 2:8), and the character of Jesus is the basis of Paul's appeals to us to live a spiritual life (Rom. 15:3,7,8; 1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 5:2,25; Phil. 2:5-11; 1 Thess. 1:6). We should live "quietly", and we are exhorted to do this "by our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess. 3:12). Our imagination of who He was and how He would have lived must be our pattern. We are in this sense in the grip of a personality cult based upon Him. If we understand 'the law of Christ' in the same sense as 'the law of Moses' then we have missed the crucial message that is in Christ; we have merely exchanged one legal code for another. His is a spirit of grace which specifically, legally demands nothing and yet by the same token demands our all. And so in all our living and thinking, we must constantly be asking 'What would Jesus do? Is this the way of God's Spirit? Is this how the law of love teaches me to act? '. To live the life of the Spirit, to construct in daily living an ambience of spiritual life, is therefore a binding law. Living according to the spirit / mind / example of Jesus will mean that we naturally find the answers to some of the practical dilemmas which may arise in our lives. Thus we read that when Paul tried to go to preach in Bithynia "the spirit of Jesus suffered them not" (Acts 16:7 RV). Could it not be that the spirit of Jesus, a life lived after His pattern, compelled them to (let's imagine) go to visit a sick child and this meant they missed the transport leaving for Bithynia?

We may make 'laws' to help us keep this 'spirit', e.g:

- I will get up 40 minutes earlier than usual to do my Bible readings. So I set my alarm clock at 5:30 a.m.

- I won't have a television because if I do I'll watch things I know I shouldn't; I'm so weak. And I feel it will influence my general spirit of life.

- I won't listen to certain types of music. The empty words, the suggestive lyrics, will lead me to think that way too.

- I will try to remember something of Jesus every half hour.

These kind of 'laws' to govern a way of life aren't altogether bad. Our nature is such that we need them. But we can't impose them on others, neither must we think that by doing these things we have therefore achieved spirituality. We make them to help us create an ambience of spiritual life. Our overall way of life, rather than specific acts of righteousness, is what can be the motive force in overcoming the flesh. Through the spirit- the spiritual way of life- we mortify the flesh (Rom. 8:13). Through the Spirit we keep the truth (2 Tim. 1:14). This doesn't mean that somehow God's Spirit power in a miraculous sense makes us hold on. What it surely means is that if we live the Spiritual way of life, this will of itself enable us to keep walking in the true way. It's not that the temptations won't arise; but our way of life will be such that they no longer have so much power. The temptation to go drinking with the village boys on Friday night is so much less if every Friday, as part of your way of life, you go to study the Bible with someone. The spirit way of life changes us into the image of Christ progressively (2 Cor. 3:17,18); if we can make the Truth our overall way of life, we will be on an upward spiral of change. If we have the spirit within us, i.e. a spiritual mind, then the spirit of Christ will dwell within us, we will thereby be able to comprehend His love, and be filled again with the spirit...(Eph. 3:16-18 cp. 1 Cor. 3:16). Such is the upward spiral of spirituality that is possible for those who devote themselves to being spiritually minded.

The spiritual life renews (Tit. 3:5), giving us that newness of life, that ongoing baptism and resurrection experience, which Rom. 6:4 promises. This way of life, as it develops, creates its own momentum for further change. If we walk in the spirit (another way of describing the spiritual 'way of life') we will not fulfil the lust of the flesh (Gal. 5:16). The Galatians found that their flesh lusted against the spirit to the extent that they just couldn't do the things they knew they should- because they were not led of the spirit, they were still under law (Gal. 5:18). They didn't have a spiritual way of life, instead they were just trying to keep certain specific commandments, and they found they just couldn't live a victorious spiritual life. They didn't give their hearts to the things of the Truth, and so their spirit couldn't give rise to love, joy, peace, patience- the fruits of the spiritual life.

The key question is: how to get the spiritual mind in the first place? The words of God are spirit (Jn. 6:63). Daily, systematic contact with the mind of God through the study of His word is absolutely essential. We *must* read, and allow the things of God's spirit to enter us. For this is the engine that powers you in the upward spiral of which we have spoken. You get to the point where you can't lay your weary head down each night until you have 'done your readings'. They are, truly, our daily bread. And don't just read, but absorb the spirit, the ambience, which comes from them. You don't need to be 'getting points' from every verse or chapter you read. Just absorb the ambience of God's ways and being.

If we have God's spirit within us, we will keep in step with His spirit (Gal. 5:25 Gk.). Our spirit bears witness with God's Spirit- we know that our way of life is in harmony with Him, our spirit is His, and thereby we know that we are His children and united with the eternal life and now eternal spirit of His Son (Rom. 8:16). The way of life we live in Christ is an eternal life, an eternal spirit; in this sense we are living the eternal life, the life we will eternally live. This is how crucially important it is to be living the truth as a way of life. Go through your life and see how you can construct this ambience within it. To do so, you may need to root a lot of things out. What sort of novels (if any) are you reading? What do you watch? What do you let influence your mind and mould your perceptions? Do you find yourself walking around humming the words of some mindless song? Is it really wise to have the radio playing all the time, the television flickering from morning till evening? Can't we put some posters or verses on our walls, in our bedrooms, bathrooms...? Can we be bold enough to quit reading

and watching anything that is not spiritual? How involved do we get in the conversations of those we mix with in the world? How often in the daily round are we thinking of Christ as a person, as our Lord, King, Master, Captain, Bridegroom...? How often do we meditate on what we read and learnt yesterday from God's word? These are the things that ultimately, in the final, final analysis, are worth their weight in gold. The Lord taught that if our right hand offend, we must cut it off (Mt. 5:30). The right hand was a Hebrew idiom for the power, the thinking, the dominant desire of a man. If it's all taking us the wrong way, we must cut it off and cast it from us, with no regrets about what we have given up.

Ecclesial Spirit

The spirit of which we have spoken must be seen in our collective way of life too, and must affect, e.g., how we run our meetings. There is no Bible verse that teaches we *must* avoid wearing outrageous clothing, or that we *mustn't* get up in the middle of an exhortation and go for a walk, or turn round and start a conversation about the weather with the sister sitting behind us, or that we *must* take very noisy children out of the meeting. And neither should we seek to define all these things in rules, lest we return to Pharisaism. Once we define, we will be tempted to build hedges round the law, and hedges round them, until we feel we can't move or think without upsetting somebody. But on the other hand, we are under "the law of the spirit". We want to create an ambience in our meetings which gives glory to the Father and His Son, which inspires spirituality and sustained concentration upon them and their words. We *must* act with that law in mind. All the law, every possible type of legislation, is comprehended in the one simple law of loving our neighbour (Rom. 13:9). We aren't free to do, dress or speak just as we like; the law of love binds heavy upon us. The things of God's Kingdom don't revolve so much around laws (e.g. about what we should eat and drink) but around "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). It is attitudes which are important rather than specific acts of obedience. There is a fellowship of the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14) in the sense that all who live the same spiritually-centred life will thereby be bound together in a powerful and inevitable fellowship. When, for example, two Christian mothers strike up conversation about the difficulty of raising children in this present evil world, when two brethren talk about the difficulties of living as Christ would in today's business world...there is, right there, in those almost casual conversations, the fellowship of the spirit. It isn't just a social connection because we belong to the same denomination.

We have suggested that often when the NT speaks of the 'spirit', it refers to the spiritual way of life. Is. 26:8,9 parallels "the desire of my soul" with "my spirit"; it is the dominant desire of a man. For David, the salvation promised to him through Christ was "all my desire" (2 Sam. 23:5). The direction of his life was towards that end. 2 Chron. 15:12,15 parallels seeking God with having our whole desire for Him, giving all our heart and soul to Him. God judges a man's life with regard to where the essential, dominant desire of his heart is focused. This is why some of the kings of Judah are introduced with the comment that they did right in God's sight- even though it becomes apparent that they did many wrong things, and sometimes died committing wrong acts. But surely they were judged on their dominant desire, where their heart was, and not on their specific acts of failure. Likewise there are Biblical examples of where men can commit the same action but be judged quite differently. It all depends where the spirit is, in what overall direction the way of life is going. At judgment day, the Lord will commend the righteous for feeding Him etc.- and they will reply in genuine surprise, feeling that they truly have *not* done any of those things for which He commends them. The point is, their way of life was an unconscious doing of good; it is the mindset which legalistically remembers every act of righteousness which will be finally

rejected. Often, “desire” is seen by God as prayer (Ps. 10:17; 21:2; 27:4; 59:10; 92:11; 140:8; 145:19; Mt. 18:32; Rom. 10:1; 1 Jn. 5:15). God interprets that inner desire as prayer, even if it is not articulated in specific requests.

This all has a great relevance to us in ecclesial life. So often we hear words and see actions by our brethren which hurt, which tear us apart as we meditate upon their real import. And so churches or small groups of converts can become divided and embittered. But *try to see your brethren as God sees you*. He doesn’t max out on our specific words and actions; He sees the overall direction of our lives, and whilst taking note of our failings (as He did with those of Judah’s kings), He recognises us on the basis of the dominant desire of our hearts. He sees that we truly *seek* Him, even if we don’t get where we would like to. And so let’s try to recognise that our brethren are all going broadly the same direction as we are. You would stand at their graveside, surely, and know that here lies a man of God, one who will rise again and share eternity with his Lord and yours. You would do that because you realise, deep in your heart, that your brother was in his heart committed to his Lord. All the rest was surface irritation. And if you don’t see your brother like that, then you are condemning him. And for the sake of your eternal destiny, you must snap out of that mindset. We have to assume our brethren will be in the Kingdom. Paul did this even with Corinth; he wrote of how “*we shall judge angels*” (1 Cor. 6:3) when we are all accepted in the Kingdom. And his way of writing to the Thessalonians about the resurrection and judgment assumes that all of his readers would be accepted (“so shall *we* ever be with the Lord...ye are *all* the children of light”). We too can do nothing else but see each other like that. The impact of this is colossal. We’d rather shy away from it. But meditate awhile upon it. It can enrich and ennoble and dignify every gathering of the believers, from twos and threes meeting in apartments throughout Russia to the dozens now gathering in churches throughout Africa and India.

2-15-2 The Positivism Of Jesus

One hallmark of the spiritual way of life is an indomitably *positive spirit*. Not a simplistic naivety, blindly hoping for the best in an almost fatalistic way. But as the Father and Son are so essentially positive, so will we be, if we absorb something of His Spirit. Just consider these examples of the positivism of Jesus:

- The disciples are said not to have believed "for joy" (Lk. 24:41). But the Lord upbraided them for their arrant foolishness and plain unbelief. Despite His peerless faith, the Lord Jesus marvelled at the extent of other's faith (Mt. 8:10); and the Gospels stress how sensitive He was to the faith of others (Mt. 9:2,22,29; 15:28; Mk. 5:34; 10:52; Lk. 7:9,50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). Yet measured by His standards, they probably hardly knew what faith was. Yet He "marvelled" at their faith, even uttering an exclamation, it seems, on one occasion (Mt. 8:10). "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Lk. 7:9) suggests the Lord thought that Israel's faith was something *very* high; when their rejection of Him was the cruellest tragedy in their history. The disciples' sleepiness is excused in the statement "for their eyes were heavy" (Mk. 14:40), even though their falling asleep at that time was utterly shameful. Luke's record excuses them by saying they slept for sorrow- which isn't really possible. It's the grace of inspiration covering up for them. Yet He kindly says that their spirit is willing but their flesh was weak (Mk. 14:38); although elsewhere, the Lord rigorously demonstrates that mental attitudes are inevitably reflected in external behaviour, and therefore the difference between flesh and spirit in this sense is minimal. He spoke of how that band of rough, mixed up men were filled with the joy of little bridesmaids because He was among them (Lk. 5:34). Now this is an essay in imputed righteousness. The Lord saw the zeal of the uncertain,

misunderstanding disciples as storm troopers taking the city of the Kingdom of God by force- knowing exactly where they were coming from and where they were going (Mt. 11:12). And even after reprimanding them for their slowness of heart to believe, the record graciously says that they “believed not for joy”- although joy can never hinder faith.

- John, surrounded by apostasy and a break-up mentality, could “rejoice greatly that I have found certain of thy children walking in truth” (2 Jn. 4 RV). That at least some were holding on was a great joy to him. He focused on the positive things in ecclesial life.

- The chief rulers are described as believing on Christ (Jn. 12:42), even though their faith was such a private affair at that time that it was hardly faith at all. The positivism of Jesus counted them as believers. " My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God and do it" (Lk. 8:21), refers back to His recent parable of the good seed that “did” the word which they heard (8:15). But surely that group of fascinated, surface-interested onlookers didn’t all come into the good seed category, who held the word to the end, all their lives? He saw the hypocritical Pharisee Simon as being a man forgiven 50 pence, who therefore loved Him (Lk. 7:41). In the same chapter, the Lord recognised that John the Baptist had suffered a crisis of faith. But He tells the crowd that John wasn’t a reed shaken with the wind, an unstable believer (Lk. 7:24 cp. Is. 7:2), but the greatest of God’s servants; He overlooked the temporary failure, and judged the overall spirit of John.

- Whether the woman of Mk. 14:8 really understood that she was anointing His body for burial is open to question. But the Lord's positivism graciously imputed this motive to her. The women who came to the garden tomb weren't looking for the risen Lord; they came to anoint the body (Mk. 16:3). But their love of the Lord was counted to them as seeking Him (Mt. 28:5).

- The Lord condemned the Pharisees for devouring widow’s houses (Mk. 12:40), but then goes on to show how the widow who threw in all her wealth to the treasuries of the corrupt Pharisees had actually gained great approval in God’s eyes by doing so (Mk. 12:44). Out of evil, good came. The Lord didn’t just lament the cruel selfishness of the Jewish leadership. He pointed out how God worked through even this to enable a poor woman to please Him immensely. There is a wondrous ecology in all this; nothing is lost. Nothing, in the final end, can be done against the Truth, only for the Truth.

Paul’s Positivism

Paul likewise exudes a very positive spirit about his brethren, notably Corinth, in the face of so much reason to be discouraged. When dealing with the problem of fornication, he doesn’t appeal to any legal code, not even the ten commandments, nor the agreement at the Council of Jerusalem, because he was appealing for life to be lived according to the spirit rather than any law. Likewise when writing about meat offered to idols in 1 Cor. 8, he could so easily have appealed to the agreements made at the Council as recorded in Acts 15. But he doesn’t. For love’s sake he appeals. He asks them “judge ye what I say”, he seeks for them to live a way of life, rather than obey isolated commandments as a burden to be borne. It is simply so that brethren and sisters, men and women, prefer simple yes / no commandments rather than an appeal to a way of life. In those communities and fellowships where everything is reduced to a mere allowed / not allowed, there tends to be less internal division than if it is taught that life must be lived by principles. Paul was smart enough to know this, especially with his background in legalism. And yet he chose not to lay the law down with Corinth; instead he

appealed to a spirit of life, even though he must have foreseen the strife that would come of it.

2-15-3 God And Israel

" Some" Jews didn't believe (Rom. 3:3); the majority, actually, but the Father is more gentle than that. The whole tragic history of God's relationship with Israel is a sure proof of His essentially positive character. Right at their birth by the Red Sea, the Almighty records that " the people feared Yahweh, and believed Yahweh, and his servant Moses" (Ex. 14:23). No mention is made of the Egyptian idols they were still cuddling (we don't directly learn about them until Ez. 20). Nor do we learn that this " belief" of theirs lasted a mere three days; nor of the fact that they rejected Moses, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. " There was no strange god" with Israel on their journey (Dt. 32:12); but there were (Am. 5:26). The reconciliation is that God counted as Israel as devoted solely to Him. The Angel told Moses that the people would probably want to come up the mountain, closer to God, when in fact in reality they ran away when they saw the holiness of God; almost suggesting that the Angel over-estimated their spiritual enthusiasm (Ex. 19:21-24 cp. 20:18). Likewise the Angel told Moses that the people would hear him, " and believe thee for ever" (Ex. 19:9). Things turned out the opposite. At this time, God saw no iniquity in Israel (Num. 23:21). He fulfilled His promise at Sinai that if they were obedient, He would make them His people; and He did, counting them as obedient. Yet the events of the intervening forty years hardly sound like Israel being obedient; He " suffered their manners" forty years (Ps. 95:10; Acts 13:18). And yet at the end of that period, they were counted as having been sufficiently obedient to be made God's people (Ex. 19:5 cp. Dt. 27:9).

Even when God punished Israel, He seems to later almost take the blame for their judgments; thus He says that He left some of the Canaanite nations in the land to teach Israel battle experience (Jud. 3:2 NIV). Yet elsewhere the presence of those remaining nations is clearly linked to Israel's faithlessness, and their survival in the land was actually part of God's punishment of Israel. He almost excuses Israel's apostasy by saying that they had not seen the great miracles of the Exodus (Jud. 2:7). " The portion of the children of Judah was too much for them" (Josh. 19:9) almost implies God made an error in allocating them too much; when actually the problem was that they lacked the faith to drive out the tribes living there. Likewise " the coast of the children of Dan went out too little for them" (Josh. 19:47), although actually " The Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountain: for they would not suffer them to come down to the valley" (Jud. 1:34). When Dan fought against Leshem, this one act of obedience is so magnified in Josh. 19:47 to sound as if in their zeal to inherit their territory they actually found they had too little land and therefore attacked Leshem. But actually it was already part of their allotted inheritance. Yet God graciously comments: " all their inheritance had not fallen unto them among the tribes of Israel" (Jud. 18:1).

Further such examples at the time of the conquest could be furnished; they are summarized in the conclusion: " The Lord gave unto Israel all the land...and they possessed it, and dwelt therein...there stood not a man of all their enemies before them" (Josh. 21:43,44). But their enemies did stand before them, they didn't possess all the land. Yet God puts it over so positively, as if it's a story with a happy ending- when actually it's a tragedy. Even when rebuking them, God sees Israel as in some ways " perfect" (Is. 42:18-20). Israel were like Sodom, and yet they weren't treated like Sodom (Is. 1:9,10). They were Jeshurun, the upright one, but they kicked at God (Dt. 32:15). Their request for a human king was, as God Himself

mightily demonstrated to them, an utter rejection of Him, and He grieved because of it. And yet when God gave them a King, He expresses His decision in quite a different tone: " I will send thee a man (Saul)...that he may save my people out of the hand of the Philistines: for I have looked upon my people, because their cry is come unto me" (1 Sam. 9:16). God speaks as if the gift of Saul was akin to the provision of Moses, to save poor Israel from their unwarranted persecution. Actually, Saul was slain by the Philistines- in His foreknowledge, the Almighty knew all about Saul. But in His pure grace, He doesn't reflect this in the way He speaks at this time.

This God of absolute grace and enthusiasm for our redemption really is our God, just as He was Israel's God, and is manifested in our Lord Jesus. When finally He appears, we shall be able to say that " Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him" ; He will be the character that we expect Him to be. The believer who thinks his Lord is a hard man will find Him like this; but to us who know Him as the Lord of all grace, this is how He will surely be. In the meantime, our experience of Him and His character will in itself lead us to the positive expression of His Name in every aspect of our daily lives: from our objection to violent military activity, to our speech, even right down to our body language.

2-15-4 The Hopefulness Of God

Israel never really wholeheartedly committed themselves to Yahweh, and yet 2 Chron. 20:33 positively and hopefully says: " *As yet* the people had not prepared their hearts unto the God of their fathers" . They never did. Especially in the preaching of the word of salvation to those who they knew wouldn't respond, the Father and Son show their hopeful spirit. "Are you also *yet* without understanding?" (Mt. 15:16), the Lord asked the disciples; as if to say that He was surprised the disciples still hadn't come to the understanding which He hoped the Pharisees soon would. The good shepherd searches for the sheep until He finds it. John 10 is full of reference to Ezekiel 34, which describes God's people as perishing on the mountains, eaten by wolves. But the Lord Jesus set Himself to do that which was impossible- to search *until He found*, even though He knew that some were already lost. Our attitude to those lost from the ecclesia and to those yet out in the world must be similar. The Lord knew there would not be repentance by Israel. But He went to the fig tree seeking fruit, even though it wasn't the time for fruit (Mk. 11:13). He saw the crowds who wanted only loaves and fishes as a great harvest (Mt. 9:37).

The Lord Jesus told Paul about the Jews: "...get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me" (Acts 22:18). And yet Paul always appealed first of all to the Jews; and later, despite the Holy Spirit repeatedly warning him not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22,23; 21:11), he went there. He hoped against hope that even in the light of the foreknowledge that Israel would reject the Gospel, somehow they might change. Likewise God told Ezekiel that Israel would not hear his preaching (Ez. 3:7); and yet Ezekiel repeatedly prefaced his preaching addresses with an appeal to *please hear* God's word (6:3; 13:2; 18:25; 20:47; 34:7; 36:1,4). He was hoping against hope; his preaching work was asking him to attempt the impossible. To make a nation hear who would not hear. Jeremiah likewise was told that Israel wouldn't hear him (7:27), but still he pleaded with them to hear (9:20; 10:1; 11:6; 16:12; 17:24; 38:15); God's hope was that perhaps they would hearken (26:3) although He had foretold they wouldn't. In this yet again we see the hopefulness of God. And in similar vein, knowing the destruction that would come on all except Noah, God waited in the hope that more would be saved. He as it were hoped against His own foreknowledge that more would be saved (1 Pet. 3:20).

2-15-5 A Positive Spirit

Our task of witness may likewise seem hopeless. We need the same positive spirit of heroism in our witness which Jeremiah and Ezekiel had, as they reflected the indomitable Spirit of God in this matter of human salvation. Our unbelieving families, our workmates, our neighbours, seem to be stony ground to the point that it just isn't worth bothering. But we need a positive spirit. People *are* interested. It seems to me that world-wide, in every country I visit, there are more people interested today than there were ten years ago. There *is* interest in our message! And moreover, I never cease to be amazed that those I think would never be interested *are* in fact interested, deep below the irreligious surface. It's so easy to have a negative spirit. Are people sincere? Do they just get baptized in the hope of material help? Can we cope with so many converts? Won't many of them leave? What does this person really believe about doctrine? Can you believe them? Isn't this or that the thin end of the wedge? This isn't the spirit of the Lord's parable about the drag net fishermen (note, not fishing with a line for a special, prize catch- but concentrating on saving as many as possible, of whatever quality, Mt. 13:47). But there are other questions, more personal. Can we afford it? Can I, should I, allow my worldly advantages to slip just so I can do this or that for the Lord's cause? Can I afford to write so many letters? Do I have time to go to that Bible study? What about giving more time to revising for my exams rather than doing the readings? Our knowledge of the positive spirit of Christ means that we don't think like that. One of the many slanderous allegations against Paul was that he was indecisive and negative spirited. His response was that this was not so, for the gospel and Lord whom he preached were so essentially positive, that he too had had become likewise through his experience of them: "...our word toward you was not yea and nay. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us... was not yea and nay, but in him was yea. For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us" (2 Cor 1:18-20). And in that knowledge, let us unashamedly show forth a positive spirit about how God sees us ourselves, about our brethren, and in our witness to the world.

2.16 "By your words...": Controlling Our Words

2-16-1 Controlling Our Words

I write this time about something I cannot but flinch at addressing. Something in which I cannot but feel more deeply than usual my own sense of serious inadequacy. It is the matter of the tongue, of our words, of what we say and don't say, and how we say them. It may be that we all have a similar feeling of awkwardness about this matter, knowing our failings. But this doesn't help me feel any better at all about this matter. The fact is, by our words we will be condemned and by our use of words we will be counted as righteous. The importance of our words cannot be overstressed. Judah were condemned "because their tongue and their words are against the Lord" (Is. 3:8). All their idolatry, perversion etc. was summarized in their words. Again and again, Isaiah and the prophets say that the reason for Israel's condemnation was their words, even those they said under their breath- "your tongue hath muttered perverseness" (Is. 5:24). "Their princes shall fall by the sword for the rage of their tongue" (Hos. 7:16). "The inhabitants thereof have spoken lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth. Therefore also will I make thee sick in smiting thee, in making thee desolate because of thy sins" (Mic. 6:12,13). Truly "death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof" (Prov. 18:21).

The Hebrew word usually translated “tongue” is also put by metonymy for the person- because a man’s words reflect who he really and essentially is. And this means we shouldn’t justify our bad speaking by feeling that underneath, we aren’t *really* like that. We can’t shout and scream hard words at our partner or children or brethren and think that really, we love them underneath. Let’s not think that the way words come out is something involuntary. Job and his friends (Job 4:2) all justified their inappropriate words by reasoning that a man just couldn’t but speak out what he felt given the situation. But they all learnt in the end how far better it would have been not to have spoken as they did. They laid their hands upon their mouths. Words *can* be controlled. We *are* culpable for them. Because a man’s words are counted as who he is:

“Surely the serpent will bite without enchantment; and a *babbler* [same word translated ‘tongue’] is no better” (Ecc. 10:11)

“Ye are taken up in the lips of *talkers* [s.w. tongue]” (Is. 59:3)

“Let not an evil *speaker* [s.w. tongue] be established” (Ps. 140:11)

“Ye are taken up in the lips of *talkers* [s.w. tongues]” (Ez. 36:3)

2-16-2 Judged By Our Words

It is a common theme that the wicked snare themselves, falling into their own pit, judged by their own words, rather than God specifically snaring them (e.g. Ps. 7:15; 9:15; 57:6; Prov. 26:27; 28:10; Ecc. 10:8). From their own mouth and words men will be judged (Mt. 12:37; Lk. 19:22 cp. 2 Sam. 1:16; 1 Kings 20:40). It could even be that the Lord cites the condemnatory words of the rejected uttered during their lifetimes and leaves these as their condemnation. Woe, therefore, to he or she who has said unrepentantly that they don’t want to be in the Kingdom if brother x or sister y are going to be there. “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life; but he that openeth wide his lips [in this life] shall have destruction” at judgment day (Prov. 13:3). The link between the final verdict and the words we use today is that clear. When the Jews spoke out the judgment they thought should come on those who killed the Master’s Son, the Lord cited their words back to them as description of their own forthcoming condemnation (Mt. 21:41,43). This is just as David was invited to speak words of judgment on a sinner, and was told: “*thou art the man*”.

Whatever we have spoken in darkness will be revealed for all to hear and know (Lk. 12:2,3)- our words will as it were be cited back to us before others in that day. We will be judged by our words. The Lord says this in the context of warning us not to have the leaven of hypocrisy in the matter of our words- there’s no point in saying one thing to one person and something different to someone else, because our words will be gone through at the judgment and will be open for everyone to hear. We should live, He implies, as if we are now before the judgment; speaking things we wouldn’t be ashamed for anyone to hear. Note in passing how he says that hypocrisy in our words is like leaven, that corrupts and spreads within an individual and a community. Once somebody starts being hypocritical with their words, someone else does. And we’ve all seen plenty of this, in office departments, classrooms, men working together, women running childcare groups together, in families...and even in ecclesias. Someone has to break the cycle of saying one thing to one, and something different to someone else.

The idea of dishonest words being like yeast, a source of corruption (Lk. 12:1-3), takes us to Mt. 12:32-37: “Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him... Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh... every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified [then], and by thy words thou shalt be condemned”. The fruit of the tree equals the words (as in Prov. 12:14; 13:2); a corrupt man will speak corrupt words. And these will be the basis of his condemnation. By contrast “the fruit of *our* lips” should be praise (Heb. 13:15). “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth” (Eph. 4:29) refers to the Lord’s words- the corrupt fruit is corrupt words. But the idea is that we bear the fruit *now*- our words *now* are our fruit. The Lord puts it all another way in Lk. 6:44 when He says that men don’t “gather” good fruit from a corrupt tree. The language of gathering is very much that of judgment to come; and yet the fruit is produced and gathered now, in the words / fruit that comes out of our mouth. This is why right now we can judge a false teacher, by his corrupt words [this is one of the contexts of the Lord’s words about corrupt trees and fruit- we see the fruit *now*]. The corrupt man *will* speak villainy (Is. 32:6). But corrupt words don’t just mean expletives- the false teacher would be too smart to use them. He comes in sheep’s clothing.

Lk. 6:41-44 gives us an example of “corrupt” words; words which create a corrupting spiritual influence in a man or in a community. One may *say* to his brother that he must cast out the splinter from his eye, although he has a plank in his own. And the Lord goes on to say that a good tree doesn’t bring forth corrupt fruit. The corrupt fruit, as in the above passages, means ‘corrupt words’. And in Lk. 6:45 the Lord concludes by saying that “for of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh”. The corrupt fruit are the corrupt words of Lk. 6:42- saying, ‘My brother, I’m very sorry, but I just have to correct you, you are so obviously wrong and stupid to walk round with a splinter in your eye, I can correct your spiritual vision, because I see perfectly. At the moment your spiritual perception [‘eye’] is just hopeless. Your understanding of this passage and that verse are totally wrong, your standards of dress and behaviour are an affront to our holy God. Without me, and listening to what I tell you, you’ll never stumble your way to the Kingdom’. The Lord understood ‘the eye’ as one’s spiritual vision (Mt. 6:22,23). These kind of words, in essence, are the real leaven; they corrupt / pull apart over time communities as well as individual faith. These criticisms work away within a brother or sister, deaffirming them as believers, deaffirming them for who they are, raising doubt and not hope, humiliating them that they haven’t made the grade ...until they are corrupted. We will be judged by our words.

We have a specific example of a man being punished in judgment for his words, and it may well be the basis for the Lord’s teaching here: “When the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks. For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done this...” (Is. 10:11,12). And there follows a long quotation of his words. These words were the ‘fruit of his heart’- out of the abundance of his heart his mouth had spoken. And these words were almost cited back to him at the time of his condemnation. We know, however, that it is quite possible for human actions and words to *not* reflect the heart. Consider how Sennacherib invaded Judah but in his heart “he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so” (Is. 10:7). This is why the Lord clearly condemns the thought as being as bad as the action, even if the action isn’t actually committed. Ps. 55:21 laments how words

can not reflect the true state of a man's heart: "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". So why, then, is there so much emphasis on spoken words as the basis for judgment to come? Surely it is that although thoughts will also be judged, and the hypocrites revealed for who they are, it doesn't follow that a good man sometimes uses 'corrupt speech'. It's impossible. A good man cannot bring forth bad words. But a bad man can sometimes bring forth words which seem good on the surface, but which are in fact counterfeit. But it can't happen another way- a good man's words aren't just his surface level sin. And I for one flinch at this; because when I have to own up to having said inappropriate words, my flesh wants me to think that in my heart, I didn't mean them. And yet, ruthlessly, I must press the point: bad words reflect a bad heart. We can't justify them. We must repent of them, and by the influence of knowing God, through and in His Son and His word, we must change the state of mind that leads to them. And we should be, on one hand, simply *worried*: that bad words came out of a bad heart. And a good man cannot bring forth such corrupt fruit. There is with some especially the problem of temper, saying things well beyond what they really mean in hot blood. But here again, the words of hot blood do reflect something of the real man or woman. The tongue is a fire that can lead to condemnation, whatever and however we justify its' words as a relatively harmless outcome of our personality type. This may be true, but the words that result aren't harmless. We will be judged by our words.

Speaking of the sudden destruction of the wicked at the future judgment, David reflected: "So they shall make their own tongues to fall upon themselves" (Ps. 64:8). Unsound speech will be condemned, or perhaps [will lead to our] condemnation (Tit. 2:8). The implication seems to be that our words will be quoted back to us during the judgment process. Brother, sister, think about this. It doesn't need me to tell you what words you should or shouldn't be saying. This thought alone will elicit from you acute self-awareness and self-knowledge in this matter. If you meditate upon it- that our words will be cited to us at judgment day. By our words we really will be justified or condemned. The false prophets were judged according to their words: "Every man's word shall be his burden" at the day of Babylonian judgment (Jer. 23:36). Gal. 6:5 alludes here in saying that at the judgment, every man shall bear his own burden- i.e., that of his own words. We truly 'make the answer now'. The Saviour came more to save than condemn (Jn. 12:47); it is men who condemn themselves as inappropriate to receive eternal life. It is *their* words, not His, which will be the basis of their rejection. We must so speak as those who will be judged, knowing that he who showed no mercy in his words will receive none (James 2:12,13); our words of mercy or condemnation, and perhaps *the way we say them*, will be the basis upon which we will be accepted or rejected. "A fool's mouth is [will be] his destruction, and his mouth calleth for strokes [i.e. condemnation at the judgment, Lk. 12:47,48]" (Prov. 18:6). By our words we may be *shouting out for condemnation*. "In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride [with which he will be beaten at the day of judgment]; but the lips of the wise shall preserve them" from such a fate (Prov. 14:3). Our words are as fire, and are to be connected with the fire of condemnation (James 3:5,6), which our words have already kindled (Lk. 12:49). Likewise wrongly gained wealth is the fire that will burn those who have it at the last day (James 5:3). James is picking up a figure from Is. 33:11, again concerning the final judgment: "Your [own] breath [i.e. words], as fire, shall devour you". Their breath, their words, were as fire which would in the end be the basis of their condemnation. Nadab and Abihu kindled strange fire, and it was with that fire that God burnt them up, in symbol of His destruction of all the wicked at judgment day (Lev. 10:2).

Quite simply, by our words today we are deciding our eternal future. We will be judged by our words. The rejected will have cried out for their own condemnation through their words. Consider:

We can bite and devour one another in gossip and slander (Gal. 5:15).

As the Jews did in their day of condemnation in the Babylonian invasion (Jer. 19:9); and as the rejected may literally do in the future, according to this type.

The Jews gnashed their teeth against Stephen (Acts 7:54)

As they will at the judgment (Mt. 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51)

We have dwelt on the negatives- the need to avoid bad speech. But we must match this with a speech salted with salt, a figure for the peace that there should be between us. As salt was added to the sacrifices to make them acceptably burn, so good speech is vital for our final acceptance. And not only must we speak words of comfort, love and grace; but words of *power and meaning*. The Lord said that we will give account for every idle / useless word we speak (Mt. 12:36,37). The same word is used in Mt. 20:6 about the idle, unworking labourers doing nothing. The Lord may be warning that if our lives are just empty words, we must give account for these words. We can so easily be as the son who *says* he will go work in the vineyard but doesn't go (Mt. 21:31). For we live in a world of words that lack power, bereft of meaning. Promises mean nothing, there is no substance and underpinning to words. Yet *we* are to speak "as oracles of God", reflecting the Father's speech in our own.

2-16-3 Bridling The Tongue

We must realize that it is perfectly possible to have an appearance of spirituality and yet make no real effort to control our words: "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain" (James 1:26). Peter likewise teaches the possibility of bridling the tongue: "For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile" (1 Pet. 3:10). And yet straight away we run into a seeming contradiction with James 3:7-10: "Every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh". James himself appeals in his letter for us to bridle the tongue. But here he seems to say that the tongue is uncontrollable, and "we"- he includes himself- use it to both bless God and curse men. And he goes on to say that this shouldn't be so, because a good tree brings forth good fruit, i.e. words. Inappropriate words from our mouths indicate that there is something fundamentally wrong with our spirituality. What is the reconciliation of this? I suggest that James, despite being a leading brother, is showing a chink in his own armour, and thereby empowering his message all the more. He is saying that he himself has to admit that "we", including himself, do sometimes say inappropriate things. The tongue can be bridled, it can be as Peter puts it 'refrained'. But in

practice, no man seems able to totally tame the tongue. And this is why James also says in this very context that we shouldn't be eager to be teachers, because it is almost inevitable that we will use words wrongly and thereby offend our brother, with all the Biblical implications this carries: "For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man" (3:2). James, a teacher in the ecclesia, a Master in Israel, says that "we", himself included, at times offend others; because "the tongue can no man tame". And yet it *can* be bridled, refrained, tamed, just as a horse can be tamed by use of a bridle. Surely what James is saying is this: 'This matter of the tongue worries me no end. I know I, and all of us, could tame our tongues. It's vital we do. But inappropriate words do still come out of me, and you. And it worries me, because a good tree doesn't bear such bad fruit. It seems no man among us can tame his tongue as he ought. Oh wretched men that we are. Me especially, because I'm your teacher, James the brother of Jesus Himself. Yes, let us strive the more earnestly in this matter of bridling the tongue. But who in the end shall deliver us from this bondage of corruption, this seeming inability to live and speak and do and be as we ought to? I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord and His saving grace'. Amen.

"Let my words be sweet

Because tomorrow I shall have to eat them"

2-17 Starting Right

We all know from experience that how we start each day is important. Indeed, how we start any enterprise is crucial- hence the need for a sound understanding of the basic Gospel before we're baptized. We so often meet the phrase "rose early in the morning" in the Hebrew Bible. Strong defines the Hebrew *shawkam* translated "rose early" as essentially meaning "to incline the shoulder to a burden... literally to load up on the back of man" (1). In this we see an evident connection with the Lord's thought about taking up the cross *daily*, for that surely implies we are to take it up each morning (Lk. 9:23). Men and women had arisen each morning for 4000 years and inclined their shoulders to the burden of the day, loaded themselves with it onto their back. And the Lord now took humanity further, in redefining that "load", that burden, as His cross. Practically, does this not mean that we are to reflect as we come to consciousness each morning that we are to load ourselves with His cross? This thought need not necessarily lead to an image of having to burden ourselves with an impossible, awful weight. For again in allusion to this idea of loading oneself up each morning, the Lord spoke of how His burden is *light*! Here perhaps is one of the finest paradoxes of the spiritual life- that His cross, the life of self-sacrifice and self-giving unto the very end, is indeed heavy and demanding... yet in another sense it is "light", far lighter than the burdens of legalism which Pharisaic religion bound [and binds] upon people.

And so maybe we should all make a conscious effort to think of the idea of daily carrying the Lord's cross, each time we awake. In those moments of regaining consciousness, Job realized that God "visits" us every morning, He 'seeks' us then (Job 7:18,21). Through his sufferings, Job came [as we all do in such times] to a very deep understanding of the essence of God- and I think this understanding of God's morning 'visiting' and 'seeking' of us each morning is indeed valuable. May God not 'find' us simply too busy and stressed and rushing around each morning that we have no thought for Him. Perceiving this, David made a promise to God which we could all copy: "My voice shall you hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto you, and will look up" (Ps. 5:3). Are we rolling out of bed, irritated by the alarm clock and then dashing to the bathroom and thence to the kitchen and

thence to the day's work... with no thought for God? The language of 'directing' or 'gathering' our prayer together, looking up to God... all speaks of a conscious attempt at thought control and marshalling of our thoughts towards our Father. The Psalms give further insight into the disciplined nature of David's prayer-life: "Evening and morning and at noon will I pray" (Ps. 55:17); "I will sing aloud of thy mercy in the morning" (Ps. 59:16); "in the morning shall my prayer come before you" (Ps. 88:13); "to praise your mercy in the morning, and your faithfulness every night" (Ps. 92:2); "before the dawning of the morning, I hope in your word" (Ps. 119:147). This kind of self-discipline is the utter essence of practical Christianity. It is through this that we will realize every morning that God is our "arm", our strength, for the coming day (Is. 33:2); and God's mercies are only renewed every morning in that the righteous man *thinks afresh about them* every morning (Lam. 3:23)- for God's mercy itself is around the clock! Likewise the comment in Zeph. 3:5 that God's judgments are revealed every morning only becomes true in that the believer meditates upon God's word each morning.

And in return, as it were, David expected to be caused to hear God's lovingkindness every morning, and to be taught the way he should take- all because he would every morning 'lift up his soul unto God' (Ps. 143:8). All this was the pattern of daily life for the Lord Himself, who was noted for rising up early and praying (Mk. 1:35). Is. 50:4 prophesies of the Lord Jesus that morning by morning, God awoke His ear "to learn as a disciple". That last phrase is surely to signal the intended similarities between the Lord's path of growth, and that of all disciples. The next two verses go on to predict that because of this morning-by-morning teaching process, "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair; I hid not my face from shame and spitting" (Is. 50:5,6). Thus again we come to the cross, the life of cross carrying, as the end result of our morning reflections. It was from His own experience that the Lord could bid us take up our cross- *His* cross- each morning. The unbelieving world is repeatedly characterized as walking in a crooked path (Lk. 3:5; Acts 2:40; Phil. 2:15 and often in Proverbs). Quietly starting every day right is part of our walking in a *straight* path, following the way of the cherubim; and by walking in that straight daily path we will not have opportunity to stumble (Heb. 12:13).

With the advent of electric lighting and now the internet, more and more people find themselves claiming to be "night owls" by nature- sleeping late and getting up late. But that's not the kind of lifestyle which there was in Biblical times, nor am I convinced it's physically or spiritually healthy, nor is it really natural. How often do we get up late and have a good conscience about it? How often do we get up later than we planned, and find ourselves madly rushing to start the day, and never quite get our spiritual grip as we should? Some of the most spiritually minded folk I know are those who get up early and begin each day with prayer, Bible reading and meditation. I suspect that these things are far more effective done before the day starts than after midnight. For the "after midnight" approach often leads to getting up late and starting a day with no or little spiritual basis; and the life lived that day reflects that. At the very least, I ask you to think about these things in your life... for it's how we live out our days in this life which is the essence of how we will eternally be. 'Rising up early' was a characteristic of Abraham, who's set up as a pattern for us all. Moses and Joshua are also frequently described in this way. There's another Hebrew term (*qum*) for getting up in the morning, which seems to just literally mean to rise up. And- significantly, I feel- this is the term applied to unbelieving men when they are described as getting up and doing something. The idea of *shawkam*, getting up early and picking up the day's burden, is mostly a feature of the records of righteous men and women.

Our early morning thoughts are fair indicators of how we really are with God. Interestingly, Israel are criticized for their early morning attitudes- in the mornings they fantasized after their neighbours' wives (Jer. 5:8; Hos. 7:6), got up and wanted to get drunk again (Is. 5:11), had unjust thoughts about others (Jer. 21:12; Mic. 2:1). That's quite some emphasis- God was *so* unhappy with what His people thought about in the mornings. And Zeph. 3:7 is perhaps the most challenging of all- God condemned His people because they rose each morning and cast off all their opportunities (Heb.), despite Him every morning [potentially] revealing His word to them (Zeph. 3:5). They allowed themselves to be simply too busy to see all that God potentially enabled for them every single day. And what about us? God has prepared huge potential achievement for each of us- but we tend to fritter our days away in busyness and poor planning and lack of a self-disciplined life.

Several times God speaks of His rising up early in the morning through the ministry of the prophets, every single day since Israel left Egypt (2 Chron. 36:15; Jer. 7:13,25). The figure is stressed- God Himself rose up early every day to teach and appeal to His people (Jer. 32:33). Alarm clocks have changed our appreciation of this. Have you ever had to make yourself wake up before dawn, without an alarm clock? You can only do it by having a deep internal, subconscious awareness that you must get up early. You don't sleep well, you keep waking up and wondering if it's time to get up. So to make oneself rise up early was easily understood as a figure expressing great mental effort. And God did this *every day* for centuries... This figure of rising up early is surely the basis for the Lord's parable in Mt. 20:1- where God is likened to a man going out early in the morning to hire labourers. It is through the ministry of His word that God does this- each morning that word calls us to labour for Him in His vineyard. Israel didn't notice the huge effort God puts into His word- that every day He rose early and taught them. We can also misunderstand Biblical inspiration to mean that God effortlessly inspired "the original autographs" long ago, and moved on; but actually the whole process is an ongoing and incredible outgiving of God's energy in appealing to us. And... in our mismanaged, weakly disciplined lives, is it so that we don't even make time to read His word daily? If Job could value God's word *more* than His regular daily food... then for us too, regular contact with His word should be part of the atmosphere of life within which we live.

It's not only how we start our days that's important. The Mosaic law required sacrifices to be offered every morning and evening- at the start and end of the working day (2). And there was the warning not to let the offering of other sacrifices tempt the people to think that the "continual burnt offering" was therefore not to be taken seriously on those days (Num. 28:10 etc.). I find a powerful lesson for myself here. The regular, purposeful beginning and ending of each day with devotion to the Lord is something which nothing else should ever displace. I was recently working with a group of fine brothers and sisters trying to plaster and paint a house against a deadline. We worked day and night quite literally- and afterwards confessed to each other that in those days, our prayer and Bible reading had taken a major slip. Of course at the time, we all told ourselves that we were about the Lord's work... which we were. But my point is that the "continual burnt offering" of devotional 'quiet time' with the Lord, prayer and Bible reading, really must not slip. I challenge us to start each day with some "quiet time", to make Him our arm every morning, to strive the harder for a more disciplined life- with the dynamic in it all being the transfixing experience of knowing Jesus as our finest friend, inspiring brother, matchless Saviour, Son of God.

Notes

(1) Hence there is a word play in Gen. 21:14, where the word *shawkam* occurs twice. Abraham "rose up early" (*shawkam*) in the morning, took bread, water and Hagar's child, and "laid [them] on her shoulder" (*shawkam*). I understand from this that Abraham really fellowshiped with the suffering laid upon Hagar; he did it with a very sad heart, feeling for Hagar to the point of realistic empathy.

(2) Probably many readers have wondered why the Hebrew day begins at sunset and ends in the morning. I'd be interested in others' comments on this. The answer presumably goes back to the timing of creation- implying God started work on day one in the darkness, and the evening and the morning became the first day (Gen. 1:5)- and the sequence thus continued. God's creative activity begins with all of us in the darkness, and creatively works to bring us through to the light. Interestingly, *ehad*, translated "first" in Gen. 1:5, can imply 'unified'. The two periods- day and night- become united into one "day". The light and the dark, the created and the not yet created, the achieved and not yet achieved, are somehow united in God's understanding of our 'days'.

2-18 The 'Wow!' Factor

David spoke for every one of us when he considered the sky, the work of God's fingers, and wondered "What is man, that You are mindful of him, and the son of man, that You visit him?". We each need to take a few minutes out of our busy lives and meditate upon what eternity means. To just close our eyes and think of how the Kingdom will go on and on, and on, and on... until the mind trips, and we're left with that sensation of 'Surely there must be an end... another phase... but no... *still* on and on...yes really, *for ever*'. In words I have no chance to simulate this feeling... you have to do it for yourself. I think sometimes of a line that just keeps going on... of wooshing through stars eternally...

And then you come back to daily reality, and inevitably wonder: 'Who am I, that God should pick me up and give *me* such a wonderful future'? Who am I, a European guy who wears glasses, born in a London hospital, living off Dzirciema Prospekt in Riga, sitting in my apartment, watching the snow fall... to live for *ever*? And moreover, to be *given* such a gift? To give me say 10,000 years of nice living in return for 70 years of mostly reasonable behaviour [by human standards] would be very generous; but *eternal* life is something of a different order of grace. The extent of the free gift is quite out of proportion to anything we may have done. Here we are up against pure grace. And we have to feel 'Wow!'. But the feeling of 'wow' can't remain just a passing feeling of a moment; it has to find issue in our lives. It means that *we* in our turn will be forgiving and acceptant of others; all the petty arguments [theological and otherwise] over which people waste the thinking and mindsets of a lifetime become so irrelevant. If God is going about doing this huge grace *for me*, then I will jump at the chance to be generous, forgiving etc. to others. And we too will seek to do 'Wow!' things for others. God's generosity is a pattern to us. Thus the words "He has dispersed abroad; he has given to the poor" are used in 2 Cor. 9:9 about God; and in Ps. 112:9 about the generosity of the believer. As our wedding anniversary approached one year, I asked a mature brother what he suggested I did for Cindy. His advice was 'Do something which will make her gasp 'Wow!''. And just as God's grace has made us gasp 'Wow!', we need to think how we can make others utter the same gasp at the grace we show them. It could be redecorating an old sister's apartment; fixing up something for her; writing a letter sympathizing with someone over something apparently trivial which we noticed in their lives. But just as God must've 'thought out' His wonderful plan of lavishing grace upon us [for 'the word' existed first and then 'became flesh'], we too will need to take time to think out our

plans for showing grace and the 'Wow!' factor to others. Eph. 2:5-8 speaks of God working with us now, so that He can lavish His grace upon us for eternity. This is what He is all about. And it's what we should be all about; taking a Divine joy in forgiving, being generous, caring, showing grace.

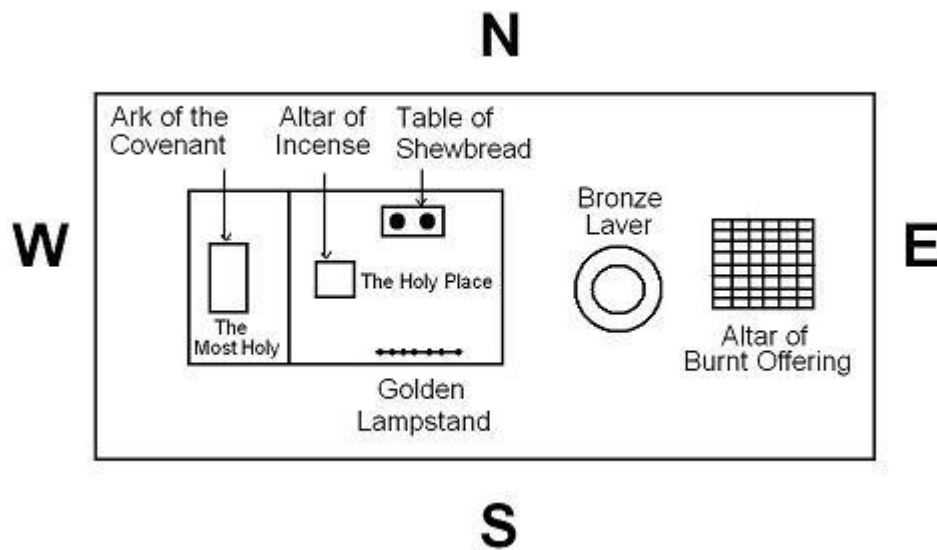
God's delight in doing this is reflected in the way that He chooses to work through the weak things of this world, to back the losers, to choose the younger and not the firstborn; indeed He appears to take a special joy in using the things, methods and people which are poor, despised and humanly weak- 1 Cor. 1 and 2 are all about this feature of God's working. He chose Israel, a tiny and spiritually weak nation, to be His ambassadors to the world- He comments in Ez. 15 that Israel is a vine tree, weak and spindly, useless for serious load bearing, just fuel for the fire of condemnation (Ez. 15:6). And yet... God delights to use them. Ps. 113:6,7 speaks of how the God who humbles Himself to behold the things in Heaven and earth, is the same God who "raises up the poor out of the dust". His grace at a cosmic level is reflected in the way that on earth He chooses to work with the poor rather than the mighty. As we reflect on the 'Wow!' factor in God's calling of us, we need to learn this deeply- that we are the nobodies whom God has called and chosen. We find here a great levelling. The wife of the peasant farmer in a poor country is lifted up to realize that she *is* something, she is a future [and even present] ruler in God's Kingdom, the specially loved daughter of God Almighty... and the wealthy, healthy [for the moment], successful, handsome, winsome Western professional realizes what all in those positions must realize in their hearts at times: that they are nothing, nothing at all, but for God's grace; just a lost little weeping boy, whose loving Father God has found him and will make him truly great in the future Kingdom, when all earth's empires are swept away.

Those who truly suffer, who experience real poverty (in spirit or materially), simply yearn for the end. And that end is, for the Christian, the coming of Christ and establishment of His Kingdom. As the early church became wealthier and less persecuted, so their focus on the second coming dwindled. And if our 'Wow!' sensations come merely from the things of this world, the good news of the coming Kingdom will likewise have little real meaning for us. But it's not only the eternity of the Kingdom which is so awesome; but the quality of that life. I don't suppose we'll be marking time, smugly grinning as the millions of years tick by. It will be the non-stop spirituality, relationship with the Father and Son and each other, service, glorification of Him... that will be the essence of existence. Indeed, the life eternal which is promised by the Lord Jesus refers far more to the quality and nature of that life than the fact it won't end. It is in this sense that He can give us the eternal life now, in that we can live the essence of the Kingdom life today. Here again, 'our hearts and minds with all their powers, are in the boundless prospect lost'. When one considers the sheer distance between 'Heaven' and earth, the billions of light years between earth and the furthest known galaxies... who am I, that I 'down here' should break God's heart 'up there', thrill Him by my small obediences, worry Him by my desperate cries for help? Can it... be really so?

Yes it can. And yes it is so. That's the wonder of it all. But the more we appreciate it, the more we tread in this relationship with God with reverence and awe. It's not surprising that we should wonder whether really God is *only* gracious and fear that His 'harder side' may somehow come into action against us at the last day; for the Bible records His anger with both sin and sinners. I see throughout Scripture a tension between God's grace and His rightful judgment of sin; and that tension is painful and consumes even His huge energy. Yet in the end, mercy rejoices against judgment, both within God and in His actions on earth

which reflect His mind. We see something of the struggle when He cries out in Hosea "How shall I give you up, Ephraim...?"; as if to say 'OK, how *can* I really bring upon you the judgments I promised?'. We see the same struggle after the flood. God promises: "Never again". And He set His bow in the cloud. It's been observed that rainbows are in the form of an undrawn bow, as if God is a victor in some conflict. What conflict? I don't feel it is in any conflict with humanity, that He as it were beat us in fair fight. That seems a thoroughly inappropriate interpretation. Perhaps rather it is an indication of the victory of His grace over His judgment? So awesome is all this that we should resolve, firmly resolve, at least one thing: never, ever, to presume upon this wonderful grace that is the result of a struggle within the mind of Almighty God Himself.

In the early days of God seeking out people on whom to lavish His grace, God worked through the tabernacle system:



The layout of the tabernacle was intended to reflect the court and throne room of a Middle Eastern king; the various items leading towards the throne room would've been understood by the Israelites as what had to be passed through to come into the presence of their God. The progression of the priest towards God, moving from right to left on the diagram, is a picture of our path towards the God who is trillions of light years away from us, physically and spiritually. The first requirement was to make an offering. There can be no approach to God without an initial acceptance that we are in this to *give*, to sacrifice what we perceive as *ours*. That of course stands quite opposite to the idea that we become Christians, or join a particular church, for some kind of personal benefit. Only *after* that realization of sacrifice, there was the washing in the laver which pointed forward to baptism and cleansing in Christ (Heb. 10:21; Eph. 5:25,26). After that there was the Holy Place, with the table of shewbread and candlestick speaking of ecclesial life and the breaking of bread. Note that ecclesial life is a necessary step in our path towards God. There can be no such thing as a truly 'out of church Christian'. For all our frustrations with the community of believers, we can't go it alone; the whole idea of relationship with God is that it occurs within the context of a community. This also highlights the danger of excluding our brethren from ecclesial life; we're excluding them from part of their path to God by doing so. But beyond the shewbread and the candlestick there was the altar of incense, speaking of prayer (Rev. 5:8). It's interesting that this was placed *after* the symbols of ecclesial life [bread and candlestick]; personal prayer to God is actually a place *beyond* ecclesial life. God forbid that we should think that mere attendance at

an ecclesia is what relationship with God is all about. The essence of it is in deep personal prayer.

The smell of the incense passed through the veil, and into the Most Holy Place, where the presence of God Himself was symbolized as being over the blood-stained cover of the ark. The simple wonder of it all is that the words of our prayers really can penetrate to Heaven itself. And in Christ, the veil itself has been done away, and we can with boldness enter into that Most Holy Place and personally have direct fellowship with God (Heb. 9:7-13; 10:19). Our heart can touch the heart of God. It's a priceless wonder to know and experience this. God saw Israel's depressed *minds* in Egypt and was moved to 'come down' to them in response (Ex. 3:7- the word translated "affliction" is rendered by Strong as 'depression'). And negatively, the evil heart of mankind troubled the heart of God (Gen. 6:5,6). This "heart to heart" between God and man is amazing. As Joseph's heart was 'warm' for his younger brother Benjamin, so the same word is used about how the heart of God is 'warm' in yearning for His ungrateful people (Gen. 43:30 cp. Hos. 11:8). Kneel down and pray; pray long and / or hard enough till you 'get the feeling' of heart to heart contact with God Almighty.

But how *can* this be... that I, sitting here on earth, with all the limitations of my understanding, hedged in by humanity, can have this fellowship with God Almighty? It's here that we come to the endless significance of the fact that the Son of God was of our very nature. He opened the way into the Most Holy in that He Himself passed through the veil of having human flesh, as Hebrews explains at length. Throughout the Gospels, it's apparent that both explicitly and implicitly, the Lord was almost desperate to persuade His followers to see Him as their brother, one to whom they could realistically aspire- and not a superhuman icon to be trusted in to get them out of temporal problems. His preference for the title 'Son of man' rather than any more direct reference to His Divine Sonship is an example- although to the Old Testament mind, "son of man" was a title which upon closer reflection associated Him with the glorious Son of man of Daniel's visions. The Lord's struggle was prefigured in the way Joseph-Jesus had to urge his brothers "Come near to me, I pray you", and begged them to believe in His grace and acceptance of them (Gen. 45:4; 50:18-21). We experience the "Wow!" factor once again when we begin to grasp what the Lord Jesus actually achieved for us; that One who had the same plasma and skin and blood and temptations and irritations as we do, could actually be perfectly God-like 24 / 7.

Beyond "Wow!"

Take the incident of the withered fig tree in Mark 11:20-24 as an example of where Jesus didn't want us to perceive Him as too different from us. The disciples are amazed at the faith of Jesus in God's power. He had commanded the fig tree to be withered- but this had required Him to pray to God to make this happen. As the disciples looked at Him, wide eyed with amazement at His faith, very much into the "Wow!" experience, the Lord immediately urged *them* to "have faith in God... *whosoever* [and this was surely His emphasis] shall [ask a mountain to move in faith, it will happen]... therefore I say unto *you*, Whatsoever things *you* desire [just as Jesus had desired the withering of the fig tree], when *you* pray [as Jesus had done about the fig tree], believe that *you* receive them, and *you* shall have them". I suggest His emphasis was upon the word *you*. He so desired them to see His pattern of faith in prayer as a realistic image for them to copy. How sad He must be at the way He has been turned into an other-worldly figure, some wonderful, kindly God who saves us from the weakness and

lack of faith which we are so full of. Yes, He *is* our Saviour, and the “Wow!” factor leads us to have a burning and undying sense of gratitude to Him. But He isn’t *only* that; He is an inspiration. It is in this sense that the spirit of Christ can and does so radically transform human life in practice. Of course, we have sinned, and we continue to do so. For whatever reason, we are not Jesus. But our painful awareness of this [and it ought to be painful, not merely a theoretical acceptance that we are sinners]... shouldn’t lead us to think that His example isn’t a realistic pattern for us. It makes a good exercise to re-read the Gospels looking out for other cases of where the Lord urged the disciples to not look at Him as somehow separate from themselves, an automatic Saviour from sin and problems. Thus when it was apparent that the huge, hungry crowd needed feeding, the Lord asked the disciples where “*we*” could get food from to feed them (Jn. 6:5). In all the accounts of the miraculous feedings, we see the disciples assuming that Jesus would solve the situation- and they appear even irritated and offended when He implies that this is *our* joint problem, and *they* must tackle this seemingly impossible task with *their* faith. The mentality of the disciples at that time is that of so many Trinitarians- who assume that ‘Jesus is the answer’ in such a form that they are exempt from seeing His humanity as a challenge for them to live likewise.

Repeatedly, the Lord Jesus carefully worded His teaching in order to use the same words about Himself as about His disciples. He was the lamb of God; and He sent them forth as lambs amongst wolves; He was “the light of the world”, and He stated that they too must be likewise. As He was the source of living water to us, so we are to be to others (Jn. 4:10,14). John grasped this, by using even some of the language of the virgin birth about the birth of all God’s children. It’s as if even the Lord’s Divine begetting shouldn’t be seen as too huge a barrier between us and Himself. The wonder of the virgin birth is something which elicits the “Wow!” mentality; but the miracle continues into *our* lives. Many of the Lord’s parables had some oblique reference to Himself. The parable of the sower speaks of the type of ground which gave one hundred fold yield- and surely the Lord was thinking of Himself in this. And yet the whole point of the parable is that all who receive the Lord’s word have the possibility of responding in this way. Or take the related parable of the mustard seed [=God’s word of the Gospel] which grows up into a huge tree under which all the birds can find refuge (Mk. 4:31,32). This image is replete with allusion to Old Testament pictures of God’s future Kingdom, and the growth of Messiah from a small twig into a great tree (Ez. 17:22). Here we see the power of the basic Gospel message- truly responded to, it can enable us to have a share in the very heights to which the Lord Jesus is exalted.

I suppose most challenging of all is the Lord’s invitation to us to take up our cross and follow after Him, in His ‘last walk’ to the place of crucifixion. This image would’ve been chilling to those who first heard it, who were familiar with a criminal’s walk to his death. Quite rightly, we associate the cross of Jesus with our salvation. But it is also a demand to us to be like Him, not only in showing the courtesy, politeness, thoughtfulness etc. which is part of a truly Christ-like / Christian culture, but in the utterly radical call to self-sacrifice unto death. It is in this matter of bearing the cross after Him that we would so dearly wish for the crucified Christ to be just an item in history, an act which saved us which is now over, an icon we hang around our neck or mount prominently on our study wall- and no more. But He, His cross, His ‘last walk’, His request that we pick up a cross and walk behind Him, the eerie continuous tenses used in New Testament references to the crucifixion- is so much more than that. If He washed our feet, we *must* wash each others’ (Jn. 13:14). Everything He did, all He showed Himself to be in character, disposition and attitude, becomes an imperative for us to

do and be likewise. And it is on this basis that He can so positively represent us to the Father: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (Jn. 17:16).

So our sense of 'Wow!' can never excuse us from the life of active commitment to this wonderful Father and Son. Indeed, it is to be the very basis for it. And yet the ultimate 'Wow!' is in God's grace in promising to save us; and in having saved us in Christ now. This God who seeks to lavish His grace upon us is understandably a God who takes no pleasure in condemning people. Our sense of 'Wow!' battles with and is at times crushed by our sense of sin and failure and God's inevitable displeasure. But His grace, His desire to save, His mercy, is ultimately greater than His severity and need to judge sin. The whole Bible carries this message. His sensitivity to all His creatures is evident. Finally, just put together two Bible passages: Cain felt that his condemnation was greater *than he could bear*, and so God put a mark upon him so he wouldn't be slain (Gen. 4:13,15). Now 1 Cor. 10:13: God will not allow us to be tested *more than we can bear*, but will make a way of escape so we can bear it. I take this as meaning that if God is even sensitive to the feelings of a condemned man like Cain, rather like putting an animal to sleep in a humane way... then we who are saved in Christ can take comfort that even in this life, we will not be asked to bear the unbearable, and yet we have the prospect of eternity in front of us when this life is through. And in a very quiet, sober way, we have to respond with gratitude: 'Wow'.

'Wow' of course strikes us as a quite inappropriate word to use for these wonderful things. But any word is insufficient; language is no longer useful to express these things. "What shall we then say to these things?" - i.e. 'what form of words, of 'saying', is adequate response to them?' (Rom. 8:31; Paul uses that phrase seven times in Romans, so beyond words did he find the atonement wrought in Christ). Words aren't symbols sufficient for our experience of God's grace and love; all commentary is bathos, like trying to explain a symphony in words; we experience a collapse of language. What remains, I suppose, is to live, to exist, in the sober knowledge of this grace, to never lose sight of them in our hearts; and all the rest, the rest of life and living and all the decisions and responses we are supposed to make, will somehow come naturally.

2-18-1 Wonder

I want to reflect with you upon the sense of wonder which we ought to have as believers. I'd go so far as to suggest that a genuine sense of wonder, of radical amazement, is a characteristic of the believer; and we should be seriously worried if we lack it. So many of the Psalms record the faithful writers' awestruck wonder at God's ways, at the human body, at His acts in history, at creation. Even under inspiration, Paul writes of how he himself is caught up in utter marvel at the way God's grace works to save both Jews and Gentiles: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Rom. 11:33). Three times a day the Orthodox Jew prays: "We thank thee for thy miracles which are daily with us, for thy continued marvels". And in the evening liturgy they recite the words of Job 9:10: God "does great things past finding out, marvellous things without number". And perhaps spiritual Israel can take a lesson from this; a regular sense of wonder should fill our daily lives. But does it?

I'm sure you've had those rare moments of wonder, of insight, of 'getting it', or feeling you are somewhere along the road of getting it... but where do they come from, and what do they mean? I suggest they are all about our meeting with God. The Bible reveals that God is in

search of man. "Like grapes in the wilderness, I *found* Israel" (Hos. 9:10); "He *found* him in a desert land...he encircled him, he cared for him" (Dt. 32:10); "I have *found* David my servant" (Ps. 89:20). Jeremiah's search for believers was a reflection of God's: "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth" (Jer. 5:1). God hunts for us like a lion, Job came to realize; and in this "You show yourself wonderful to me" (Job 10:16). And we are searching for God. God is not indifferent to our searching for Him. Those awestruck moments of wonder, of radical amazement, are where God finds us at the time we are searching for Him. Both sides are seeking each other; and in those moments, they meet. As a Jewish poet put it: "And going out to meet thee / I found thee coming toward me". In those moments, heaven and earth kiss each other. There is a click, a flash, between Almighty God and us- as we stand at a bus stop, turn left into Acacia Avenue, lay there on our bed meditating.

Defining Wonder

Wonder doesn't mean we cease to analyze God's word; it's a sense of touching reality, not a fuzzy feeling of vague speculation. It's tempting to assume that it's the natural creation which alone provokes wonder. But Biblically, it's more often God's actions in history, His saving of His Israel, His grace, His undeserved helping of us in practical situations (e.g. Jer. 21:2) which are what should provoke wonder. Otherwise the blind would have no sense of wonder at God. God's whole plan in Christ "is wonderful in our eyes" (Ps. 118:23). It is a "marvellous work and a wonder" (Is. 29:14; Acts 13:41).

Yet beholding the stars and the natural world lead the Psalmists to wonder. But this was not because they saw them as an end in themselves; the writers looked to the God and the covenant with us which is beyond them. The natural creation is a mystery, a question- but not the answer. To simply observe it won't give the answers. "Pitiless is the silence of the sky". Job went so far as to say: "If I have looked at the sun when it shone, or the moon moving in splendour... I should have been false to God above" (Job 31:26-28). The prophets seem to discount any form of nature worship. The answers to the questions creation poses are to be found, to put it bluntly, in the Bible. Few people really know what to do with their lives, with their minds, with their encounters with a sunset or the mysteries of life... we need guidance, and that guidance is in God's word. Humanity senses that there is something 'there' which is within our reach but beyond our grasp; an undisclosed meaning, an allusiveness to some One beyond, a whisper of some forgotten mother tongue, scattered hints, something cryptic. And we need help to get to it. A passing sense of wonder at the night sky as a man glances at it for a few moments longer than usual one evening from his balcony... needs to lead to the questions in response to God's questions: Who or what is He? What is His Name, His hope for me, His ability... how should I respond? And the answers to those questions aren't in nature itself, but in God's word. "You are great and do wonders... teach me your way, O Lord; I will walk in your way" (Ps. 86:10,11). The moments of wonder which God affords His creatures aren't intended to lead them into wild speculation; but rather to incite them to seek His revealed truth in His word.

But for these questions to be sincerely asked, they must be provoked not by the idle intellectual curiosity of a moment, but by the sense of wonder which arises from faith. Remember how the Lord repeatedly tells the cynical and unbelieving Jews of His day *not* to marvel / wonder, but to *believe*. Perhaps we're intended to read in an ellipsis to these passages: '[Don't only] marvel / wonder [but *believe*]' . If we know that "we are of God", that He is with us, with me personally... then our wonder at creation will be of a different order to

that felt by the unbeliever; we will be able to feel some connection with the natural world which the people of the world don't feel. We will be able to say with Job that we are "in league with the stones of the field" (Job 5:23). And thus we will feel God's very real presence; that man is not alone; *I* am not alone. There is God, and a God who is "for me", Emmanuel, God with us and for us in His Son. The most basic words of Scripture need to be felt by us: "*You* are with *me*. Your rod and staff comfort *me*". *Our* moments of wonder will arise from our realization that the natural and supernatural aren't two different spheres, a beauty up there or out there which is separate from our mess down here. "The earth is *the Lord's*". The high and lofty One who inhabits eternity dwells both in the high and holy place, and with those who are of a humble and contrite spirit to His word (Is. 57:15). For those who don't know the Father and Son, the search for God through nature must lead ultimately to some sense of doubt. But the Biblical perspective is so different. There are so many words in Biblical Hebrew for "wonder"; but not one which means "doubt".

Man In Search Of Wonder

We too often kid ourselves that nobody is really interested in our message. But not so. People are aware that there is something beyond their mundane experience, the emotional flatland and seeking for petty 'fun' which characterizes our postmodern world. Humanity is confronted with a world that alludes to something beyond itself, to a truth beyond experience. Ps. 19 speaks of how the sun, moon and stars speak to humanity with no voice nor words. And yet that very passage is applied in the New Testament to the preachers of the Gospel. In mankind's meeting with *us* they should be seeing the same unspoken message which there is in the heavens above. We really can lead them on from their vague sense that there's something else out there in life and existence. They may feel that the answers lie shrouded by some impenetrable fog. But we need the spirit of Paul, when he noticed an altar to an unknown God. "Whom you ignorantly seek / worship, Him I will declare to you". People are fast realizing that advanced technology, social reforms, a rational approach to life... simply isn't the answer to our spiritual needs. People are seeking something beyond. They're asking the right questions, but seeking answers in the wrong places. It's becoming increasingly evident that as a planet, we can't solve our problems; and the nature of the global village now is that a few men- be they the 9/11 terrorists, Bush, Saddam, Obama or Osama - may throw all men into final disaster. Something beyond us is needed to save us; and people are realizing this, even if only subconsciously. The whole planet is ripe for harvesting by the preacher of the true Gospel.

What Stops Wonder

If God is replaced merely with a creed, love by habit, then our sense of wonder will wane. "The truth" is a Biblical phrase, but I think it refers essentially to the covenant truthfulness of God to us, rather than implying that those who are "in the truth" therefore know all there is to know about God. If this is what we think- nothing will be very wondrous for us, if we think we know it all already. Every Biblical paradox will be 'easily explained'; there will be for us no sense of mystery left. Whereas I suggest there are many intentional paradoxes in God's word, which defy rational resolution. The whole nature of the Lord Jesus, Son of God and yet Son of man, is itself the "great mystery of Godliness". A statement of faith, a list of accurate theological propositions, is all well and good and useful in some ways. But a mere combination of concepts won't of itself produce wonder and awe of God. If misused, it can hinder it. If we identify ourselves as believers with a creed set in stone, then the great sweep of the spirit which occurs in those moments of wonder will swerve into the blind alley of literalism and preformulated theological propositions, seeking to force the infinite God whom we wonder at into the triteness of our minds. True wonder at God produces creative thinking;

for we have interacted with God in those intense moments of amazement, and we will not be inspired by that encounter to return to our familiar paths of thought and behaviour, but rather to quit those rat runs and reach out to Him in newness of life and thinking. Words and symbols cannot adequately convey our sense of wonder. Indeed, our sense of wonder is exactly because we have encountered something we know is ultimately beyond our comprehension.

The endless petty things of life naturally stop us having the 'wonder' feelings constantly. In the same way as God has to have some distance and hiddenness from us, so man cannot constantly be enraptured in wonder at God. We can't live in the intensity of the 'wonder' moments all the time. And yet we can too easily glory in the petty distractions of life, rather than seeking to minimize them in our lives. Look up at the sky, and then hold a small coin in front of your eye. That very small thing can obscure the vision of so much. And so it is with the leaking gutters, sick cat, crying baby... which fill our lives. And yet I'd say that in the same way there's an afterglow of the evening after the sun has set, so there should be a glow which characterizes our lives, in between the moments of actual wonder.

The Spirit Of Our Age

But like Israel, we can forget God's wonders, lose the intensity of those moments we once shared with Him (Ps. 78:11). Our worship can so easily become mechanical, the flame of praise dies out all too soon. When was the last time you *spontaneously* did something for the Father and Son, or burst out in heartfelt praise, in response to real wonder? It's indifference, lack of passion, which, it seems to me, is the besetting tragedy of our age. When did you last really shed tears? When were you moved, really wrenched in your gut, by the suffering of others, by the sin of this world, your own sin, your part in humanity's tragic rejection of God... when did you last feel for God in His pain, as He sees His beloved children and creation walk away from Him day after day, second after second? When did you last feel ecstatic joy, deep sadness... in this post-modern world of surface level emotion?

In human nature, the pole of regularity is stronger than the pole of spontaneity. We so easily slip into habit, whereas the 'wondrous acts of God', of which the Bible speaks so much, are intended to shake us from this mire of mediocrity. Confronted by a spectacular sunset, modern man at best grabs his cell phone and snaps a picture of it, and then gets distracted forwarding it to his friends. But ultimately, there's no neutrality before God. To ignore the implications of that sunset is to effectively deny Him. And of course man doesn't stand before God just for the duration of that sunset; our relation to Him isn't an episode, He demands our life and soul. What we face in that sunset [or whatever awesome aspect of creation we encounter] isn't merely a passing state of mind within us, a vague aspiration of a moment; it is a contact with the everlasting fact of the universe, namely God. We return from those moments of encounter all too easily to the issues of our family, employment, society, groups to which we belong. But our relations to those things don't penetrate every strata of our personality and existence. In our final solitude, as we face death, those things fade away and leave us with our inner longing for God. And it is this which we must allow first place whilst we have life, and not grant Him merely a few moments of occasional wonder and reflection as we charge through life. And it's not just a pretty sunset which should elicit this awareness; to the spiritually minded man, in every event, every encounter in this world, there is something spiritual at stake, something of God.

A worship of science and technology has without any doubt decreased our sense of wonder and spontaneity. Rationalism has been the keynote of our modern world; everything can be

explained, so they think; or at least, science will one day explain it. There's no place left for wonder. People need an ever more dramatic 'wonder' experience to break them away from their rationalism. The modern world has trivialized existence; adults spend hours playing dumb games on their keyboards, pressing keys and clicking a mouse in a certain sequence. Study and reflection is used in order to get qualifications which enable more money to be earned; but there's a lack of deep personal analysis, any time free from money making is whiled away on the inanities of entertainment. There's even an anti-intellectual climate around, whereby anything other than 'fun' is frowned upon or shied away from as too challenging and intrusive. People generally fail to see any ultimate significance in anything. And so when confronted by the overpowering sunset, the sense of awe never runs very deep and soon fades away.

Yet in those 'awesome' experiences we are facing a question from God. We don't come to God through asking the right questions as one does in scientific analysis. For can we by searching find out God? This was the whole climax of the book of Job- it wasn't Job's questions which led him to God, but God's questions to Him. I'd suggest that human philosophy starts with human questions; but true Christianity begins with God's questions to us, and His ultimate question is posed in the cross of His Son. We may easily accept the theory of all I've written here. Job did too. He spoke in his earlier speeches of the wondrous nature of God's power. But it needed the speeches of Elihu and God Himself to make Job *really* experience wonder. What he had heard in theory, by the hearing of the ear, his eye came to see personally. God's response to Job's suffering and self-absorption was to instill in Job a real sense of *wonder*. And He works likewise with us.

Where Wonder Leads

- Wonder leads to worship, to that flame of praise which is the worship "in spirit and in truth" which the Father seeks. But wonder adds awe and reverence to that worship. And we have to ask how much of that there is in much popular worship today, be it in starchy hymns or rock music. 1 Chron. 16:9 makes the connection between wonder and worship quite plain: "Sing unto him, sing praises unto him; talk of all his wonders". Likewise Ps. 9:1: "I will praise you O Lord; I will show forth all your wonders".

- The fear or awe of the Lord, our wonder at Him, is the beginning of wisdom. Wonder isn't a kind of intellectual resignation, giving up on the study of God and retreating into numb feelings. Quite the opposite. True wonder leads to a more earnest seeking after wisdom. The Angel told John that John had 'wondered' in amazement at the visions so that God could now reveal the mystery to him (Rev. 17:6,7). In our wonder we sense we are at the beginning of things of infinite significance, we feel we are starting to grasp something ultimate. And we wish to go further. We will glory in the understanding and knowledge of God which that wonder stimulates us to search out (Jer. 9:22,23). Our eyes are opened to the "wonderful things" in God's law (Ps. 119:18). A sense of wonder in itself will not give us the knowledge of God; it is His word which does this. Nebuchadnezzar in his repentance knew a sense of wonder; and it led him to *knowledge*, not nagging doubt or wild speculation: "At the end of the days, I lifted up mine eyes to heaven, and my power of knowledge returned to me" (Dan. 4:31).

- Related to this, wonder leads to more faith. God reminded Abraham and Sarah: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14). And the Hebrew word translated "hard" is that usually translated "wonder". In our moments of wonder, and as the afterglow of them permeates our lives, it becomes easier to believe that nothing is too wonderful for our God of wonders to do for us. For He *is* the God who does wonders, He *is* wonderful and awesome. Jeremiah theoretically learnt the lesson from God's words to Abraham and Sarah; for he alludes to it in Jer. 32:17: "Ah Lord God! Behold, you have made the heaven and the earth by your great

power and by your stretched out arm; there is nothing too hard [wonderful] for you". But God has to remind him soon afterwards in Jer 32:26,27: "Then came the word of the Lord unto Jeremiah, saying, Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh: *is* there any thing too hard [wonderful] for me?". We think we know all about wonder, when actually we don't. Our lack of total faith shows that we do indeed think God's wonder is limited. Because something is hard / marvellous in our eyes doesn't mean it is in God's eyes (Zech. 8:6).

- Our sense of awe is a tacit recognition of the distance between us and God; yet at the same time it's a realization that He is 'there' and yet He is 'here' too. It's the very perception that there is this distance between us and God which brings us to Him; rather like the silence that draws lovers near. And this 'distance' isn't only a matter of realizing "How great Thou art" in physical / cosmic terms of power, but also in perceiving the distance between our thoughts and His. But our baseline belief in Him and His searching for us draws us closer. It's an amazing thing. That man is not alone. I am not alone; you are not alone. God is in search of man. Planet earth isn't spinning out of control in the cosmos; for "the earth is the Lord's". And His Son shall soon return, right here. One of the hardest things about God to believe is that really, all men matter...you matter. I matter. How we speak, what we do and think, is incredibly significant to God. It is a staggering thought that the Creator of heaven and earth should care about how an obscure individual man behaves toward poor widows, orphans, his wife...

- This faith, inspired by our sense of wonder, will lead to obedience in practice. "Behold I make a covenant: Before all your people I will do wonders... [therefore] observe that [covenant] which I command you this day" (Ex. 34:10,11). Israel refused to be obedient, were stiffnecked, because they were "not mindful of your wonders" (Neh. 9:17). Ps. 78:32 likewise: "For all this they sinned still, and believed not in his wondrous works". Our perception of God's wonder is intended to inspire us not to sin, to be obedient to Him at whom we wonder.

- A real sense of wonder also becomes the base motivation for our witness. "Declare his glory among the gentiles, his wonders among the nations" (1 Chron. 16:24). And the Psalms are full of this, once we appreciate that in their primary context many of them were David's preaching to the Gentile nations around him.

A Scream In The Night

For we who are in Christ, there will be those moments when the wonder of the truth of God breaks again and again over us, as a joyful wave. I can testify to this, as can so many of you. Let us right now try to grasp the wonder of it all. That Christ really will come, soon; that now is my salvation nearer than when I first believed. That the feet of Jesus of Nazareth will surely stand on this earth again, and His Kingdom be eternally here; that He truly was a man of my passions and nature, and yet overcame. That I and my innate selfishness are the real 'satan', not someone or something else. That death is death, that this brief and fragile life is the time to serve the Lord, with no fiery hell beneath us, but instead the sure hope of God's grace. That through baptism, I truly am part of the seed of Abraham and a partaker in Israel's Hope. And that by the grace of God's calling, I am delivered from the fog of error which dogs so many about these things. And that there is, in the end, one body of true believers world-wide believing as I do; that the sun that bids me rest is waking my brethren 'neath the Western sky, so that the voice of praise is never silent. And in the end, it shall never be silent for you and I shall live forever in God's Kingdom.

There are times of total desperation and disappointment with myself, with my nature, with this world, with humanity, with my brethren. And I know there are just the same for you too. So in our hard moments, in the hours and days of such utter and essential loneliness, the dark nights of the soul, let's seek to grasp the wonder of it all again. Reflect again on the power of

those things which we most surely believe. Look at nature. Feel God searching for you, as you search for Him. And may we find Him, and in wonder be revived, may the thrill of knowing again His love for us spark a light in the black, as a scream in the night, bringing us to know again the personal presence and power of Jesus my Lord. Not for us 'the same old scene'. Working on the highway, drilling through the hardtop, hour after mindless hour; changing those nappies, preparing the same food at the same times, day after endless day as we take the same route to work each day, walking to the textile mill, across the railroad tracks, boarding the same bus, coming off at exit 42; in all these things we can be more than conquerors. In the wonder of knowing Him and His saving grace.

2-19 Joining The Dots In Life

It will be apparent to any regular Bible reader that there is a tremendous repetition within the Biblical narratives. Individuals tend to go through very similar experiences, and often the same words are used in the descriptions of the experience or their response to it. Some of these similarities are so specific and humanly unlikely to be replicated that one can only conclude that there was a higher power over-ruling their situations. It may be that the Angels work in human lives according to some kind of Divine pattern, and this accounts for the sense of repetition and *déjà vu*, both in our lives and in those of Bible characters. But it may also be because it is God's intention that we meditate upon the lives of His previous servants to the point where we see their experiences coming through, in principle, in our own lives; and we are urged on to a like victory as they attained. Consider the following of many possible examples of this repetition in Biblical narratives:

- The way Saul returns from pursuing David because of a rumour of invasion is so similar to Rabshakeh's retreat from Jerusalem after rumours of incursions (1 Sam. 23:27).
- As Samuel tarried longer than Saul expected, so Amasa "tarried longer than the set time which [David] had appointed him" (2 Sam. 20:5).
- The incidents involving Moses and Jacob meeting women at a well are evidently intended to be seen as reflecting some unseen Heavenly template.
- When Joshua was leading the Israelite army, he was given victory because Moses kept his arms outstretched in prayer. Later, circumstances repeated, so that Joshua had the opportunity to make the same effort for others as had been made for him. For Joshua had to keep his hand stretched out, until his men had destroyed all the men of Ai (Josh. 8:26). And throughout life, this occurs for us- a situation wherein we were shown grace repeats, in essence, so that we have an opportunity to show the same grace to others which we received.
- God created a great wind with which He brought Jonah and his fellows to their knees (Jonah 1:5). God later creates another great wind with which to teach Jonah something else (Jonah 4:8). Jonah ought to have perceived the same hand of the same God at work with him. Jonah's life "ebbed away" inside the fish (Jonah 2:7)- and a very similar word is used about his experience as he sat under the gourd (Jonah 4:8). In the fish, Jonah prayed that God would

save his life, and was heard. But when he was made to feel the same again, he instead prayed God to take away his life. Perhaps this shows that even when we respond well to circumstances, those same circumstances may repeat in order to test us as to whether we will continue to make that right response.

- Joash did right before God whilst the priest Jehoiada was alive, and then apostasized; Uzziah did likewise, with Zechariah the priest (2 Chron. 24:2; 26:5). He didn't reflect upon the personal implications of Divine history. And we too must appreciate that there are Bible characters whose experiences are framed in terms directly relevant to us- for our learning. Interestingly, straight after Jehoiada died, the princes of the land came to Joash with a request, which he wrongly listened to. This has great similarities with the tragic mistake made by Rehoboam after Solomon died (2 Chron. 10:3,4 cp. 24:17). So Joash was given chance after chance to be directed back to previous examples and be instructed by them- but he went on in his own way.

- The genealogies of Genesis 11 reveal how some human lives repeat according to the same outline schema. Thus both Arphaxad and Shelah each lived 403 years after the births of the eldest sons; Shelah, Peleg and Serug were each 30 when their first sons were born. Abraham and Shem both had sons at 100 years old (Gen. 11:10). And it is the very nature of Christian fellowship that God has arranged that our human lives likewise have elements of amazing similarity of pattern.

- The way Peter was given a vision and asked to eat what he had previously thought unclean has many similarities with Ezekiel going through a similar experience (Ez. 4:10-14 cp. Acts 10:14).

- David sent messengers to Nabal meaning well to him, and they were rudely rebuffed, resulting in his anger which only Abigail's grace and wisdom saved him from (1 Sam. 25). And yet the same situation repeated in its essence when he sent messengers to Hanun who were likewise misinterpreted and rebuffed (2 Sam. 10:3). Again, David got angry- but there was no Abigail to restrain him, and he did get into an impossible fight... from which by grace God delivered him. Could it not be that David failed to learn from his previous experience...?

- The signs done by Moses before Pharaoh have evident connection with the later plagues brought upon him- they were all "that you may know" (Ex. 7:17 etc.). The staff, stretched out right hand, snakes, the rod "swallowing" the serpent rods of Egypt (symbols of Pharaoh- Ez. 29:3-5; 32:2) just as the Egyptians were to be swallowed at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:12), leprosy / boils, water / blood all repeat. The signs were thus both an encouragement to believe as well as a warning of judgment to come. Pharaoh was presented with the possibility of either faith, or destruction. Note in passing that God's hardening of that man's heart didn't mean that He made no effort to save him nor appeal to him.

- The disciples' eyes were heavy and they fell asleep at the critical moment. But earlier, "having remained awake", the same disciples were blessed with a vision of the Lord's glory (Lk. 9:32 RVmg.). If they had remained awake in the garden, they would have seen the Lord being glorified by Angelic visitation. But they didn't perceive how the circumstances were repeating, and thus didn't find the strength and inspiration which was potentially prepared for them through the similarity of circumstance.

- Especially do we find the essence of the Red Sea deliverance repeated in life after life, situation after situation, in Israel's history. This happens to the extent that some of the Psalms can speak as if we were there present; and Paul stresses how that passage through water remains a type of the baptism of every believer to this day (1 Cor. 10:1). Take for example how just as Yahweh confounded Israel's enemies at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:24,25), so He did in Deborah's victory over Sisera (Jud. 4:15); and "not one was left" (Jud. 4:16), just as happened with the Egyptians (Ex. 14:28).

- Samuel appeared to have assumed that Eliab must be Yahweh's anointed, seeing he was tall and handsome (1 Sam. 16:7). But he had not learnt the lesson he should've learnt from his experience with Saul, who was exceptionally tall, and yet was no leader of God's people. God tries to remind Samuel of this by saying of Eliab: "I have rejected him"; God had used the very term about Saul very recently (1 Sam. 16:1,7 RV). Ps. 89:19,20 imply that God had specifically told Samuel to anoint *David*- so his desire to anoint tall, handsome Eliab appears to have been a failure on Samuel's part, rooted in simply not joining the dots. And even when David was brought in, Samuel seems to have somewhat failed in his judgment- for he was impressed by David's fair appearance (1 Sam. 16:12), when God had just laboured the point to Samuel that the choice of a ruler was *not* to be based upon his appearance (1 Sam. 16:7).

Relevance For Us

One can also recount such instances of repetition in the narratives of our own lives. Our experiences connect with those of Biblical characters- and thus the Biblical records become alive and intensely personal for each of us. Further, we see similarities in patterns and experiences between our lives and those of others contemporary with us. This is surely to enable the principle of 2 Cor. 1:4- that if we suffer anything, it is so that we can mediate comfort to those who suffer as we do. To go into our shells and not do this not only makes our own sufferings harder, but frustrates the very purpose of them. The repeating similarities between our lives and those of others also reveal to us that God at times arranges for us to suffer from our *alter ego*- persons who behave similarly to us, and who through those similarities cause us suffering. In this way we are taught the error of our ways, both past and present. It seems that Jacob the deceiver suffered in this way from Laban the deceiver- in order to teach him and cause his spiritual growth. For example, as Jacob deceived his blind father relating to an important family matter, so Laban deceived Jacob in the darkness of the wedding night. Esau once begged food of Jacob, and he deceived him cruelly. As an old man, Jacob twice had to beg food from the estranged brother, his own son Joseph. No wonder he so tried not to have to send his sons to Egypt to beg for food. He was being taught- even after all those years- how Esau his brother had felt.

The Example Of Abraham

Abraham was progressively set up by God so that his spiritual growth would be an upward spiral. Initially, he was told to walk / go to a land which God would shew him (Gen. 12:1); when he got there, he was told to "arise", and "walk" through that land of Canaan (Gen. 13:17). And Abraham, albeit in a faltering kind of way, did just this. But this was to prepare him for the test of Gen. 22:3 in the command to offer Isaac. His obedience this time isn't at all faltering. He "arises" and 'goes' [s.w. "walk"] "unto the place of which God had told him" to offer Isaac (Gen. 22:3). This is exactly what he had been called to do right back in Ur- to arise and walk / go to a land / place which God would show him (Gen. 12:1). And so our obedience in one challenge of God leads us to obedience in others. One experience is

designed to lead us to another. Nothing- absolutely nothing- in our lives is senseless chance. All- and this takes some believing- is part of a higher plan for our spiritual good, in our latter end. Time and again we see this in Abraham's life. He was taught that he really could be a blessing to others by the circumstances which God arranged relating to Lot being blessed / saved for his sake. Or take how Sarah murmured that it was impossible for her to have "pleasure" in childbearing (Gen. 18:12). She uses the word *ednah*, related to the word *Eden*. Yet in the events of Gen. 19, she sees how the land around Sodom that was once "like the garden of Eden" (Gen. 13:10) is made barren and sowed with salt so that nothing could grow there (Gen. 19:25; Dt. 29:23). She was being taught that God can give and take away fertility on a huge scale. Likewise in Gen. 20:17, Abraham's weakness leads Abimelech's wives to become barren; yet through the faith and prayer of an undoubtedly spiritually weak Abraham, their fertility is restored. Again, God was teaching Abraham through circumstances. It could also be reasoned from Gen. 20:6 that God weakened Abimelech's body so that he had no sexual desire for Sarah- and again, this was to teach Abraham the impotent old man that virility is a gift which God can give and take at ease. The wonderful thing is that all these lessons were taught to Abraham through the incident of lying about and betraying his wife, which shows the weakness of his faith in God's promises. The way God works with and through human weakness is awesome.

Thoughtful readers of Genesis must have wondered at the rubric "Now these are the generations of...". This phrase, the *toledoth* [Hebrew for "generations"] formula, is used to introduce both genealogies and also narratives. Why not say "Now this is the story / account / history of Joseph"? Why describe a narrative as a genealogy? Why preface genealogies and narrative histories as if they are one and the same? I suggest that the inspired writer of the Bible's opening book wished to establish the point that history gives birth to the future, history is pregnant, and not dry, dead and finished. And God's history especially demonstrates that the "generations" somehow repeat themselves over history, in that situations and character types recur over time in a Divinely planned manner.

The repetition of circumstance in our lives is not only to teach us, but to make sure that we learnt the lesson- for what teacher doesn't give pupils exercises to practice the theory they've learnt? The life of Joseph and his brothers is very much a case of situations repeating. It seems that Joseph, acting on God's behalf and as a type of Christ, manipulated circumstances so that his brothers would have *deja vu* experiences. Thus he sets things up to tempt them with freedom if they again betray their younger brother (Benjamin) and are thoughtless to their father's pain. The united, frank and open response of the brothers (Gen. 44:13,16,17) showed how they had indeed learnt their lesson.

Another example of Joseph being tested by repeating circumstances was in the matter of playing God. In interpreting the dreams in prison, Joseph twice said that interpretations of dreams belong to God; "it is not in me; God will give Pharaoh an answer..." (Gen. 40:8; 41:16). Thus twice Joseph resisted the temptation to claim Divine power to himself. Some years later, however, I fear he failed a similar temptation, when he says to his brothers: "Such a man as I can indeed divine" (Gen. 44:15). He seems to be claiming for himself the power that earlier he had ascribed solely to God. But at the end of his life, when his brothers express their fear that Joseph will judge them harshly now that Jacob has died, Joseph assures them that he will not, as he is not going to play God: "Fear not, for am I in the place of God?" (Gen. 50:19). Significantly, these were the very words of Joseph's father to his mother in Gen. 30:2- showing how temptations and the essence of situations repeat across the generations and within the collective experience of groups of believers. We can discern what

happened to Joseph going on in our own lives, if we will only take time to examine ourselves and the patterns of our experiences. A specific temptation or situation may, in essence, occur once, and we respond rightly; again it happens, and again we get it right; then again some years later, and we fail; and then some years later still, and we get it right. Constantly our understanding and obedience is being tested, developed, expanded, confirmed... by the Divinely controlled, providential structure of our lives and the situations and persons we encounter. Whether we travel the world each day meeting new people and apparently "new" situations all the time, or we sit in the same room confined by illness and with a limited pool of interaction... all the same, God is equally at work with us all, every moment. Let's not lose sight of the fact that Joseph stands as a pattern for us all. When Paul wrote that all things work together for our good (Rom. 8:28), he was echoing how in all the grief of Joseph's life, the rejection by his brethren, the cruel twists of fate [as they seemed at the time]... *God meant it for good* (Gen. 50:20). This same wonderful process will come true in our lives- for they too are equally directed by a loving Father.

Understood like this, God's word becomes an ongoing dialogue with us as the tapestry of our own lives unrolls. His word is, if you like, God's take on human history. He wants us to see how He interacts with us in our lives as He likewise has done in those of so many in the past. The more we reflect upon Biblical history, which is really the account of a few hundred lives which God interacted with over 4000 years, the more we will be able to make sense of the choices we face each hour. We will see the likely consequences, and we will also see the importance of motives, coming to appreciate that it's not always so much the choice we make, as the reasons for that choice which are crucial. And thereby we'll come to see how things in the lives of others will have different meanings, lessons, warnings and encouragements for each of us. Thus even within the Biblical record, the names of places (e.g. Bethel and Beersheba) and people (e.g. Ishmael and Isaac) are given different interpretations depending upon the point which the record is seeking to make.

Just as we will come to hunger for more intimacy with the Biblical characters, reading the records and meditating upon them with amazement at how they speak to our situations... so we will likewise come to more earnestly seek closeness with our brothers and sisters. No longer will "fellowship" be an on-paper agreement, or attendance at the same place of worship, where we hold a common doctrinal understanding and follow the same ethos. Fellowship with our fellow believers is only meaningful insofar as we get to know them, and they to know us.. backgrounds, experiences, paths of growth and failure, achieving those moments of "touche" between minds. So very often it has been observed that the encouragement we take away from meetings with other believers is not centred upon the talk we heard, but rather on the positive encouragement we picked up from conversation with others over coffee. Experience unites, whereas dry theology and theory alone tend to divide. For we as persons relate to persons, and as such it seems to me that platform speaking and speakers shouldn't be over-rated by us. Rather should we see the need for real, inter-personal fellowship, making the effort to meet, be involved, be in loving and concerned contact, sharing our lives, failures and experiences... with our brothers and sisters.

2-20 The Abundance Of Grace

We reflected in our last editorial upon the wonder of eternity which God intends giving us. His whole intention is to lavish His grace upon us for ever and ever; for every moment of our future eternal life will be an existence by His grace. Paul wrote of the God "who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, (who) has

quicken us together with Christ (by grace are you saved) ...that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us" (Eph. 2:4-8). God created us for His pleasure (Rev. 4:11)- and His pleasure is to pour out grace, to give us eternity (Jn. 6:40). None of the uninspired creation myths includes the idea of the Divine Creator then *blessing* His creation. Here we see the surpassing grace of God. He lavishes His love upon what He created. None of the creation myths include such a wonderful feature. The pagan creation stories sometimes spoke of the things created by the gods then blessing *them*. The Sumerians recorded that at 'creation', "The whole universe, the people in unison, to Enlil in one tongue gave blessing". But the true God, the God of all grace as revealed in the *true* creation record, not only creates His people and other creatures, but then blesses *them*! And the spirit of that grace should be seen in all our relationships. The Sumerian and Babylonian myths speak of people being created in order to serve the gods, "to bear the yoke of the gods", to relieve them in their everyday work. But the Genesis creation has God creating man and giving him great freedom, and blessing him.

We who write and read these words have not only been created by God, we have been called by Him to eternal life with Him. Until the good Samaritan's return, the man was kept in the inn, with everything that was needed lavishly provided. Surely the inn is symbolic of the ecclesia; there has been lavish provision made for us even now as we await the Kingdom's coming. Sensing the extent of God's grace should mean that we don't worry about material things. The worry-free life is a characteristic of the true believer. If God gave us His Son, how much more will He not give us "all things"? The Lord brought out the point in Mt. 6:30: If God so clothes the grass... how much more will He clothe us, therefore, don't worry! "Clothe" translates the Greek *amphi-hennumi*- to enrobe around. The Lord seems to have been referring to a type of wild flower that appears to be draped around by its natural skin, rather like an iris. God gives the wild flowers robes... although they do not spin them or work for them (Mt. 6:29). Solomon's robes weren't as beautiful as them. And how *much more* will God clothe us, both literally and with salvation (for this is how the Bible usually uses the idea of God clothing us). God does so much for the lilies, who are to be 'thrown into the fire'... a phrase which inevitably connects with the Lord's other uses of that idea to describe the final condemnation of the wicked (as in James 1:11). God cares for flowers, and He even cares and provides for those whom He will one day condemn. For God to keep such people alive is a conscious outflowing of His lavish energy, His gracious gift of life and health. If He does that for things and persons which will ultimately be 'thrown into the fire', how *much more* will He clothe us. Let's remember that creation isn't run on clockwork; God makes His rain come, and His sun to rise, on the just and unjust; He's aware when a bird falls from the air; counts the hairs on our heads, as a mother dotes over a newborn baby's features. Just by keeping alive humanity (indeed, all of creation), God is lavishing His grace and consciously outgiving of Himself.

Recently I was worrying about where to get tables from. In a week's time, we were expecting 60 visitors at our new Bible School venue in a village in northern Latvia. Our budget was spent many times over, and we had not one table to even put food on. Cindy and I got hold of some wood, and spent an evening and half the night making a table. I could see that both time and resources were against us; and for some reason, this matter became an especial worry to me. I then got a message that a kind brother in far away France has an office furniture business, and had some spare table tops. I'd never met the brother (and still haven't). He calmly told me that in a few days, a truck would arrive with a few tables. I somewhat doubted how all this would end. But very soon, a huge truck arrived in the village, a big articulated lorry, the biggest truck to have ever come into the village. And no fewer than 80 tables were

unloaded, along with two whiteboards and even the marker pens to go with them. Local people watched with total fascination. We needed a few tables... and God sent 80. "My cup runneth over" was a verse that came to mind. It was as if God was almost playing a game with me, and enjoying it.

Paul knew this aspect of the Father, when he wrote of how God does exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). How many times have we found that we prayed for one thing, and God gave us something so very much better? I see a kind of similarity with the way that God brought in the Law "that the trespass might abound; but where sin abounded, grace did abound more exceedingly" (Rom. 5:20). God set up a situation in order that in due time, He could lavish His grace the more. One almost wonders whether this is one of the reasons why God allowed the whole concept of sin to exist at all. After all, the God of boundless possibilities surely had ways to achieve His ends without having to allow a concept like sin in the first place. Seeing there is no personal Satan, the intellectual origin of the concept of sin surely lies with God. And perhaps He chose this simply as a way of being better able to express His amazing grace and love to sinners. Having lambasted Israel for their sins and described in detail their coming judgment, God then makes a strange comment, apparently out of context with what He has just been saying: "And therefore will Yahweh wait, that he may be gracious unto you; and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for Yahweh is a God of justice; blessed are all they that wait for him" (Is. 30:18). God appears to be saying that He delays His actions, that He brings judgment, that He sets Himself *so* far above us- just so that He can get to show yet more mercy to us. Perhaps Joseph was manifesting God in the way he worked out that slow and detailed scheme of dealing with his sinful brethren... it has always seemed to me that he drew out the process just so that he could lead up to a climax of pouring out his maximum grace to them. Whilst the way seems long, "blessed are all they that wait for him". God is even spoken of as concluding (Gk. 'shutting up the eyes') of Israel in the sin of unbelief, "that he might have mercy" upon both them and the Gentiles (Rom. 11:32).

If God cares for the grass, which He will not save and which lasts a moment... how much more will He care for us? So, do not worry! He will provide. "How much more..." runs as a refrain through the Lord's teaching. "Consider the ravens, that they sow not, neither reap; which have no store-chamber nor barn; and God feeds them: of how *much more* value are you than the birds!" (Lk. 12:24). "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how *much more* shall your Father who is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Mt. 7:11). "For if the blood of goats and bulls... sanctify unto the cleanness of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ... cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb. 9:13,14). The Lord tells the disciples that they are "of little faith" if they don't perceive and live by what He is teaching about God's care for the flowers. The 'faith' is surely faith in the simple fact that God lavishes His loving care upon us, just because, like a flower, we are here as His creation, in His eternal purpose. Eph. 1:8 talks of how God has lavished or *abounded* His grace upon us. The same word is used about the Lord not only made miraculous loaves and fishes, but there was so much that *abounded* (AV "that remained") that it filled twelve baskets (Mt. 14:20). Why did the Lord do that, and why make the disciples pick up all those crumbs? Surely to give them an object lesson in how God delights in abounding to us. He didn't just give the people food; He *abounded* to them. The record of each of the feeding miracles, in each of the Gospels, uses this word translated "remained" in commenting about the fragments that were left over- although the real meaning is 'to abound'. Each of the Gospel writers was therefore deeply impressed by the fact that the Lord not only provided food- but such an abundance. All this sets the

background for Paul's use of the very same word to describe how God's grace has "abounded" to us in Christ (Rom. 3:7; 5:15; Eph. 1:8).

Practical Response

Our practical life in Christ is really all about our response to the abounding nature of God's grace. If we really believe it, then we will trust in Him and not worry. Mt. 6:32 goes on to imply that the difference between the Gentile world and the believer in Christ is quite simply that we believe that our Father has this level of care and concern for us; and therefore we will not worry, whereas the unbelieving world worry constantly about material things. This is how much of a 'first principle' this really is. And of course we cannot know God's grace without likewise 'abounding' with it ourselves. This can be in acts of generosity; the early believers 'abounded' in generosity to the needy (2 Cor. 8:7- the same word used about the abounding of God's grace). But the spirit of 'abounding' is far more than material generosity. We are to 'abound' in the work of edifying the church (1 Cor. 14:12; 15:58); abounding in prayer for each other (1 Thess. 3:10), rather than just praying once about someone else's problem as a conscience-salving formality. Ask yourself- whether your prayer for others is of the 'abounding' quality that the Lord's intercession was and is *for* you? We are to 'abound' in praise- for God's abounding grace abounds through us to His glory if we praise Him for that grace (2 Cor. 4:15). And so... how is your praise? A mouthing off of familiar words and lyrics, that you've hummed and hymned for years? Or the internal praise that has some real fire and flame to it? As God makes His grace *abound* to us, *we* are to *abound* to every good work (2 Cor. 9:8). We are to 'abound' in love to each other, as God abounds to us (1 Thess. 3:12). This is why there will never be a grudging spirit in those who serve properly motivated by God's abundance to us. This super-abounding quality in our kindness, generosity, forgiveness etc. is a feature lacking in the unbelievers around us. If we salute our brethren only, then we do not super-abound (Mt. 5:47); if we love as the world loves its own, then we have missed the special quality of love which the Father and Son speak of and exemplify. This radical generosity of spirit to others is something which will mark us apart from this world.

The Lord died so that we might know life "more abundantly" (Jn. 10:10). Think for a moment of *how* the death of a man on a stake, 2000 years ago, on a day in April, on a Friday afternoon, irritated by flies and barking dogs... could actually give us life "more abundantly"? What was the process, what *is* the process, going on here? What's the connection between that dying man, and a transformed life in you and me today in the 21st century? Surely the connecting power is that the spirit / disposition of the Lord there and then has an inevitable, transforming influence upon those of us who believe in Him; the super-abounding grace and generosity of spirit that was in Him there, which was epitomized in the hours of public, naked exhibition... can't fail to move our spirits to be likewise. Paul speaks of this when He says that God does for us exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think, by the spirit / power / disposition that works in is (Eph. 3:20). That power, that spirit, is surely that of the crucifixion of Christ. For we cannot be passive to it, if we really 'get it'. It is a power that "works in us". In this sense, grace is spoken of as a King, powerfully reigning in our lives. In Romans 5, Paul makes a seamless connection between the reign of God's grace now, and our future reigning in the literal Kingdom of God to be established materially upon earth at the Lord's return: Grace reigns *unto* eternal life, i.e. the result of the reign of grace now is eternal life in the future (Rom. 5:21)... and thus " the ones receiving the abundance of the grace and of the free gift of the righteousness in [this] life *will* reign through the one, Jesus Christ"

(Rom. 5:17). The idea is that if grace reigns in our lives, then we will reign in the future Kingdom.

The Father's whole spirit / attitude is of wanting to lavish grace. Our spirit likewise must not be mean- totting up the cost of all the things the visitors have eaten, etc. But God's lavishing of grace is not only in material things, but supremely in His patient forgiveness and salvation towards us. Are we super abounding in forgiveness, or do we grudgingly offer it only upon evident repentance from others? Such legalism is associated with Moses, but grace and truth, "grace upon grace", came by the Lord Jesus (Jn. 1:16). Grace is 'ever increasing' ("grace upon grace") in that as we grow in Christ, we perceive that grace more and more. God not only forgives, but He *delights* in doing so (Is. 62:14; Mic. 7:18); the way He is spoken of as 'delighting' in spiritually weak Israel is part and parcel of Him lavishing grace as He does (Num. 14:8). It must be so awful to have such a wonderful spirit of lavishing grace and love, consciously giving out life and patient forgiveness to so many; and yet not be appreciated for it, to have puny humans shaking their fist at God because they die a brief moment of time sooner than they think they should, to have tiny people arrogantly questioning His love. Seeing that God is Almighty, and God could have made [and could re-make] His creation to 'understand' and respond in a robot-like way... and seeing God has real and deep emotional feelings... it all makes God almost a tragic figure. He was to Israel as a wayfaring man who wanted to lodge with them, but they only let Him stay one night (Jer. 14:8). All I can say is that as we read this study, as we are reminded of the things I am sure we all well know, and resolve to feel His amazing grace and respond to it the more... we are pleasing Him. I hope He looks down upon us, reader and writer, with pleasure... that at least someone [just starts to] 'get' the whole wondrous nature of His grace.

An Abounding Community

As a community, we need to develop a spirit of abounding grace which will influence all our members. The life of radical grace is infectious. Mary's lavish anointing of the Lord may well have been what inspired Nicodemus to so lavishly prepare the Lord's body for burial. The vast quantities of spices he used was more than that used in the burials of some of the Caesars. He too must have bankrupted himself to anoint the Lord's body. That two people did this within a week of each other is too close a similarity to be co-incidental. Surely the nature of Mary's giving inspired that of Nicodemus. Paul likewise writes of how the generous commitments of the Corinthian ecclesias had "inspired very many" to generosity (2 Cor. 9:2). And we too, in our abundant responses to God's super-abundant grace, will inspire each other likewise. I don't mean, of course, in the proud manner of many charity donors, trying to outshine each other before the public's gaze by their 'generosity'. I mean that in the graces of forgiveness, kindness in a myriad modest ways, that we see performed by others, we will find *our* motivation to do likewise. For rightly-performed good works are a light to the world; perhaps it is their very modesty which makes them "*shine* before men". So in this sense we will perceive others' acts of grace and be inspired by them, no matter how discreetly and modestly done they are. For they inevitably shine in a way that gives light to all who are in the (ecclesial) house, so that they too glorify the Father (Mt. 5:16). The Lord taught that we should "give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, shall they give into your bosom. For with what measure ye mete it shall be measured to you again" (Lk. 6:38). We might have expected Him to say: 'Give generously, with a good, running over measure, and this is what you will receive in return'. But He doesn't. He says simply "Give"; and then we will be given to in a generous measure, because with what measure we use in our giving, we will receive. Thinking it through, He means

surely that “giving”, by His definition, means a generous, well packed, abundant giving; for that *is* Christian giving. And note that the context of Lk. 6:38 is the Lord talking about not being critical and judgmental of others, but rather forgiving and accepting them. It is our 'giving' in this sense which is to be so full and generous. Only God's grace / giving can inspire this attitude within us, as we live hemmed in by the people of a materialistic, mean world, where nobody takes up a cross for anyone else. This is why Paul makes a play on the word 'grace' when writing to the Corinthians about giving; for *charis*, “grace”, means 'giving'. He urges them to not receive God's grace in vain, but rather, motivated by it, to give grace to others (2 Cor. 6:1; 8:6,7,19). This giving of grace is of course not just in material giving; speaking of how this world has an envious, materialistic spirit, James comments that by contrast, God “gives more grace” (James 4:6), i.e. His grace is more than the material 'giving'. Especially is grace given through forgiveness, especially forgiveness without demanding repentance, being inclusive rather than exclusive, patience, especially patience with others' immaturities, forbearing one another, basic kindness and thoughtfulness, imagining how others feel or may feel. God *delights* in showing forgiveness and mercy; He loves doing it (Mic. 7:18). It's "*son métier*" - 'what He's good at, His speciality'. When Israel were so far from God, He foretold the day when "my people will be gorged with my grace" (Jer. 31:14). The image of gorging upon grace is yet another reflection of the super-abounding nature of it. And this part of the new covenant to be made with Israel is true of us today, who have already entered that same covenant; it's a thought we can dwell upon as we eat at the Lord's table. And as we do so we can think of how God describes *His* feelings in all this: "I will find joy in them and in doing them good" (Jer. 32:41). God simply *loves* pouring out such grace. Let's try to catch something of this spirit of the grace of God. Let's try to adopt God's perspective. For what does He require more of a man, "but to do justly, and to *love* mercy (as God does, 7:18), and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8)?

2-21 Love Is

Paul didn't just start writing his poem about love in 1 Cor. 13. It's wedged firmly in a context, a clearly defined unit of material about the use of the Spirit gifts spanning 1 Cor. 12-14. Having clarified his own authority and personal experience of the miraculous gifts, he proceeds to shew the Corinthians "a more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31). He uses a Greek word four times, although most English translations render it inconsistently. It's worth highlighting the words in your Bible, maybe with a note like "s.w." ['same word'] next to them:

- "Prophecies shall *fail*" (1 Cor. 13:8)
- The Spirit gift of "knowledge shall *vanish away*" (1 Cor. 13:8)
- "That which is partial shall be *done away*" (1 Cor. 13:10)
- "Now that I am become a man [mature], I have *put away* childish [immature] things" (1 Cor. 13:11).

I read this as Paul saying that he used the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit in his spiritual immaturity; but in his maturity, he chose not to use them, he "put [them] away". Paul also writes of how the miraculous gifts will be "done away" when "that which is perfect [complete, mature] is come" (1 Cor. 13:10). He seems to be saying that his personal growth from childhood to manhood, from immaturity to maturity, is a reflection of how ultimately

the gifts will be no more when the mature state has come; and he wishes to attain that state now in this life, and thus he ceased using the gifts. He asks us likewise in this context to follow his pattern, to be "mature" [AV "be men"] (1 Cor. 14:20). This connects with how he speaks in Col. 3:14 of "above all" having love, which is the seal, the proof, of the mature state [AV "the bond of perfectness"]. In his own way, John spoke of the same state when he wrote of "perfect / mature love", and how he who fears hasn't reached the 'perfected-in-love' stage (1 Jn. 4:18). Instead of flaunting the Spirit gifts, Paul sold his soul for love; he gave himself over to the life characterized by the kind of love about which he writes so powerfully in his poem. Paul laments that the Corinthians weren't mature (1 Cor. 3:2), and wishes to be able to speak to them as "mature" (1 Cor. 2:6). So often in the decisions we face in life, it doesn't come down to a right or wrong, a yes or no; rather it's a question of what is the mature Christian behaviour, and what isn't.

In the future Kingdom of God, there will be no need for the miraculous Spirit gifts as they were in the first century. Love is "the greatest" because faith and hope will then have been turned to sight and will be no more (1 Cor. 13:13). A theme of Corinthians is the ability of the believer to live on different levels- e.g. 1 Corinthians 7 advocates the single life of devotion to God as the highest level, but goes on to make a series of concessions to lower levels. It seems that in the matter of the use of the miraculous Spirit gifts, Paul is again presenting a higher level upon which the believer of his time could live- a "more excellent way". He wanted to live the Kingdom life now as far as possible. We "have eternal life" not in the sense that we shall not die, but in the way that we in Christ can live the kind of life we shall for ever live- right now.

The Supremacy Of Love

What Paul is advocating, then, is a conscious outgiving of ourselves to love. Not just being a nice enough person, a reasonable neighbour, partner, parent, a "top bloke", real decent guy. But a love which is actually beyond even that. A love modelled on God's love, and the love of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us crucifixion. Paul's poem personifies love as a person- love, e.g., "rejoices with the truth", hopes and endures. We too are to 'be' love. Not just occasionally, not just in ways which we are accustomed to, which are convenient to us, or are part of our background culture such as occasional hospitality to strangers. "Love is...", and we are 'to be' love, as if our very name and soul and heart is '*agape*'. Before we look at some specific aspects of this love, let's allow Paul to point up to us the paramount importance of love. Love is not an option- it's to be the vital essence of 'us'.

Even if we have faith to move mountains- an allusion to the Lord's teaching in Mt. 21:21- we 'are nothing' without love (1 Cor. 13:2). God so respects faith that He may hear the prayer of a believer, even though He considers that person "nothing" because they lack love. Rather like Elijah bringing fire down from Heaven by his faith- and yet the Lord Jesus seems to imply that this wasn't the right thing to have done, because Elijah lacked love (Lk. 9:55). In our self-examination we may perceive how God answers our prayers, our faith is rewarded... and think we're doing OK. But it could be that we are still "nothing". It's a sobering thought. Paul goes on in 1 Cor. 15:2,19 to say that faith can be "in vain", and hope can likewise be merely of benefit in this life. But 1 Cor. 13:3 hits even harder home: a believer can give their body to be burned, for nothing, if they lack love. Remember these words were written, albeit under inspiration, by a believer who did give his body to die a violent death, and who had seen with his own eyes the death of Christians. Surely Paul writes with a warning word to

himself; that even that apparent pinnacle of devotion to the Lord can be in vain, if we lack love.

Love Is

So seriously did Paul take this that, as I suggested above, he stopped using the miraculous gifts of the Spirit in order to live the Kingdom life of love now, as far as possible. I find it deeply concerning that so many who have committed themselves to Christ are unable to confidently answer questions such as 'What is love?'. To expound the beasts of Daniel's visions is relatively easy- this equals that, that refers to this. But to get to grips with "love" appears to have been given all too little attention. Love is patient / long-suffering (1 Cor. 13:4). But let's not think that patience simply means how we react to forgetting our keys or spilling milk. To some extent, whether we take such events calmly or less calmly is a function of our personality, our nervous structure, the kind of cards we were dealt at birth. I suggest that the long-suffering patience Paul refers to instead has reference to our forgiving attitude to others, rather than applying to whether or not we get frustrated with ourselves. The man hopelessly in debt to his Lord begged for Him to show "patience" (Mt. 18:26). Patience is about not forcing others to "pay me what you owe me". We all have many people in our lives who are in our debt- more such people than we may realize. We have all been hurt by more people, and hurt more deeply, than we realize. Patience is about bearing long with their immaturity, waiting for them, whilst the debts remain unpaid; rather than demanding that they resolve with us before we'll fellowship them. Love is not easily provoked (1 Cor. 13:5)- and here we have an allusion to how slow God was to anger with Israel. As their loving husband He stuck with them for centuries, enduring what would have emotionally shattered many husbands if they endured it just for a few months, and putting up with what most men couldn't handle even for a year. God was slow to anger for centuries, and even then in that wrath He remembered mercy, even in His judgments He desperately sought to find a way to go on with Israel in some form. And we are asked to show that same slowness to anger.

Love is not "puffed up" (1 Cor. 13:4). Earlier in Corinthians, Paul has warned that "knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1). Let us never kid ourselves that because we "know" some things about God, even know them correctly, that we will thereby be justified. It's not a case of simply holding on to a set of doctrinal propositions which we received at the time of our baptism into Christ. For the day of judgment won't be an examination of our knowledge or intellectual purity. This is not to say that knowledge isn't important. Paul had been arguing that if we truly know that God is one, that idols therefore have no real existence, that we are free in Christ to eat any meat- then this knowledge should not lead us to be arrogantly insensitive to our brother or sister who has a less mature understanding or conscience. Love is... not like that. Love therefore restrains our own superior knowledge and bears with those who don't quite 'get it' as they should. Again, our pattern is God's attitude to us who know just a fraction of His ultimate Truth. This love "seeks not her own" (1 Cor. 13:5). This phrase again builds on Paul's earlier argument in Corinthians- that we should act sensitively to others weaker in the faith, not doing things which may make them stumble, according to the principle "Let no man seek his own, but each his neighbour's good" (1 Cor. 10:25). This is quite something. All the time, in every decision, action, position we adopt, we are to think of what would be best for *others* rather than what's cool for ourselves. At the very least, this means that we are to act in life *consciously*- not just go with the flow, reacting to things according to our gut feeling, choosing according to what seems right, comfortable and convenient to us at that moment; but rather thinking through what import our positions and actions will have upon others. It takes *time* to think out what will be beneficial for them. And

"love is..." just this. This is a way of life and thinking which it's very rare to meet in people. Almost frustrated, Paul lamented: "For all men seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" (Phil. 2:21). 1 Cor. 10:25 spoke of seeking not our own good, but the good of our brethren- i.e. "the things which are Jesus Christ's". But according to Phil. 2:20,21, Paul felt that only Timothy understood this spirit of not seeking our own good, but that of the things of Christ, i.e. our brethren. The life of love is therefore a lonely life. So few 'get it'. Summing up, love bears / covers / carries all things (1 Cor. 13:7). This is the language of the cross- the Lord Jesus bearing, carrying our sins, and covering them. If we really grasp this, it ought to make us take a deeper breath. We are being asked to personally enter into the cross of Christ. To not just benefit from it ourselves, admire it from afar, look at it as Catholics glance at a crucifix over the door, pause for a moment in unthinking respect of tradition, and then go headlong through the door. No. We are asked to get involved in the cross, to participate in it, to bear it ourselves. The mind that was in the Lord Jesus at that time is to be the mind which is in us (Phil. 2:5-7).

Our Failure

Faced by the heights of such challenges, we can easily despair. We are not like this, or not like it very often nor very deeply. But Paul felt the same, even though under inspiration he himself wrote the poem. Paul too realized his failure, the slowness of his progress. When he writes that love is not "easily provoked" (1 Cor. 13:5), he uses the same Greek word which we meet in Acts 15:39 describing the provocation / contention he had with Barnabas which led to their division. Surely he had that on his conscience when he wrote that love is *not* like that. Note how he writes in the first person: "If *I* have all faith... but have not love, *I am nothing*" (1 Cor. 13:2). It's not only that Paul is warning himself personally; the only other time the Greek phrase "I am nothing" occurs is Paul speaking about himself, also to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 12:11). There's a kind of association of ideas between the "*I am [nothing]*" and "*Love is [everything]*". Unless we 'are' love, we 'are' nothing.

Paul speaks as if he has in one sense matured into "love", no longer a child but a man; yet he writes as if he is still in the partial, immature phase, seeing in a mirror darkly, waiting for the day when he would see "face to face". Likewise "Now I know in part, but then shall I know..." (1 Cor. 13:12). It's the 'now but not yet' situation which we often encounter in Scripture. In a sense we have attained to the mature state of love; in reality, we are still far from it. Paul is alluding to Num. 12:8 LXX, where God says that He spoke with Moses face to face and not in dark similitudes. Paul felt that he wasn't yet as Moses, encountering God 'face to face' in the life of mature love. He was still seeing through a glass darkly. But some time later, Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he was now beholding the glory of the Lord's face [as it is in Christ] just as Moses did, "with unveiled face", and bit by bit, that glory was shining from him (2 Cor. 3:18 RV). And hopefully we feel the same- that bit by bit, we are getting there. So let's take Paul's urging seriously: to grasp the utter supremacy of the life of love, to "follow after love", to press relentlessly towards that state of final maturity which *is* love (1 Cor. 14:1).

2-22 Christian Frailty and Sensitivity

Frailty and Fickleness

Despite our preferred impression that we are strong, resolute individuals who think things out for ourselves, act logically, don't follow the crowd... the reality is that we are but human, and

there is a strong tendency within human nature to be fickle and follow the crowd. Is. 53:6 describes our sinfulness like this: “We each like sheep have gone astray [sheep go astray because of their visible tendency to follow the flock they are in]; we have turned every one to his own way”. We each sin in our own unique and personal ways; but we do so because we follow the flock. And the context of Isaiah 53 is that the crucifixion of the Lord was necessary exactly because of this. He was the ultimate strong man psychologically, who ultimately went the Father’s way when no other human ever did.

Biblical history is full of examples of people following the crowd and thereby ending up doing sinful things which their better judgment would tell them not to do:

- At least two of Joseph’s brothers were against throwing him into the pit, and their comments to each other when they later meet him in Egypt suggest that hardly any of them really wanted to do what they did. But the power of groupthink was greater than that of their individual conscience; a whole group ended up doing something unthinkable, when the majority knew it was wrong.
- A study of “the princes” of Judah at the time of the final Babylonian invasion shows that they were not against Jeremiah nor responding to God’s word (Jer. 26:16; 36:14,19); indeed at one stage they pulled back from their path of refusing to respond (Jer. 34:10). But “the princes” were the ones whom Zedekiah feared (Jer. 38:25), and that fear led him to reject God’s word. And “the princes” were finally condemned for their weakness (Jer. 32:32); it was they who imprisoned and sought to kill Jeremiah because ultimately they could not abide his word (Jer. 37:15; 38:14).
- One person can easily lead a whole group, even of believers, into sin. It was specifically Judas who criticized the extravagant anointing of the Lord (Jn. 12:4,5); but all the disciples actually said it (Mt. 26:8; Mk. 14:4).

And so it is that whole groups of people- even God’s people- can be very fickle. The history of David’s final years shows this. “The people” were totally loyal to David; then to Absalom; then back to David; then to Adonijah and other pretenders to the throne; then back to David. “The crowd” were initially loyal to John the Baptist and then to Jesus- “the world has gone after him”, was the Jewish leadership’s frustrated comment. But the same crowd who cried “Hosanna!” were soon screaming “Crucify Him!” just days later. And the same “crowd” were just two months later deeply moved by Peter’s preaching, so that the Jewish authorities were again frustrated by the widespread support for the Jesus movement.

Searching our own lives and reflecting upon the lives of those known to us reveals the same tendency- heights of devotion one day compared to miserable failure the next. Those who once sacrificed all for the sake of the Truth- now indifferent, or even atheist or agnostic. People who would die for each other in love and care, cooling off over months and years into apathy. Brethren who once seemed so strong in faith suddenly come out on internet forums admitting they no longer really believe in God nor even desire to be in His Kingdom. Human beings are fickle and psychologically weak and frail. The frailty or weakness of humanity is a major Bible theme; and the weakness in view is not so much physical as moral and mental. We tend to assume better of ourselves and of others. A hard word or email, a rejection... may do deep damage to another person, although that damage may not be immediately apparent. Recognizing the frailty of others will bring us to a sensitivity towards them which requires constant self-control and self-analysis of our words and unspoken messages. And to live

sensitively in this increasingly desensitized world is not only very hard, it is part of picking up the cross of our Lord and following Him to the same painful death.

Focus Upon The Cross

The Bible abounds with images of stability. God is presented as a rock, and we are to build our house upon the rock of obedience to His word. We are to have the unwavering faith which is not “like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed” (James 1:6). The image of being blown around is also used in Eph. 4:14: “Henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, carried about with every wind of doctrine [teaching]”. There are those who read something on the internet, hear an idea compellingly presented by a teacher somewhere, and they are shaken by it, “carried about of winds” (Jude 12; Heb. 13:9). In those passages, the same Greek word for “carried about” is used; and the only other time Paul uses it is in speaking of how he “always carried about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10). And here we begin to see one antidote for such instability: A conscious, daily commitment to share in something of the crucifixion sufferings of Jesus, in hope and even present experience of His resurrection life breaking forth into our personal experience. We are asked to pick up His cross, to make His death our own. A firm commitment to this will enable us to stand firm against the various ‘winds’ which buffet us- especially in this internet generation, where information which we’re unable (if we’re honest) to really process assails us from all sides. How does that suggested teaching, that possible way of living and being, square with my solid, once-for-all commitment to follow my Lord to His cross and beyond?

Back To The Bible

The man who built his house on the rock was able to ultimately withstand the winds. But his building was slow, because it was a ‘hearing of [Christ’s] words and doing them’ (Lk. 6:47,48). Spiritual progress will be slow- if it is real progress. This is not only a comfort to us, as our self-examination reveals pathetically slow progress. It also inspires us to patience with the slow spiritual progress of our brethren, whose failures and slowness to develop are so much more obvious to us than are our own similar frailties. The Lord’s parable opens to us another way of being firm rather than easily swayed- to hear the Lord’s words and do them. Daily Bible reading may seem a call from conservative yesteryear; but it is a necessary call. It is a daily familiarity with the basic text of Scripture and a daily, conscious commitment in prayer to follow God’s word which will give us stability. When “It was told the house of David, saying, Syria is allied with Ephraim! His heart trembled, and the heart of his people, as the trees of the forest tremble with the wind. Then said the Lord...” (Is. 7:2,3). The antidote to hearts shaking back and forth was to pay serious attention to God’s word.

This is the difference which the Bible makes in human life. An acceptance that finally, in that volume, we have the expressed will of God for us, gives us a basis upon which to firmly decide our principles and positions- “For the Bible tells me so”. This is a feature of the seed sown on good ground- that is has a “root” (Mt. 13:6). But the interpretation of the sower parable adds the significant detail- that he who withers away “has not root *in himself*” (Mt. 13:21). Our root is in God’s word, and in the things of the crucified Christ, the smitten rock. And yet it is ‘in ourselves’ in the sense that God’s word and the things of Christ are deep within *us*. This, then, is the intention of regular, daily, habitual reading and meditation upon God’s word, both as it is in the Bible and as it is in the character and personality of the Lord

Jesus, who should likewise be our daily meditation. It is “the root of the trees” which will be judged (Lk. 3:9; Mk. 11:20); it is who we are and what we have deep within us which is so crucial, and which withstands every wind. There is a colossal emptiness within the hearts of so many, an emptiness willingly filled with the meaningless words of popular music, entertainment and a life focused upon the cosmetic rather than the essential. We have so much more to fill our minds with- let us do so. Carry a pocket Bible with you. Dip into it in the course of the day. “Gird up the loins of your mind”, Peter says- gather together our thoughts instead of letting them flow and drift everywhere, thus hampering our movement. Focus them upon the Lord Jesus. Have Him as Lord and Master of your heart. Be spiritually minded. And as we inevitably reflect that all this is so much easier read than done- pray that the rock of Israel, and the smitten rock of His Son, shall fill our minds with their spirit, so that really it shall be possible for us.

Establishing The Heart With Grace

The New Testament has a major theme of the believer being ‘established’ by God (1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:21; Col. 2:7). The Greek word implies that we will be made stable, having a foundation that will not be swayed; and God will do this to us if we allow Him to. Heb. 13:9 teaches that we will not be carried or blow about if our heart, our core being, is “established with grace”. If we really accept that gift, believing and feeling that in spite of our works we will be saved should Jesus return right now- then nothing will blow us off course. The wonder of that will be our stability, both now and eternally.

Sensitivity

We live in a world which is becoming desensitized and almost dehumanized. From the hard looks of chic women to the indifference of an old man dropping a candy wrapper on the street, this world is hard and getting harder. We who have the spirit of Jesus, the mind of Christ, are not to live as the world, who sin because they are “past feeling”, a-pathetic, without pathos, without sensitivity (Eph. 4:19), with a blind mind (another figure for insensitivity), with a vain heart, and who have *therefore* given themselves over to the life of selfish greediness and petty materialism. The lack of true emotion, pathos and passion in our postmodern world is all a reflection of this chronic insensitivity. Paul’s comment is that “you have not so learned Christ” (Eph. 4:20). To have His mind, His spirit, is to be sensitive both to God and man; and to thereby live with feeling and passion. Like Paul we will rejoice with those who rejoice, and feel so connected with our brethren that if one of them stumbles, we as it were ourselves feel the fire of their future condemnation spreading over us right now (2 Cor. 11:29).

Our inspiration to live soft in this hard world comes from the spirit, the way of being, the pattern, the essence, of the Father and His Son. The way the Lord healed people reflects His sensitivity- He commanded food to be brought for a girl who had been dead and was therefore hungry (Lk. 8:55). And on an even higher level, He is given the title “The Spirit” because His spirit / mind is at one with both God and us; hence, Romans 8 explains, He is such a matchless mediator. He is simply *so* sensitive to our thinking as well as God’s.

The Sensitive Lord

The sensitivity of both God and the Bible writers is indicated by the way in which the inspired writers often sense the likely response to what they have just written, and engage

with that response ahead of time. Thus after having written of the resurrection, Paul foresees the response, and goes on: "But someone will say, How are the dead raised up?" (1 Cor. 15:35). Your homework can be to look for other examples of this kind of thing, especially in Romans. What we are to learn in practice is that we should anticipate the likely response of others to our words, actions and positions- rather than bluntly present "truth" (as we perceive it) without any care for their response to it. For we aren't simply 'witnessing truth' to people in an in-your-face manner; but seeking to win them for Christ, to walk at one with them in the same steps and same spirit.

The way the Lord speaks with Peter in Jn. 21:15-17 is an essay in His sensitivity and having thought about how Peter would be feeling, the assurances he would need, the questions he was likely asking himself, the challenge he would be facing, the encouragement he would need on the path to salvation. We need to engage with others in this same way. Jesus had already met Peter twice since His resurrection, but hadn't raised the obvious issue of Peter's denials. And now He does it only *after* He has first eaten with Peter. We must bear in mind that to eat together, especially to take bread and give it to others, implied acceptance and religious fellowship (Jn. 21:13- reminiscent of the breaking of bread, the same words for 'bread', 'take' and 'give' are found in Mt. 26:26). The Lord firstly fellowshiped with Peter and only then moved on to probe the issue of his disloyalty, after having first affirmed His abiding love for Peter. He had tried to arrange circumstance to provoke Peter to himself engage with the issue- for the triple questioning, the triple invitation to work for Him, all took place by a fire of coals- just as Peter's triple denials had. We see clearly portrayed here the gentle, seeking spirit of the Lord

"You know that I love you" was met by the Lord with the comment that Peter must feed His sheep. This wasn't so much a commandment / commission, as the Lord explaining that Peter's love for Him personally would be reflected in the degree to which Peter loved the Lord's sheep. John grasped this clearly, when he underlines throughout his letters that we cannot have love for God without loving our brethren. The Father and Son are to be identified with their people. "Lovest thou me?" was a question for Peter's benefit, not in order to give the Lord information which He didn't then have. His great sensitivity to Peter led Him to foresee the obvious question in Peter's mind: 'Has He forgiven me?'. And the Lord is saying that Peter knows the answer insofar as Peter knows how much he loves Jesus, on the principle that whoever loves much has been forgiven much (Lk. 7:47). The allusion back to that incident in Luke 7 is confirmed by the way that the phrase 'to love more' occurs elsewhere only there, in Lk. 7:42: "Which of them will *love* him [Jesus] *most* [s.w. 'more']?". Jesus had already forgiven Peter; the answer to Peter's concern about whether he had been forgiven was really 'Yes you have, if you believe it; and if you believe it, you will love me, and according to how much you love me, you will know how much forgiveness you have received'. In all this, we see the careful sensitivity of the Lord Jesus to His people, foreseeing and feeling our doubts and fears, our questions; and responding to them in a profound way.

The Lord Jesus is the same today as He was yesterday. The Gospel records are the history of only what He *began* to do and teach people (Acts 1:1). He didn't interact with a few people for 33 years and then speed off to Heaven, to get on with other things until He returns to earth. No. He is as active in your life and mine as He was in that of Peter.

Our Sensitivity To God

I suspect we all tend to read the Bible subconsciously searching for more evidence for our own pre-conceived ideas, be they doctrinal issues or practical. Yet if this book and these words are truly God's words, and we feel this, then we can actually be nothing other than truly sensitive and open hearted to whatever He is going to teach us through them. We will not seek, therefore, to induce our own conclusions from Scripture, but will rather come seeking to simply be taught, whatever the cost, whatever the surprise. We need to clear our minds as far as we can before we begin our Bible reading, and pray earnestly that what we read there will be for us "the truth"; that we will not read those words to just find our own preconceived ideas there. We are up against this problem continually, when we ask, e.g., a Catholic to read the Biblical record about Mary with a clean, child-like mind, with no expectations as to what we expect to find there. And actually it's still just as hard for us to read Scripture with that same pure mind, as the years pass by after our baptism. Israel 'heard' the word, and yet they did not "hearken" to it (Rom. 10:16,18)- we can hear but not hear. Yet if we really believed that Scripture is inspired, we wouldn't be like this. It is awesome to reflect how those Hebrew letters, those Greek ciphers written on parchment centuries ago, were actually the very words of God Almighty. But this is the real import of our understanding of inspiration. Israel literally 'heard' the words of Ezekiel, knowing that a prophet had been among them- but they wouldn't engage with those words. We too can pay such lip service to the doctrine of inspiration- and yet not be truly sensitive to the word we know to be inspired.

In Practice

The command not to murder has its basis in the fact that human life is not for us to use as we will (Ex. 20:13; Lev. 17:11; Gen. 9:6). It is God's life within those other people around us. Others, therefore, are not for us to use as we will. Gentleness and sensitivity to the life of others, in family life, the workplace, on the road... is therefore an outcome of our belief that the 'other' person likewise has been created by God and has life from Him. To drive in an unkind way, to act in a thoughtless way to others' detriment, is therefore the same basic error as taking human life in murder. When it comes to our brethren, we have in them a unique, God-arranged opportunity to express His sensitivity to us, and our love for Him, through our sensitivity to them. How will they feel if I write this, what are their needs, concerns, fears, questions, insecurities... how will my action, my words, help them towards God's Kingdom? It all seems too great a challenge, for life passes too quickly for us to be able to work out a sensitive response to every situation we enter, every phone call we take. But this is where the concept of the spirit / mind / disposition of Jesus comes so powerfully into play. If we make Him our daily study and meditation, then we can have the mind / spirit of Christ, and somehow we will naturally respond as He would. For "the knowledge of Him" gives us the spirit of wisdom, that we may know how to respond to every man (Eph. 1:17; Col. 4:6).

2-24 A PRAYER TO PRAY

We live in a world where the majority are drifting through life as in a dream, doing roughly the same things the same way, living on autopilot, not too much in touch with themselves, existing rather than living. Make no mistake about it. For all their apparent achievements in study, business and family life- this is the hard reality for most of our fellows. We have been given life in Christ, and "life more abundant" (Jn. 10:10)- an allusion to how the natural creation brought forth life 'abundantly' (Gen. 1:20). Those who have become part of the new creation are to experience this same 'abundance' of life- whether trapped in poverty, difficult family situations, ill health or even clinical depression. The 'abundance' of our lives is to be what makes us different from those in the world- we are to salute

not only our brethren because we are living “more [same Greek word translated ‘abundantly’] than others (Mk. 5:47). There is a power at work in us which does “exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20).

But how do we lock in to this abundant life? It is none less than the resurrection life of the Lord Jesus. The life of Jesus is now being made manifest in our mortal flesh; and that life “works in you” (2 Cor. 4:11,12). The Christ-focused life means that He is working through us, doing His work, so far as we open ourselves to Him. Sure, we should read the Bible, and daily. But we can too easily leave it there, thinking that our duty is to maintain correct understanding of some doctrines, read the Bible, go to church, keep our nose clean, live a reasonable life. But we can do all that and still not make that vital personal connection with the Lord Jesus as a person, feeling His presence, communicating with Him, knowing Him, consciously serving Him and ever seeking to be as Him in this world... making and allowing His thinking to be ours. To have “the mind of Christ”, His outlook, perspective and worldview, to speak as He would speak, reason as He would. The Jews studied the Bible, but they would not come to Jesus that they might have life (Jn. 5:39,40).

We are called to live, to live for Christ and with the life of Christ- not to merely exist. Not to live merely in the sub-culture of being a Christian, full of good theology and fine phrases. There is a ‘life’ in some groups who have totally wrong beliefs, which should challenge us deeply. The Mormons say it takes them 500 hours of work on the doors to get a convert. And they do it- thousands of their young people are out knocking on hostile and unwelcoming doors as you read this. And the JW’s are another example. And we... with so, so much more and better to tell folk... what are we doing? Immersed in our sub-culture- or out there doing something with our lives? Just as you get middle aged spread, so our beliefs can become stale, and we become flabby. Nothing excites us anymore. But this is not the abundant life in Christ.

This is not just a point to agree with and skip on. Clever and inspirational words are cheap. We put them on Facebook profiles, status updates etc. and talk soberly and approvingly of them. But our usage of them can disguise the fact that much of our would be zeal is borrowed. The revolutionary and dynamic message of the real Christ can still be unfelt by us personally. We can read thousands of ‘great books’, hear hundreds of powerful exhortations- all in a fog of unreality. And yet never really change or live this life. We undervalue ourselves and our huge significance to God and our Lord. That’s probably one reason why we have a tendency to hero-worship and setting up brethren on pedestals- ‘I wish I were him / her, I never will be, the best I can do is reverence those who spiritually made it’. But as Marianne Williamson put it, “We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world” (from *Return to Love*). In the eyes of God and the Lord who so loved us to the point of death, we are all those things. We are talented- He has given us talents, to go trade with and achieve something for Him, to make some increase of what He has given. There are good works which God before ordained that we should do for Him (Eph. 2:10). Right now, *ask Him*. Yes, stop reading this and pray- that God will show you His hopes for you, His intentions, what He has set you up to do for Him, what talents He has given you.

But say ‘Amen’ to that prayer realizing it will require radical change. And just accept that you like all human beings are a conservative. We cling, desperately, to patterns of coping and established ways of being. The Lord recognized the essential conservatism of human nature when He observed that

no matter how good the new wine, we will think that “the old is better” (Lk. 5:39), taking it as read that “the former days were better than these” (Ecc. 7:10). Yes, for all our much vaunted liberalism and open mindedness, our reasonable openness to new ideas which we assume we have- we are conservatives by nature. Don’t disturb me or upset my social club. The seed of the Gospel was sown in our lives so that we might bring forth fruit. Not to just be retained and to lay dormant. The Lord’s judgment of the one talent man may seem unusually harsh- he who carefully preserved the talent (and the same Greek word is used later in the New Testament about the need to “preserve” the Truth). He didn’t spend it on himself. Didn’t lose it. Didn’t let it get dirty. Didn’t forget where he buried it. But his inaction was the basis of his condemnation.

In the wider Christian world, Christianity is becoming increasingly professional. But just like the colossal scale of a cathedral dwarfs Catholics into thinking they themselves can do nothing, so this professionalism can do to us. Smart websites, powerpoint presentations, truly funny jokes, entertainment. But this is not how God works. It is through the likes of the late, great Ludmila Fyodorovna Kuritsyna, who never had a cell phone, had no teeth and no dentures, thought the internet was only for her grandkids... and yet converted several hundred throughout the former USSR by letter writing and constant personal visitation and teaching.

“Endure hardship like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No-one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs- he wants to please his commanding officer” (2 Tim. 2:3,4). Not for us the disillusion of feeling we gave our lives for the wrong cause, that we made such commitment without knowing the real facts, of seeing the feet of clay in our leaders. The life in Christ, the work for His cause, shall never disappoint. But we must keep focused on it, as the bigger picture overarching our lives. We will not allow the hard word of others, their failure, even your own failure, the major calamities, loss of fellow soldiers falling at your side... to interfere with the overall thrust and direction of our lives.

The fact the Lord Jesus died for you personally will mean you seek to respond without wavering, without flinching. Not for us the philosophy of ‘balance’ - a bit of effort for the Lord, but balanced by our commitment to our hobbies, wealth seeking and other passions. The end result of it is simply life in the mire of mediocrity. He gave and lived His life to the full for us, and has given us that kind of life. We are to live in *harmony*, I would say, not maxed out on just one particular aspect of serving Him- but there is a subtle difference between ‘balance’ and such harmony. Watch out, in this generation as never before, for time wasting. For life is full of ways to waste the precious hours God has given you, and each one is lost forever once it’s over. We will spend eternity serving God because our nature will be changed. But every effort we make for Him in the constraints of *this* nature, where such service has to be a conscious choice, is perhaps in a strange way even more meaningful and pleasing to Him. So please, pray a prayer something like this: “Father, who created me for Your pleasure, and Lord Jesus, who died for me, please show me what are Your hopes for me. What can I do. Lead me to the right people. May I get into the right conversations. I believe You will lead me and show me as I ask. But please also give me the courage to follow where You lead. I open my life and my heart totally to You. I want to give my all for You. I am willing to lay my life down for You. Help me to do it. For the sake of Jesus and so that all His love and work for me will not be without response from me, Amen”.

2-25 Man's Search for Meaning

All too easily, our life in Christ becomes reduced to the same old scene of religious habits and rituals- reading the same Bible chapters, saying more or less the same words in prayer, attending the same kind of meetings at the same times. All these things are good and wholesome of themselves, but unless we're very careful, put together they turn our wonderful relationship with the Lord into mere religion. We can make a religion out of our service of God, and turn it all into a kind of idol. And there is Biblical and archaeological evidence that Israel used their idols as a form of Yahweh worship. They turned Him and His service into an idol. And in essence, we in this age can do the same, the outward form of our religion doesn't make us atheists, but it can lead to what Martin Buber called *The Eclipse of God*. And all this means that we have missed something very fundamental: We were called to work. By accepting Jesus as *Lord*, we signed up to being His *servants*. And each servant has been given a task to do- "to every man his work" (Mk. 13:34). When James writes of not being forgetful hearers "but a doer of the work" (James 1:25) he surely alludes here- with the implication that we have each been given a specific work to do. In another parable, we are each given coins with which we are to trade and make some profit for the Lord; and those who do nothing with them shall not be in God's Kingdom (Mt. 25:25). The man didn't spend the money on himself; he carefully preserved / hid the coin (the same word is used later in the New Testament for holding / preserving the one Faith) and returned it to his Lord. And for this he was rejected. He said he was "afraid" (Gk. *phobeo*)- perhaps he was fearful of making a mistake. Or we could legitimately translate *phobeo* as 'reverence'. The man thought his duty was to revere God in his own mind but actually *do* nothing. Whatever, the fact remains that we were "created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Our "walk", our way of life, our 'occupation' (the original Greek is elsewhere translated like that) is to be doing the works which God set us up to do. So here is good news for the unemployed- and for those who feel they have no meaningful occupation.

"Not in vain"

Our focus upon Paul's teaching about grace and faith can lead us to overlook the fact he also wrote much about the significance of work. God is in need of man- in a sense. He need not be, but He chooses to work through humans as the mechanism through which He operates. On one pole we have Divine sovereignty, His sovereign ability to be and do as He wishes in this world; on the other, we have human responsibility, the fact that if we don't pray for some things then they will not happen, if we don't do some things then they will not be done. We can play a part in others' salvation- when the Lord saw the faith of the friends, He forgave the sick man. And we can cause others to stumble and shut up the Kingdom to others by our legalism. We balk at this- because we struggle to grasp our own significance in God's ultimate purpose. Surely He can get someone else to do it? Who am I? Can I as one in seven billion people have any hand in the destiny of others on this planet? And shaken by the possibilities, the potential prospect before us, we stick our heads down and get on with our secular education, work and living- kidding ourselves that that is serving God, and we can do nothing else. But such secular work is actually glorifying the curse given in Eden. It is all in vain, as Ecclesiastes laments, and ends in the dust of death. But the good news is in 1 Cor. 15:58: Our labour, our toil, our weariness (so the Greek also means) is not in vain *in the Lord*. Only in Him does life and its labour become meaningful. Here ends Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, and all the depression and dysfunction that goes with sensing the insignificance of our lives and the inability to attach ultimate meaning to the stream of events that comprise human history. As believers, our decisions are meaningful and affect the course of history for others. God in

that sense is open to many possible futures, even though they shall all come to term in the establishment of His Kingdom on earth. As members of His people, doing His will, the labour of our lives is *not* in vain, seeing it is done "in the Lord". Paul seems to be alluding to the spirit of Ecclesiastes, which laments that all achievement and labour "under the sun", not "in the Lord", is so tragically vain; there is no sense of final achievement, and this nagging fear about the ultimate validity of life's work must plague all who live outside the sphere of God (Ecc. 1:9-11; 2:18-23).

In writing about 'work', Paul draws no distinction between secular work (the kinds of things all human beings do, in the workforce or family life) and work for God. He uses the term *kopos*, which essentially means to toil or be troubled. The allusion is to the curse of Genesis 3. And yet Paul speaks of being fellow-labourers with God and Jesus (Phil. 2:12), of labouring to bring forth fruit, of how he has worked more abundantly than any in response to his receipt of God's grace (1 Cor. 15:10). He felt his whole life was working to an end, and therefore he rarely expresses regret for anything after his baptism. That's a wonderful way to live life. Only true Christianity enables it. Life outside of Christ is 'unfruitful' (Rom. 6:21; Eph. 5:11), and Paul's concern is with being fruitful for God. He shares his concern that he will not labour "in vain" (Gal. 2:2; 4:11; 1 Thess. 3:5), that those who leave the faith will have laboured "in vain" (1 Cor. 15:2; 2 Cor. 6:1; Gal. 3:4), asks for prayers for the success of his work (Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1), and sounds relieved to write that his visit to Thessalonica was "no failure" (1 Thess. 2:1 Moffatt). His aim was to be able to say at the day of judgment that he had not laboured in vain (Phil. 2:16). All these references give the impression of a conscious effort to ensure that life is not lived in vain, that the labour of our lives is fruitful. This concern for achievement, to be fruitful and not live in vain is pointedly relevant to our age, where life can be frittered away so easily in entertainment and endless social networking. The call of Christ is to be "fruitful", to concretely achieve, with all the associated mental effort that entails.

The Reward of Works

The results-focused attitude of Paul again shines through to us in this age. We might assume that if we place a tract in a letterbox, then we have done our duty in witness. But a results-oriented approach will think how technique might achieve conversion. I see in Paul's writings a man with an intense awareness of himself, not an egoist, but someone who realized the immense value, significance and potential of the human person in Christ. Salvation itself is a free gift, independent of works- Rom. 4:4; 6:21-23 draws the contrast between the free gift of God, and the wages paid by sin. We each receive the same penny a day. And yet there is a major emphasis in the New Testament upon works being judged and rewarded eternally (1 Cor. 4:4,5; 2 Cor. 5:10). There will be a 'payment' or reward for our works (1 Cor. 3:10-15; Rev. 22:12). There is a direct connection between our works in this life and the nature of our eternity. The nature of our eternity will be in accordance with the nature of our work. If, e.g., we laboured long and hard for the salvation and spiritual growth of an individual, then to live eternally with them will be an eternal reward. A bad builder will be saved at the last day but his work shown to be shoddy (1 Cor. 3:15). What this means is that our work within the body of Christ has real and eternal results. This alone should inspire us to be minimalists in our secular lives and focus on what will have eternal result.

In one sense, the Lord Jesus has given us His work to do and has gone away to the "far country", to return and assess our work. In another, according to Jn. 14-16, He is actively present with us. The resolution is that we are indeed left to make our own decisions and structure our lives as we think

best in order to do our Lord's work, and yet He is also very much with us in Spirit- if we perceive it. In this sense, Christ works through our work for Him, as He did through Paul's (Rom. 15:18). For "we are God's fellow-workers" (1 Cor. 3:9 RV; 2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Thess. 3:2 Western Text). Because of this, our labour is His, and thus becomes ultimately meaningful. Even our secular lives and labour becomes part of God's work, if it is done as unto Him and directed toward the final end of being *His* work rather than our own. Hence Paul reflects that if he is allowed to live a few more years, "If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me" (Phil. 1:22). Life in the flesh can be fruitful labour. And that had huge significance for the slaves who became Christians. They were not to think that they could only serve their Heavenly Lord in the tiny amount of 'free time' they had. Nor are we to think that our service of God can only be 'after hours'. How grateful those slaves would have been for this amazing feature of the life in Christ. Ordinary daily tasks become absorbed in the grand idea of serving the Lord. Paul writes of slaves or free men each having 'a calling in which he was called' (1 Cor. 7:20)- and he uses this term elsewhere only about the calling to Christ we have received. Our 'calling' in secular life is our calling to serve Christ. But we are not to think this means we are to just pay no attention to trying to consciously serve the Lord as directly as possible- for in this context he writes that "If you may [Gk. 'have the possibility to'] be made free, then use it rather [also translated 'better', 'the more']" (1 Cor. 7:21). This is relevant to issues of career choice, early retirement, how far we get involved with our employment. For we were called (Rom. 1:6, 1 Cor. 1:24)- called to be and do something. The Gospel must first go to all the world before the end comes (Mk. 13:10), the full number of Gentiles must come in (Rom. 11:25), and that may well be 'that which restrains' in 2 Thess. 2:6. We can each play our part in this. We can have a hand in history, in the path that must be taken, and for how long that path lasts, leading to the return of Christ. Don't be like the one talent man who 'feared' and therefore hid his talent. Because we are slaves *of Christ*, doing His work, we are not therefore answerable to men (Gal. 1:10). We need not fear their raised eyebrows, negative comments, misunderstanding emails, their idea that we cannot do God's work without human authorization. For we are 'in His service', doing the work of the King of the cosmos.

Our Calling Today

Life lived like this, the purpose driven life, therefore ultimately has no regrets at the end. Paul shows no regret for anything since his baptism. He also pays little attention to 'the problem of suffering'. Instead he saw every suffering as being to an end, part of the Divine program he was part of. Instead of writing about 'What I suffered for Christ', he more positively sees it all as 'What Christ has done in me'. So what does all this mean? For the African or Asian peasant farmer, the European middle aged man trapped by mortgage payments he can't really meet, the American divorcee without maintenance for her young children, the unemployed invalid in Eastern Europe, the blind man in an underfunded care home in Lithuania, the Syrian refugee living illegally in Greece, the Australian in midlife crisis, the believer stumbling through the mire of mediocrity? It means that you have a mission. A specific calling which you may yet have to pray to discover. Once you get the point, and resolve to bend every fiber of your conscious being to His service and the achievement of His work in this world- then, believe me, and believe the Scriptures- life will open up before you. Even in the face of final illness and death itself, we will see that we are still willing travellers on the journey intended for us, still part of His program for His glory. And until then, absolutely all things in life are to be done and to be used within the sense of mission and specific calling which by grace we have each received.

The Life Eternal

By God's grace, we shall live for ever. We need to regularly think of it... the life eternal, endless, infinite, without end, on and on and on and on, a line without end. Yes, we need to close our eyes and willfully think of this until the mind trips, and we are left with a breathless sense of wonder. That I, the little boy from a south London suburb, with glasses and a mole on my lip... shall never die. For salvation, as Robert Roberts said so long ago, is personal. You, me- we, shall live for ever. There are times when a man comes down very small before God- and such moments of realization are one of those times. And the art of spiritual life is surely to live daily life, hour by hour, in the spirit of those moments of realization, of feeling so very small before our maker and our saviour. For life lived in this spirit, of humility, of smallness before God, is perhaps what He seeks from us above all things.

The eternity of the life ahead dwarfs all daily problems, the crises of life and death, into very small size. Hovering over all those worries is the fact that all this shall not last long, in fact it lasts only a moment- in the spectrum of infinity. "For our slight momentary affliction accomplishes for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison; whilst meantime we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:17,18). God doesn't have long to prepare us for eternity- even a lifespan of 100 years is nothing compared to infinity. He therefore is very intensely at work in our lives to prepare us for the eternity ahead. Although day follows day and even year follows year in an apparently similar, repetitious style- through all that, He is very intensely at work. We may not always be able to attach meaning to event, but rest assured that there is huge significance to every moment and every event in daily life. It's a sense of meaninglessness, of *insignificance*, that is the root of so much depression. But for us, we are freed from that by realizing the brevity of our lives compared to the eternity ahead; and reflecting that therefore every incident now is of eternal moment and intense significance. We will not focus upon [the idea behind the Greek translated "look at" in 2 Cor. 4:18] the temporal things, but upon the things of the life eternal.

But every human being fears death. Everyone lives their lives in fear of death to the point that they are in bond-slavery to it; yet in Christ we have been delivered from that slavery (Heb. 2:15). Whilst we may fear the process of death, just as the Lord did in Gethsemane, we are free from the fear of death which enslaves other human beings throughout their lives; it's rather like being unable to enjoy a holiday because from day one, you are fearful about the holiday coming to an end. But the believer lives without this fear of endings, this unspoken angst about death itself. Like David, we can walk through the valley of the shadow of death *without fear* (Ps. 23:4). Our interest in spiritual things and in the Gospel doesn't just give us knowledge of the possible chance of eternity. The good news of the Gospel is that we have been given it, that we will be there. Otherwise the message of the

Kingdom is hardly Gospel, good news, if we have no guarantee that we shall be there. To be freed from the fear of death... this is good news so dramatic as to radically transform human life and thinking in practice, and turn the world around us upside down.

Living Eternal Life Now

But the life eternal is not only ahead, at some point further up the road; it's not all jam tomorrow. The Lord was asked what to do, "that I may have eternal life" in the future (Mt. 19:16). His response was (as so often with Him) to attack the terms of the question and invite the listeners to redefine them. His response speaks of how "If you will enter into life, keep the commandments... [then you will have] treasure [right now] in Heaven.... Follow Me" (Mt. 19:17,21). The Lord is effectively saying that our life of obedience now to the commandments, our following of Him today, is already entering into the life eternal. Instead of seeing 'life eternal' as some far future experience, He speaks of how we are to start living today the kind of life which we shall eternally live. We shall live for ever in obedience to God's principles / commandments- and we are to seek to live like that today. We will spend eternity following the Lamb wherever He goes- and we are to start doing that today. This is precisely the way John's Gospel uses the idea of "eternal life". We can right now start living the life eternal; we shall die, but the gift of the Lord Jesus is the empowerment to live today the kind of life we shall eternally live. In this sense we "have eternal life" here and now, in our mortality. And a glance at the Greek confirms this approach- the life *aionos* is the life of the *aion*, the age- the Kingdom age. In this sense we "keep" our present spiritual life "unto life eternal" (Jn. 12:25). Eternal life therefore 'abides in' we who live in love and have the spirit of Jesus (1 Jn. 3:15).

The Lord Jesus was the essence of Kingdom life, the life we shall eternally live. "The kingdom of God" was amongst Israel in the sense that He personally stood amongst them (Lk. 17:21). The parables of the Kingdom had their living exemplification in Him, the word of the Kingdom made flesh. "The life" is a title of Him (Jn. 14:6) because His character and being were the definition of the type of life we shall eternally live. Whoever, therefore, eats His flesh and drinks His blood, absorbing the essence of *Him* into themselves, has eternal life now as well as the guarantee of bodily resurrection at the last day, when this will all be articulated in material, physical, literal, bodily terms: "Whoso eats My flesh and drinks My blood, has eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn. 6:54). Eternal life is not, therefore, the reward for simply getting straight 'A's in our Bible study. The Lord criticizes the Jews for thinking that their searching of the Scriptures would give them eternal life, rather than coming to Him to find that life eternal which is in relationship with Him (Jn. 5:39); and it would seem Peter had the same mistaken thinking when He said that Jesus had the words of eternal life (Jn. 6:68). Indeed He does, but the life eternal isn't a future reward for having got our theology and Biblical interpretation correct. "This is life eternal, that they may know" [in an ongoing sense, the Greek implies] the Father and Son (Jn. 17:3). Life eternal isn't a reward for simply figuring out that God is one not three. It is about

knowing the Father and Son in terms of having a relationship with them. It starts right now, insofar as we find and know Him, and the spirit of His living becomes absorbed into our own. We express this in physical symbolism when we take the bread and wine and those symbols of Him become absorbed into our own bodies. Living “in Christ”, seeking to think as He would, act as He did, feel as He does, is to live the eternal life (1 Jn. 5:11,20). And if we do it now, there will be a seamless continuance of that life when He returns... for ever and ever and ever, world without end.

2-27 Perspective

Perspective

One of the problems folks have in interpreting the Bible is that they fail to realize that different parts of the Bible are written from different perspectives. Take the parable of the sower. At first blush, it could appear that the seed of God’s word lands on the various types of ground, and whatever type of ground you are was how you were from the start, and you have no choice in it. But the parable is from God’s perspective. Even I, looking back, can reflect on those I’ve preached to over the decades. That one responded well and does to this day, he started well but worldly cares took over, she... well, she got in with bad company and stopped responding. But the parable ends with the challenge: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear”. It’s over to us as to how we respond to the hearing of the word, the receipt of the seed. But the parable is telling us how God sees it from as it were a bird’s eye perspective. Three of the Gospels go right on after that parable to record the healing of Legion. And that record is written from his perspective. He felt he was possessed by a legion of demons, and the account reflects that, it’s written from his viewpoint, and the Lord Jesus clearly likewise went along with the man’s worldview in order to heal him of it. Thus He uses the language of demons whilst not personally believing in their existence.

A helpful simile is to read the Gospels as if they are the account of various video cameras trained upon the individuals we meet. When we read that Jesus “sat *in* the sea, and the whole multitude was *by* the sea on the land” (Mk. 4:1), the camera is as it were filming from a great distance- so far away that we don’t see the boat He was sitting in. But then the camera zooms in close and we read of Jesus turning and looking at Peter, turning and speaking to people, lifting His eyes to Heaven- as if the camera is now zoomed in close on His face and even His eyes. Or with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4; the camera is on the tired

Jesus sitting at the well, then on the woman as she speaks to Him, and the camera follows her as she walks back to the town and is met by the men. And so often we can play what Harry Whittaker called “Bible television” with the accounts. The analogy of video cameras is of course limited, because the Bible is not visual film media but text. But it helps, especially in the Gospels, to get the idea. One section has a different perspective to another. John’s Gospel focuses upon recording words of Jesus which were packed with enigma and allusion- whereas the other writers tend not to record those parts of His teaching, but rather His more straightforward language and instruction. This doesn’t mean, as the critics suggest, that Jesus never spoke the words which John records. He did; the Bible is the real account of the actual words which fell from the lips and formed in the larynx of the man Christ Jesus. It’s just that John’s camera, as it were, was turned on when Jesus was speaking in His deeper and more enigmatic style. But it was the same Jesus.

Various parts of the Bible become better understandable once we enquire about perspective. The “fiery serpents” of Num. 21:6 are not described from the perspective of observers or us as the audience- they didn’t literally spit fire. They are described from the perspective of the bitten person, for whom their bite would have felt like fire. The parables especially repay helpful reflection when we read them asking ourselves ‘From whose perspective is this?’. But the perspective can change in almost mid-sentence. The Lord comments on the parable of the lost sheep that there is joy in Heaven over the one who repents rather than over the “ninety nine just persons who need no repentance” (Lk. 15:7). They were *not* justified, and they also needed to repent. But the Lord speaks from their perspective; they *thought* they were justified and without need of repentance. Or take Genesis 1. John Thomas began *Elpis Israel* with the profound observation that the creation record is written from the imagined perspective of a man standing on planet earth watching it all unfold around him. All the struggles to square Genesis with modern science would be stillborn if we grasp that.

It could be said that faith is all a matter of accepting God’s perspective rather than the immediate one brought to us by our senses. By the rivers of Babylon, there the Jews sat down and wept as they remembered Zion, and many of the Psalms reflect their sense of abandonment by their God. But along comes Ezekiel to

Chebar and other rivers of Babylon- and tells the depressed exiles of an amazing vision of cherubim above them, and which they were a part of. The details of the vision were perhaps intentionally too profound to be specifically understood detail by detail. But the overall impression is of intense Divine activity and awareness through His myriad eyes, and that this system, headed by God Himself in person above it, had wheels on earth. And Israel were those wheels. The same is true of the visions of Revelation. They invite the persecuted believer to look upwards and realize that what happens on earth is part of visions of glory, and carefully orchestrated by a loving Father and Son who are moving all things on earth towards their final end in the return of Christ to save His people eternally. Accurate, detailed interpretation was not necessary for illiterate believers under persecution to perceive this basic truth. Or as Paul powerfully puts it in 2 Cor. 4:17,18: "Our slight momentary affliction accomplishes for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison; whilst meantime we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal". The problem is, we focus on the "slight momentary affliction". People live their whole lives playing the tape of past hurts. She said that, they deceived me, he broke my family, she sold me a useless car. Wriggle and struggle as we will, God says all this is "slight momentary affliction". But it can only be seen like that if we compare it with the eternal perspective- the eternal weight of glory.

I think of the woman who lived in a night shelter in Riga. She came to our Winter feeding program each day for years, each season she was there. We had a one hour Bible talk before the food, and she never paid any attention. She was always reading through a huge legal dossier of documents, underlining things, making notes, shaking her head, at times shedding tears, shaking sometimes with anger. She had been deceived by cunning lawyers out of the ownership of her property some years ago, and now had nothing. She would get up after the meeting finished, go out for a smoke, and come in again for the food. I saw this pattern countless times over the years. Like clockwork. No matter how compellingly we tried to explain the good news of the things of the Kingdom, both in their present and future aspects, she couldn't get over her "slight momentary affliction". Her big bundle of documents was all she had, and she carefully carried it with her in various plastic bags wherever she went, in case she lost it. It was not slight for her, nor was it momentary. It was her whole life messed up. As she saw it. The only other time the Greek word translated "slight" occurs is in the Lord's

invitation to take His yoke upon us, because the burden is "light" (Mt. 11:30). Such "light" affliction is actually put on us by the Lord Himself, as a share in His cross. One day the penny dropped. We always invited questions after the talk. She raised her hand and began asking, something like this: "You talk of eternal life. So 'eternal' means... it means... well...". Her voice trailed away... "It means... eternal, I suppose". She was baptized, now carries a Bible with her rather than the huge dossier, has a job and a flat of her own. It's not just the sense of future eternity which must affect our perspective; it is the eternal "weight of glory" ahead, that we shall for ever be concerned with the things of God's glory, and not our present sufferings.

We all have those mental dossiers which we can carry with us. We cannot change the past. But the good news of the Kingdom invites us, as does the whole language of the Bible, to see things from God's perspective.

3.1 A Kingdom Of Priests

We read in Rev. 1:6 that we are, in Christ, a nation of king-priests, a Kingdom of priests, just as He is now a king-priest after the order of Melchizedek. Reading between the lines, much of the Old Testament denunciation of Israel relates to the errors of the priesthood. "Like priest, like people" is a saying which has a definite Old Testament basis. The failure of the priesthood was a major reason for the apostasy of the old Israel. We ought to at least be prepared for slight similarities with the new Israel. There is little doubt that the early church went astray because of "false *teachers*" - the equivalent of false *priests* under the Old Covenant.

Priestly Responsibility

Of course, *every* Israelite was intended to be a priest; they were to be "a Kingdom of priests". The "covenant of my peace" was with both Israel (Is. 54:10) and the priesthood (Mal. 2:5). The same is true of spiritual Israel; "a spiritual house, an holy priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5). The process of baptism recalls the way in which the priests washed and then embarked on service to the rest of Israel. Christ is the supreme priest; but because we are "in Him", we too have some part in the priesthood. Note how the priests are described in language relevant to the Lord: "The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity" (Mal. 2:6). Thus we must "present (our) bodies a living sacrifice" to God (Rom. 12:1); making the believer "the offering and the priest", as Christ was (and is). It is interesting to consider Christ's words of Mt. 5:29,30 against this background. He invites the zealous saint to cut off the various limbs of the body (for they *all* cause offence at some time!), so that he might enter the Kingdom. To the Jewish mind, imagining such a scene would have created the impression of priestly action. Again, the sensitive reader is invited to see himself as "the offering and the priest".

The main priestly duty was to teach God's word to the people. A whole string of texts make this point: Dt. 24:8; 2 Kings 17:27; 2 Chron. 15:3; Neh. 8:9; Mic. 3:11. Note too the common partnership between priests and prophets. Because of their role as *teachers*, it is understandable that the anger of the first century priesthood was always associated with Christ and the apostles *teaching* the people: Mt. 21:33; Lk. 19:47; 20:1; Acts 5:21. The priests felt that their role was being challenged. As part of the priesthood, our duty is to *all* teach or communicate the word of God to each other. It was God's intention that natural Israel should obey the spirit of this, so that they would "teach every man his neighbour and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord" (Heb. 8:11). That was how God intended Israel of old to fulfil this idea of being a priestly nation. The Gentile Israel has been chosen to bring forth fruit where they failed; and so we must ask if this is how we really are as a community. Where is our sense of real responsibility for each other, our sensitivity to the effect we have upon each other? Where is the *enthusiasm of communication* which Heb. 8:11 implies? Given current communication possibilities, the current plethora of Christian magazines is indeed quite right- so long as they are communicating the real knowledge of the Lord rather than being political flagships. Discussion after Bible class, the posing of profitable questions to each other, lively correspondence columns- these are all part of it. It *isn't* something just for the academically minded. If we truly "know the Lord", we will want to communicate that relationship to others, as a Kingdom of priests!

Yet it is evident that some will be able to publicly communicate this knowledge of the Lord more fluently than others. For this reason, God arranged for a group of individuals to have the specific duty of teaching Israel in an organized fashion. What Israel failed to appreciate was that those priests were intended to be a priesthood within a priesthood. The early church made the same mistake; 'leave the Bible study to the priests/ ecclesial elders' has ever been the temptation of the average Israelite. There is a like danger facing the present generation of believers, blessed as our platforms presently are with some of the finest expositors and encouragers our movement has yet produced. Yet in our reaction against the 'priesthood' of the apostasy, we may have gone too far; so that in some churches, there are few, if any, who have a real sense of spiritual responsibility for their flock. And yet we all supposed to be part of a Kingdom of priests. All too often brethren end up as church leaders or Secretaries, simply because there is no one else to do the job. Any who can pen push with reasonable efficiency, and maintain a steady attendance over a period of years, normally fall into positions of church leadership by default. Yet what is required is brethren who can broadly match the 'priesthood within a priesthood' of the Old Covenant; brethren who have made a conscious commitment to oversee the spiritual welfare of others; brethren who will analyze the needs of the ecclesia, and work long and hard to prepare an exhortation relevant to needs; brethren to organize transport rotas so that *none* are left at home who want to be at a meeting.

I am not suggesting a 'full time' salaried ministry as the answer to all problems; but rather, a *conscious* appreciation of the *spirit* of priesthood. There are a number of New Testament indications that we are to have some system of eldership within our churches; and to "submit to" those who are in this position (1 Cor. 16:16), insofar as we recognize that they have our spiritual well-being truly in their heart.

3-2 Malachi's Message

The book of Malachi has two main themes: The corruption of the priesthood, and the work of the Elijah prophet in preparing the way for Messiah. These themes are related. We know that the Law was full of doctrine concerning the Messiah. The priesthood should have so read and

enthused about that Law, that over the generations they would have communicated an intricate picture of Messiah to Israel. We have mentioned that God had intended all Israel to enthuse with each " saying, Know the Lord" . Does this imply that they should have all been eagerly chattering about Lord Messiah? Sadly, nothing of the sort happened. For this reason Malachi was bidden prophesy an Elijah ministry which would purge the priesthood, and declare Messiah's coming accurately, converting Israel to Him, as the priests should have done by the time of the first century AD. It was for this reason that John the Baptist *taught* the people of Messiah, occupying a priestly role. " Many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God" (Lk. 1:16) was alluding back to Malachi's message and prophecies of Messiah's forerunner; and it also referred to Mal. 1:16, which defined the ideal priest as one who " did turn many away from iniquity" (Mal. 2:6).

It might not be amiss to highlight the areas in which the Jewish priesthood particularly failed:

- The priests " corrupted the covenant of Levi" (Mal. 2:8), in that they married out of the Faith (Neh. 13:29), thus violating the Spirit of the Levitical covenant- which was given in recognition of zealous action against the courting of Gentile women (Num. 25:12,13). A number of prophets condemn the priests for sexual malpractices.
- They offered the blemished sacrifices which Israel presented to them (Mal. 2:8,14). Thus they failed to speak out against the low spiritual standards of their flock, but instead went along with them.
- The repetitive nature of priestly work led them to treat it as " a weariness" , and to concentrate more on their own business enterprises.
- Worst of all, they refused to realize that there was anything wrong with their attitude They became spiritually self-satisfied.

Churchlife in this century is likewise based around repetition. Malachi's message is for us too. And the very same temptations exist, too. The epistle of James and those to Corinth and the seven churches would indicate that the first century eldership failed in just the same way. Indeed, there are a number of subtle allusions in James back to Malachi and the priesthood just after the restoration.

3-1-3 Trumpet Sounding Priests

The Spirit likens public speaking within the church to the sounding of a trumpet. And " If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? (i.e. for the day of the Lord? or the daily spiritual strife?). So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue significant words, how shall it be known (understood) what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air" (1 Cor. 14:8,9 A.V.mg.). One wonders how much 'speaking into the air' goes on from church platforms today. The Old Testament use of 'trumpet' language relates to the following ideas:

- To prepare for war
- To indicate the need to move on

- Convicting others of sin (Is. 58:1; Jer. 4:19)
- Warning of invaders (Ez. 33:3-6)
- A proclamation of the urgency to prepare for the day of the Lord (Joel 2:1)
- The certainty of salvation and God's response to prayer: " Ye shall blow an alarm with the trumpets; and ye shall be remembered before the Lord your God (Old Testament idiom for 'your prayers will be answered'), and ye shall be saved" (Num. 10:9).

All of these elements ought to feature in the work of our twenty first century priests. How much conviction of sin, blunt warning, forward moving inspiration, confidence building, real meaningful emphasis on the power of prayer, eager anticipation of the second coming, above all what sense of *urgency* in spiritual development- do you contribute, do you offer, do you have pouring from *you*? For we are each one members of a royal, trumpet-blowing priesthood. Israel were to be a Kingdom of priests *because* " Ye have seen what I did...how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself" (Ex. 19:4-6). The redemption which we have personally experienced must be the motivation to rise up to this challenge. The spirit of priesthood should therefore be seen in each of us.

If prayer for each other really can influence the possibility of each others' salvation- and there is no lack of Biblical evidence that it can- then we should each be *devoted* to prayer for each other. This is the work of true trumpet sounding priests. Lot's gracious deliverance from Sodom's destruction was largely due to Abraham's prayer for his deliverance; without this, it would seem Lot was altogether too unprepared and spiritually insensitive to have responded to the Angels' call in his own strength. The Lord spared Aaron because of Moses' intercession for him (Dt. 9:20); and this is perhaps the basis for James' appeal to pray for one another, that we may be healed, knowing that through our prayer and pastoral work for others, we can save a man from his multitude of sins and his soul from death (James 5:20). The very ability we have to do this for each other should register deeply with us. And in response, we should live lives dedicated to the spiritual welfare and salvation of our brethren. This should be our motivation in all areas of our service and spirituality. It could be argued that *all* our experiences are in order that we might be able to give out to others from our own experience of God's grace (2 Cor. 1:4-6). Even our Bible study, our desire to grow deeper in our knowledge of God, should be permeated by a desire to give this out to others. Consider how Moses asked to know God deeper in Ex. 33 and 34, and was subsequently given an inspiring theophany in which the Name of Yahweh was declared. This wasn't just a piece of exquisite intellectual stimulation for Moses. He quoted that very theophany, the things he had there learned of the essentially merciful character of God, in his matchless prayer of Num. 14:17-19, where he pleads with God not to destroy Israel and not to glorify him as God had offered. *All* we learn of the Father, the richness of the vision we see in Christ, all this cannot remain within us, as jottings in our Bible margins, as notes of addresses, as dimly recollected ideas in brain cells. If we have *really* seen, there must, inevitably and naturally, be a giving *out* of the vision, as trumpet sounding priests.

3-2-1 We're All Priests

God intended Israel to be " a Kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6). "All the people of Israel" were the builders of the spiritual house of God, i.e. His people (Acts 4:10,11). All Israel were to

lay their hands on the Levites to show that they were truly Israel's representatives (Num. 8:10). When Israel were rejected, they were told that they as a nation could no longer be God's priest (Hos. 4:6). By baptism, we become spiritual Israel; and this idea is relevant to us too. Peter picks up these words in Exodus and applies them to every one of us: "Ye *also* are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices" (1 Pet. 2:5,9). The Lord Jesus is a King-priest after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 6:13-18; Ps. 110:4); and through being in Him, we share this position. Through what He achieved for us on the cross, we have been made *now* king-priests, with the future hope of reigning on earth (Rev. 1:6; 5:10). The religious world around us puts great emphasis upon having a system of priests and pastors. Christians are almost the only group who don't have such a system. To me, the fundamental reason for this is a Biblical one: quite simply, according to plain Bible teaching, *we're all priests*.

A Kingdom Of Priests

The duty of the priests under the Old Covenant was to maintain true understanding of God's word, witness this to the world around them, and teach it to their brothers and sisters in Israel (Mal. 2:7). Although there was a special priesthood, it was clearly God's intention that all Israel should be like priests; they were to be a "*Kingdom of priests*" (Ex. 19:6). Israel were all "saints", and yet saints and priests are paralleled in passages like Ps. 132:16. Israel in the wilderness had clothes which didn't wear out- just as the Priestly clothes didn't, and were handed down from generation to generation (so Ex. 29:29 implies). People from all nations who want to become part of God's people in the Millennium will have to join / levite themselves to Him; they will enter into a priestly covenant, in order to be counted as part of His people. Being His nation and being a priest are connected. Israel were to teach every man his neighbour and brother, saying, Know the Lord (Heb. 8:11). God therefore saw all Israel as represented by the priests (Hos. 4:9; Is. 24:2; Jer. 5:31; 8:10); He says in Hag. 2:12-14 that He saw all Israel as defiled priests. Hos. 4:1,6, in a passage directed to all Israel rather than just the priests (cp. 5:1), warns the whole nation that they can no longer be God's priest, because of their sins. There are many hints throughout the Old Testament that God encouraged all His people to behave like priests. The early chapters of Proverbs exhort the average Israelite to love God's Law, study it, talk about it to their neighbours and children...all of which was priestly behaviour. They were all priests. The language of the priesthood is applied in those chapters to the normal, Bible-loving Israelite. For example, "the priests lips should keep knowledge" (Mal. 2:7); but the average Israelite was encouraged to study the Law for himself, "that thy lips may keep knowledge" (Prov. 5:2)⁽¹⁾. All Israel were to observe the laws about leprosy: "As I commanded them ["the Levites"], so ye shall observe to do" (Dt. 24:8). The way this is structured seems to encourage Israel to see themselves as Levites- for the law could simply have stated that all Israel were to do these things, rather than to command the Levites to do these things and then tell the rest of Israel to do the same things as the Levites had been commanded. Indeed, the principle of Nazariteship (explained in Num. 6) encouraged the average Israelite, regardless of his tribe, to in some way aspire to the High Priesthood. He could grow his hair long to imitate the High Priestly mitre, and he could chose to have the same commands concerning defilement by the dead and eating vine-products apply to him, as applied to the High Priest. The Lord applied this to all His followers, when He told the man who wished to bury his father to *not* do so, but engage instead in His work (Lk. 9:59,60). This would have sent the Jewish mind back to Lev. 21:1-11, where the High Priest could not be distracted from his service even by the death of his father.

When we come to the New Testament, there is no equivalent of the priestly system of the Old Covenant. This was a big change for the early Jewish Christians. Because of this, and in order to establish the Christian church, God temporarily gave the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit to some members of the early church. Those with the gift of speaking God's word or acting infallibly in their judgments naturally had to be treated with great respect; they were speaking and judging on God's behalf. It seems that each of the early ecclesias had a Spirit-gifted eldership, which Paul and Peter exhorts should be respected. But now the Spirit gifts have been withdrawn; they have been replaced by the dispensation of the completed word of God, to which we all have access. For we're all priests.

Note

(1) Other examples include the way in which Proverbs stresses that the man who loves wisdom will be able to judge wisely (2:9; 31:9). Yet it was the priests who were the judges of Israel (Dt. 19:17), they were the ones to whom hard cases were brought. Yet Proverbs implies all could act as priests. "To do justice and judgment is more acceptable (a word elsewhere used concerning the priests' service, Dt. 21:5) than (the offering of) sacrifice" (Prov. 21:5). Loving wisdom would give the ordinary Israelite a crown on his head (4:9), alluding to the High Priestly crown (Ex. 29:6; Zech. 6:11). Proverbs constantly urges Israel not to forget the Law (e.g. 2:6)- but the priests did just this (Hos. 4:6). There is good reason to think that Proverbs is a commentary on the Mosaic Law.

3-2-2 The Meaning Of Priesthood

In a sense, this means that we each stand alone. We are our own priests. This must have been a radical idea to those early Jewish Christians. Yet this is what Paul and Peter were driving at when they said things like: "Ye *also* are an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices...present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable (Gk. *logikos*) service (*service* is priestly language)" (1 Pet. 2:5; Rom. 12:1). They were saying: '*You're your own priest now!*'. And the early believers found it hard to cope with. Have you considered that the most common form of apostasy (i.e. leaving the true Faith) in the early church was going back to the Jewish Law, with its system of priests? Natural Israel likewise totally failed to live up to God's desire that they should be a *Kingdom* of priests. They left it all to their priests. They *didn't* teach every man his neighbour and his brother, saying, Know the Lord (Heb. 8:11; even though when He re-accepts them, God will count them as if they did). Although it was God's original intention that each family leader sanctified themselves and slew the Passover lamb personally, they came to delegate this to their priests (so 2 Chron. 30:17 implies).

There are many allusions to the language of priesthood in the New Testament, both as major statements and also in passing (e.g. the description of us as "blameless", Tit. 1:7, is priestly language). This usage illustrates for us the meaning of priesthood. "He that is washed needeth not save but to wash his feet" (Jn. 13:10) was surely suggesting that all baptized believers ("washed") were like the priests, who firstly washed their bodies and then their hands and feet, before entering on service (Ex. 30:21). Even the elderly brethren and sisters in Crete who were to be guided by specially appointed elders were to be encouraged to behave 'as those who are engaged in sacred service' (Tit. 2:3, M.R. Vincent 'Word Studies In The N.T.'). One of the commonest allusions is the idea of ministry. Time and again, the Old Testament speaks of the priests *ministering* in the priest's office. The priests are specifically called God's ministers (Is. 61:6; Jer. 33:21; Ez. 45:4; Joel 1:9,13; 2:17). The early Christians would have heard and read many of the New Testament references to ministers and ministry as invitations to see themselves as a new priesthood. The Lord said that we should aim to be a minister, a priests, to every one of our brethren, not expecting them to minister to us, but

concentrating on ministering to them (Mt. 20:26). This is exactly against the grain of our nature, and also of the concept of religion we find in the world. People *expect* to have others spiritually ministering to them. They expect a priest-figure to do all their thinking for them. But our Lord said that we are each other's priests, we're not here to be ministered ('priest-ed') to, but to minister, and give our lives in service to each other. There are some concrete examples of ministering. Paul speaks of preaching God's word, both in the world and to brethren and sisters, as ministering (Col. 1:23,25; 1 Cor. 9:13). He saw himself as a minister of the Gospel " that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable" (Rom. 15:16). This is priestly language. Paul saw his efforts for others as preparing a sacrifice. He says that we are *all* ministers (cp. priests) of God, stewards of the true Gospel, and should act appropriately (1 Cor. 4:1). Others gave money to poorer brethren, and again this is described as ministering, priest-ing (Rom. 15:27; Heb. 6:10). Reminding brethren of basic doctrines they already know is another kind of ministering (1 Tim. 4:16). Indeed, Peter says that we *each* have something to minister to each other, there is some way in which we can each serve each other (1 Pet. 4:10,11). We must bear one another's burden, as the priesthood bore the burden of Israel's iniquity (Num. 18:1,23). This is the meaning of priesthood.

Mt. 19:27-30 has a series of extended allusions to the fact that we are now the priesthood. The Lord speaks of how His followers will each have left mother, brother etc. to serve Him, referring to how Moses blessed Levi for forsaking these very things so as to God's service (Dt. 33:9). But He also spoke of how they would forsake houses and lands for His sake and the Gospel's- a reference to the way the Levites resigned their right to physical inheritance in the land for the sake of their relationship with God and the work they were called to. In the same way as Moses predicted that the Levites would be materially blessed even now as a result of their dedication (Dt. 33:11), so the Lord made the same promise. And there is no Christian who has heart and soul committed themselves to the Gospel's work, either in the world or amongst their brethren, who has not lived to see the Truth of this definition of priesthood.

Yet the NT not only encourages us to all be priests; but we can even aspire to the High Priesthood, in a certain sense. James 5:16 speaks of the need to pray for one another, that we may be healed. This is an undoubted allusion back to mighty Moses praying for smitten Miriam, and to Aaron staying the plague by his offering of incense / prayer (Num. 16:47). Surely James is saying that every one of us can rise up to the level of High Priest in this sense. Under the Law, the provision for Nazariteship encouraged the average Israelite to enter into the spirit of the High Priest by imposing some of the regulations governing his behaviour upon them. *All* Israel were bidden make fringes of blue, in conscious imitation of the High Priest to whose spirit they all were intended to attain (Num. 15:38). But we are bidden now " come boldly unto the throne of grace (cp. the mercy seat in the Most Holy)...boldness to enter into the holiest" (Heb. 4:16; 10:19): to do what only the High Priest could do under the Old Covenant. This must have been a huge challenge for the Jewish believers to rise up to. The context of Heb. 10 encourages us to enter the Holiest and " consider one another" . The High Priest entered the Holiest in order to make atonement for Israel, not just to bask in the fact he was allowed in there. And so with us. The marvellous fellowship with the Father which we are permitted in Christ, the entry into the Holiest, is not just for the sake of it; it is so we can do something for others. I am not suggesting, of course, that in any way we replace the one and only High Priest, the Lord Jesus. But because we are *in Him* we therefore in some ways share His honours and His work. The idea of eating the bread of the sacrifices would likewise have appeared strange in a first century context: it was as if the whole brotherhood (and sisterhood) were being invited to see themselves as priests. But in His last message, the Lord

went further: He promised that those who overcome will eat of the hidden manna, concealed in the Most Holy: as if to say that we will ultimately rise up to and exceed the glory of the High Priests who saw that bread once a year. If we enter in at the door of the sheepfold, we will go in and out (a NT idiom for leadership) and find pasture (Jn. 10:9). This may mean that the sheep becomes a shepherd, searching for good pasture for others, leading others, grasping the meaning of priesthood, all as a result of our experience of the good shepherd.

3-2-3 Priesthood Today

And yet history and our very nature is all against us. Israel failed to rise up to the challenge of being a Kingdom of priests. The new Israel, the early church, failed; they either went back to the priesthood of the Mosaic Law, or developed into the priest-dominated Catholic church. They began by having all things common, in imitation of how the priests had "like portions to eat" (Dt. 18:8). Notice, in passing, the stress on the equality of the priests and the studied irrelevance of their personal wealth (1 Chron. 24:31; 25:8; 26:12). The Law was geared around the assumption that the priests would be so caught up in Yahweh's work that they would never be rich (consider Dt. 14:29), and the wonder of doing His work would compensate for their lack of physical possessions (Num. 18:23). Yet the early church couldn't sustain the intensity of their initial realization of these things. Even after the euphoria of those early days in Jerusalem, Paul lamented that all seek their own salvation, rather than that of those others who belong to Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:21 and context). Every one of us has the same *basic* tendency, of being spiritually selfish, of being irresponsible for the real spiritual needs of each other. We would rather someone else do it. However, only rarely have Christians expressed this in terms of consciously agitating for a paid-pastor system to flunk our personal responsibilities. What is more common is for us to just get on with looking after ourselves, without looking out into the world and the needs of others. We cling on dearly to those who brought us to the Faith, to those who baptized us. We lean, terribly, upon our Christian heritage. We delegate responsibility, time and again. We assume someone else will do everything. We just aren't self-motivated. We rely on another brother or sister to take the initiative. We have like Corinth, thousands of instructors, many who will give Bible talks and preach, but very few fathers; few who will stay with the flock, come what may (even the flock's passive resentment against them; children also go through this stage against their fathers!). If we ran our secular lives as we do our spiritual lives, we would be complete drop outs. There is an urgent need to rediscover the spirit of priesthood today.

We tend to forget that if someone had not reached out into our little world and preached to *us*, we would not be where we are today. There is a tendency for UK brethren to think 'Well, let's let the brethren in (say) Mongolia get on with their own preaching, I mean, it's their responsibility really'. There are others whose attitude is 'If they have a Bible, they'll find the Truth and God will draw them to us'. And there might be brethren in (say) Mongolia who would feel 'I don't have a duty to preach or help the other believers here. The brothers in the UK can do that. All I need to do is meet them when they visit once a year'. We're all at fault here; and if we're honest, we know it. The fact is, *we're all priests*. My salvation is your responsibility. Yours is mine. It's my duty, it should be my desire, to see the Gospel witnessed in your country, and to see the brethren there grow strong in the Lord. And it should be your duty and desire too. We're all priests, making our own sacrifices, studying the word for ourselves, sharing it with others, being a rock for our brethren and sisters to build on. There are some brethren and sisters who I can only call "a rock". They're always there, heart and soul devoted to the work. I can always lay my tired head on their shoulder. It's God's intention that we should be *a community* of men and women like that. The priests

weren't part-timers. They gave their lives to God in recognition of the fact that God had saved the lives of the firstborn at the Passover and Red Sea deliverance (Num. 3:12). Our deliverance from the world at baptism was our Red Sea. We have been saved. Those firstborns represent us, the ecclesia of firstborns (Heb. 12:23 Gk.). We are now being led towards that glorious Kingdom, when by rights we ought to be lying dead in that dark Egyptian night. The wonder of it all demands that like the Levites, we give our lives *back* to God, in service towards His children. The Lord died that He might "sanctify" us to God. This is the word used by the LXX to describe the consecration of the priests to service of the body of Israel (Ex. 28:41). If we reject the call to priesthood today, we reject the point of the Lord's saving suffering for us. Having spoken for six verses concerning our responsibilities for others in the ecclesia, Paul makes a statement which we would sooner apply to gross immorality than laziness to serve each other: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good to all men..." (Gal. 6:7-10). Paul's sober warning is in the context of not loving and serving our brethren. To have an indifferent, irresponsible attitude to them *is to sow to the flesh*. Each of us, therefore, must live up to our serious responsibilities for each other if we are to sow to the Spirit.

In doing so, we will ourselves find spiritual growth. Practically, this is evident- in that the brother who looks through the Bible readings before doing them with his family, or reads a chapter with his five year old daughter and then the same chapter again with his wife, who makes an effort to prepare a different exhortation each time he speaks rather than re-hash an old one... the one who benefits is ultimately himself. Paul said as much to Timothy: "If thou put the brethren in remembrance...thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith...whereunto thou hast already attained" (1 Tim. 4:6). His ministry of Christ's word to others would in itself nourish *him* up, to go onwards in the upward spiral, from where he had "already attained" to higher and higher things. This is what priesthood today is all about.

3.3 Repentance And Forgiveness

3-3-1 What Is Repentance?

Introduction

Time and again, Christian communities have become divided over deciding whether a member has repented, and whether they can be forgiven to the extent of allowing them to fellowship at the breaking of bread. Whilst this problem may seem distant to the newly baptized believer, especially if you are in isolation, as sure as day follows night you will at some time be troubled by it.

It is not enough to reason 'The prodigal son was accepted back, so we should accept repentant brethren too'. No Christian disagrees with this. But the problem hinges around how we define what is repentance, and to what degree we accept that God sets an ultimately high standard, but will *tolerate* a lower standard. If we refuse to accept this latter principle in any form, we are saying that there is only one tolerable standard, and unless we achieve it, we cannot be saved. We are thereby preaching justification by works rather than by faith.

In any case, the Greek and Hebrew words translated 'repentance' strictly mean a change of mind, and not necessarily any works / actions. God in this sense can 'repent'. It seems to me that we have to recognize a changed state of heart in our repentant brother, without demanding 'works'. In Mt. 18:15, the Lord says of a sinful brother: "If your brother sins... go and point out the fault... if he listens to you, you have regained your brother". But in Lk. 17:3, He says: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him". This would parallel the brother's 'repentance' with him 'listening' to you. Seeing repentance is a state of the heart, and we simply can't know the hearts of others, it seems to me very hard indeed to judge the level of another's repentance.

The Failure Fellowship

Mt. 5:48 defines the standard: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect". Unless God will tolerate our achievement of a lower standard than His own righteousness as revealed in His word, none will be saved. We each expect God to tolerate our failure to reach up to this ultimate standard. In the context of marriage, for example, every Christian couple fails to love each other *as* Christ loved the church. Separated couples also fail in this, and are therefore united with the rest of us in a fellowship of failure. It is therefore the height of ingratitude to threaten others with disfellowship unless they completely fulfil God's standards regarding marriage. As we judge, we really will be judged. Doesn't that just frighten us? We should be *so* careful to show tolerance to those who fail to attain the standard.

Ability To Pay

Our fellowship of failure should be bound close together by our common experience of God's forgiveness. What we owe to God can never be repaid. Realizing this affects how we define what is repentance. Just one sin brings eternal death; after sinning, we cannot go back and re-live those minutes, hours, days or years when it was committed. All we can do is trust in God's grace and believe that God will negate the just results of that sin. Because we are forgiven debts which we can never repay, we are asked to liberally forgive our brethren for their far smaller debts. It appeared that the man who owed a small amount was better able to repay it than he who owed much. But the *ability* of our brethren to repay the debt of their sin is not something we should consider. Surely this is what the parable teaches. The *ability* of people to repent is something we should not *consider*. God does not consider *our* ability to repay Him- for we are utterly unable to do so.

Frank Forgiveness

We must forgive our brethren as God forgives us (Eph. 4:32). God expunges the spiritual record of the sin, and will not feed it into some equation which determines whether we can be forgiven. Christ "frankly" forgave the debtors in the parable. The frankness of that forgiveness does not suggest a process of careful calculation before it could be granted. God's frank forgiveness is seen too in Ps. 130:3: "If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord who shall stand?". God does not "mark" sin, as our love for our brethren should keep no record of their past sins (1 Cor. 13:5-7 N.I.V.). If we refuse fellowship people because of the *effect* of past sins for which they have repented, then we *are* 'marking' iniquity. God does not deal with us in a manner which is *proportional* to the type or amount of sin we commit (Ps. 103:7-12).

You will probably encounter brethren who will seek to persuade you that we must make a difference between certain categories of sin, concluding that some sin must be repented of openly, and other sin (e.g. a fit of anger) can be repented of privately. But you must really consider what Biblical proof there is for this? Is this what the Bible really says about repentance?

3-3-2 Degrees Of Sin?

Peter found it hard to grapple with the idea that the degree or amount of sin was irrelevant. But "seventy times seven" indicated how far out he was. Even when a brother's repentance seems humanly unlikely (the 490th time in the day takes some believing!), we must still have that covenant mercy for him. Note that only a verbal repentance was required- and the Lord said that the forgiver was to just accept this, rather than demand evidence of 'forsaking' in physical terms. The Greek word for repentance is a compound meaning 'to think differently after'. Repentance is essentially a changed *attitude of mind*. This is why it's difficult to judge whether it exists within the heart of another person. Because our very natures are sinful, we live constantly in need and receipt of mercy, every second of our existence. The New Covenant is often spoken of in the Old Testament as "mercy" and/or "truth". If we are *in* that Covenant, we are permanently living *in* grace/mercy. Mercy is not something which we just receive in the few moments while we pray for forgiveness. It is something constantly ongoing. We live *in* it. If we appreciated this, we would not see our forgiveness of others as something we occasionally 'grant'; we will extend mercy to them constantly, as God does to us.

Some seem to think that we only occasionally sin, and then we repent and receive mercy. This disregards our innate sinfulness, and the nature of covenant relationship with God. We are still in covenant with God even in the midst of our sins, as Israel were until the covenant was broken. Likewise, Mrs. (Sis.!) Bloggs is still Mrs. Bloggs at the height of her screaming argument with Mr. Bloggs. It is not for us to eject others from God's covenant. All we can do is to insist on adherence to certain basic doctrines which comprise that covenant. Any who reject the doctrines which form that covenant must be ejected from fellowship, because they refuse to accept the nuts and bolts of the framework which makes up the covenant. But for someone who is in covenant with God, we must show them the covenant of constant mercy which God does to us.

3-3-3 Forsaking And Confessing Sin

God is not the strict schoolteacher with a soft heart who says: 'Well I'll let you off this time but don't let me catch you doing it again'. He knows He will catch us again, and we know it too. His mercy is constant, but if we are to experience it in future, there must be a forsaking and *confession* of sin, and a *recognition* that we are living in His mercy. When we are baptized, we enter into Christ. God counts us *as if* we are as perfect as Christ. God imputes His very own righteousness to us through Christ, even though we are not perfect on account of our own obedience to commands. This is the basis of justification by faith, rather than by obedience and forsaking of sins *alone*. In *prospect* we have already been saved, all our future sins were in prospect forgiven at baptism. We are here and now in the heavenly places with Christ. How God treats us is how we should treat each other; we too must look at each other *as if* we are perfect: "Forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake *hath* forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). Paul does not say we should forgive as Christ *is forgiving* us. Our forgiveness was granted at baptism; the power of sin in our lives was overcome by baptism

into Christ's death, which destroyed the devil. Therefore anyone baptized into Christ is not a servant of sin, unless they leave Christ. Of course, we know that in practice we all keep on sinning. But our spiritual man is in Christ, God looks upon *that* side of us, not upon the devil within us. We cannot destroy the devil within us- his destruction is in death (Rom. 6:23). That natural man cannot be made subject to God's word (Rom. 8:7; Gal. 5:17,18; James 3:8). What God requires is a growth in the spiritual man, living in a way of life which on balance shows that the new man is more fundamentally 'us' than the old man. As God eagerly looks upon that new man within us, so we too should perceive the new man in our brethren. Too often extreme brethren look upon how bad the old man is in a brother, and how publicly he is manifested (e.g. in marital problems)- rather than assessing the new man, "the hidden man" which is surely to be found deep within all brethren and sisters. Note that the unworthy in Mt. 25:42-45 are condemned for what they *omitted* rather than for what they *committed*.

Repentance: When And Whether

If we are intended to grant forgiveness for specific things rather than showing a covenant of mercy, it follows that we must be able to know *when* someone has repented. We need to carefully consider the question: '*Can we know when someone has repented?*'. If the answer is 'Yes', then we are judging by the outward appearance. We are saying that our assessment of another's spiritual strivings is ultimately correct. The more reasonable Christian would say '*Sometimes*'. But if that is true, we presuppose that we do have some criteria to decide whether someone has repented. But what Biblical evidence is there to define these criteria in crystal clarity? It is therefore difficult to avoid concluding: '*No, we don't know when someone has repented*'. Repentance must precede baptism, indeed baptism may not be valid without it; but how can we *know* when and whether repentance has actually occurred in the candidate? How can we judge whether there has really been a forsaking and confessing of sin in truth? Most interviewing brethren accept that they cannot know when or whether the candidate has repented- and therefore it is rare to ask '*Have you repented?*' in the discussion before baptism. The Lord's command to forgive 490 times per day (Mt. 18:22) is surely teaching that we have no ability to judge the sincerity of repentance; all we can do is forgive.

Repent + Forsake = Forgive?

It is often argued: 'We can only forgive you if you repent *and* forsake and confess your sin'. This sounds very convenient when dealing with some more public sins. But if we are going to make this equation a general principle governing fellowship, then we must consistently apply it. We can only forgive a brother if we see him forsaking his sin. If this principle were applied to every sin, then we would have a community which could not "forbear one another in love" to the slightest extent; a community where everyone holds a gun at his brother's head unless there is forsaking of the weakness.

To 'sins' like occasional drunkenness, loss of temper, married couples deciding to permanently separate etc., Christians (generally) have never said: 'We can't forgive you unless you forsake that behaviour'. Instead, there has always been a spirit of forbearance and overlooking, as God overlooks our own more hidden failings. So, why apply this principle of 'No forgiveness without forsaking' to some areas of life and not others? We all sin, repent- and go on doing the same thing! We all strive against the same recurring failures- and fail. A couple with marriage problems may do this- and some will refuse them fellowship. Yet we all do just the same. Is there really such a difference between private sins and public ones? We must ever reflect the overwhelming *zeal* of God to patiently bring about repentance. Luke 15

contains two parables concerning repentance, where the restored sinner is in fact not repentant: the lost sheep and the lost coin. The Lord searches for them *until* He finds them; neither of them actually repent and seek to come back. Indeed, the coin is inanimate, it can't repent. It was actually the woman's fault that it got lost in the first place. Now all these are surely examples of hyperbole- a gross exaggeration to make a point. It isn't the Lord's fault that we stray. But He speaks *as if it is* in this parable, in order to make the point that He *so* strenuously seeks our return to Him. Likewise Yahweh likens Himself to a worthless husband who forsook His sweet wife of Israel in her youth (Is. 54:6). Of course we must use our freewill and repent, but the Lord likens us to things which *cannot* repent and are not repentant, and yet all the same are brought back by the Lord's endless searching and pastoral care. By all means compare this with Peter's comment that the Lord's exaltation was in order to give *repentance*, not just forgiveness, to God's people (Acts 5:31; 11:18 cp. 2 Tim. 2:25). This is the extent of His atonement for men; not only to enable forgiveness, but to show His matchless grace yet further in even granting *repentance* to men. In the light of this it remains open to question how much credit we can personally take for our repentance. Not all lost sinners will come back, but the Lord speaks as if He will search always, in every case, *until* they do. These hyperboles are all to teach the vast extent of His desire to win back the lost. In the light of this, who are we to start questioning whether or not a brother has actually repented, if he says he has and shows this to some extent?

Against God And Men

There is surely a difference between a weak brother sinning against the ecclesia, and sinning against God. Lk. 15:18,21 implies that there is a difference here. We are expected to forgive each other as God has forgiven us- but this does not mean that when we forgive each other, this is on God's behalf. Forsaking and confessing sin against God must be done to Him. Our decisions about forgiveness aren't dictating to God what His response should be. Instead, the reverse must operate- God's response to us should determine our response to our erring brother. It may or may not be ultimately true that God will only forgive us if we repent *and* forsake our sins. But there seems no Biblical evidence to show that *our* forgiveness of others must be on this basis. We forgive others on the basis of how He has forgiven us, and is merciful to our continual failures. But the basis of God's forgiveness of our brethren is different- it is centred around a person's faith in the blood of Christ. We do not ask our weak brother whether he believes in the victory of Calvary's cross before we forgive him.

3-3-4 Forgiveness Without Repentance?

The sensitive brother or sister will recognize that we are often forgiven *without* specific forsaking of sin- and therefore this *must* feature in our reaction to the sins of others. The following are proofs of this:

- David prayed for cleansing from "secret faults" (Ps. 19:12)- things which we do not specifically repent of, and yet which are still sinful in God's sight. All sin is sin- sin is not definable according to our awareness of it (as witness the Mosaic trespass offerings). If we disagree that we are forgiven for sins which we do not specifically repent of and forsake, then we must conclude that we actually *know* every one of our sins; and that just one sin, unrepented of, will keep us from salvation. None of us has the self knowledge, nor the appreciation of God's righteousness, to be confident that we do know each of our sins. It is only the self-righteous who claim that they have confessed every one of their sins. So we are driven to rely on salvation by grace- believing that we will be forgiven for sins we commit,

which we do not recognize. If we hope for any amount of forgiveness without specific repentance, then we ought not to make it a principle that we will *never* forgive our brother unless he outwardly shows his repentance. For we all somehow hope for forgiveness without repentance.

- Many sins for which we are forgiven cannot be forsaken. If a brother murders another brother, that cannot be undone. He cannot promise never to murder brother X again- that sin cannot be forsaken. David's sin with Bathsheba was forgiven on account of his *confession* of sin- there is never a word from either God or himself about not doing it again (Ps. 32:5; 2 Sam. 12:13). Why not, if *forsaking* is so vital? Because we are saved in prospect by being in covenant with God, this emphasis on *confession* is understandable. We confess that we have marred God's glory, that we have acted out of character with the Christ-man that dwells in us. God does not then send forgiveness down to us as if it is a parcel that drops out of the sky. He gladly recognizes that His grace towards us in Christ, granted at baptism, was not in vain, because we *recognize* our sinfulness and God's righteousness.

- The Father offered forgiveness without repentance to the prodigal son before there was any direct evidence of repentance- just a sign of general regret. Indeed, it would seem that the very fact the son *wanted* to return to the Father's house was quite enough to warrant his acceptance there- and the killing of the fatted calf.

- We must bless / forgive those who persecute us (Rom. 12:14; blessing and forgiveness are closely linked in Scripture). This is clearly to be done without waiting for the persecutor to stop or repent. Forgiveness without repentance has to be offered.

- The Lord saw a connection between the way the sinful woman kissed Him much, and the way she "loved much" (Lk. 7:45,47 RVmg.). He then told a parable about her and Simon the Pharisee. His point was that they both owed Him money and He had forgiven the debt, but He was looking for an appropriate response from them. Yet there is no evidence that Simon had repented before receiving that forgiveness.

- We are to forgive the person who 'repents' 490 times / day for the same sin. Clearly enough, their repentance wasn't sincere. Yet we are still to show forgiveness without waiting for repentance. The parable of Mt. 18:28-30 implies that forgiveness involves us not requiring of our brother that which we could legitimately demand of him. That surely is saying that we are to forgive our brother without demanding full repentance in terms of 'putting things right'. We are to follow God's example of frankly writing off the debt.

- Marriage out of the faith is a terrible sin- a child of God joining themselves in covenant with a worldling who is alienated from God. The sin is not just committed as the couple stand before the Registrar and have their names inscribed on the marriage certificate. The sin was going on all through their courtship; a saint of God was loving an enemy of God. And after the wedding, the sin continues. There is no proof that after the believer repents, the marriage is then recognized by God on the same basis as that of believing partners. God does not automatically join the repentant believer with their worldling partner- as shown by God's command to those who married out of the Faith in Ezra's time to separate from their partners (Ezra 10:17-44). But when a believer repents of their marriage out of the Faith, we accept that God will tolerate their sinful situation, which does violence to His principles of separation from the world. But we do not insist on the erring believer *forsaking* the wrong relationship.

Any who insist that repentance and forgiveness requires a public forsaking of the action ought logically to insist that those who marry out of the Faith *must* separate if they repent.

- Christ prayed that the soldiers would be forgiven [without repentance] because " they know not what they do" . The fact He asked for their forgiveness shows that they were guilty of sin, although they were ignorant of it- and had therefore not repented. How could they repent of crucifying Christ while they were actually doing it? They may well have regretted doing what they were forced to do by reason of the circumstances in which they found themselves. Thus Christ knew that forgiveness was possible without specific repentance and forsaking. The reply 'But that only applies to sins of ignorance!' is irrelevant- Christ's attitude still disproves the hypothesis that forgiveness can *only* be granted if there is a forsaking of sin.

- God forgives men on the basis of their *faith* in the blood of Christ, and association with it by baptism; " *not* by works of righteousness, which we have done" (Tit. 3:4-8). God's basis of salvation is *not* works. We must be careful not to insist on 'forsaking' sins in physical terms to the extent that we too preach justification by works. Just one sin deserves death. No amount of forsaking that sin can change that sentence. God's way of escape is for us to be in Christ, so that He looks upon us *as if* we are Christ, imputing Christ's perfect character to us. Therefore forsaking sin is not in itself the basis of salvation; rather is it faith in Christ. Of course, true faith shows itself in works. But none of us has the degree of faith which we ought to have, and therefore none of us does the amount or type of works which we should. To insist that someone shows their faith by specific works, e.g. certain changes in their marital status, is to insist that there is a direct, definable relationship between faith and the precise type of works which that faith leads to. Yet we are not so strict with ourselves. The faith and works of each of us are far from complete. Surely one of the greatest expressions of faith in the work of Christ is to desire to break bread. Yet this is what has been refused to those who profess themselves to have a struggling faith in their redeemer.

- The man of Mt. 18:26 was forgiven his debt due to his *desire* to repay it, even though in fact he couldn't repay it. Sin can, in a sense, never be put right, it can only be covered over. And the man was expected to reflect his experience of forgiveness in how he dealt with his brother.

- " Sin is the transgression of the law" . Each of us, therefore, lives in sin to a certain extent, looking for forgiveness without repentance. A brother may smoke; he may feel that each smoke is a sin, because his conscience condemns him. But this does not affect whether we overlook his weakness, and tolerate him in fellowship. Again, it is inconsistent to tolerate a brother who admits he is living a way of life which is in one aspect 'sinful', and yet not to tolerate a brother with an ongoing spiritual problem in another area. Can we prove that *we* are supposed to recognize degrees of sin in each other? And how can we prove that e.g. loss of temper is better or worse than any other area of failure?

From the above points it should be evident that the equation 'Forgiveness= repentance + forsaking' is just incorrect as it stands. It is not true across the board. Even if this is true of God's forgiveness of us, does it hold true for our forgiveness of others? And where is the proof that we must withhold our fellowship from someone whom we cannot forgive?

Although Israel's heart was not right with God, "He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity... for he remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passeth away" (Ps. 78:38,39). The impression is that God forgave them not

because they repented- but because of His compassion, His remembering of His covenant with them ['remember' is often used of God in a covenant context], and simply because He recognized the frailty of their humanity. In other words, He forgave them because of His grace. We dare not allow this wonderful fact to work in us any sense of ease with sin, nor any shrugging off of the importance of repentance. But all the same, the grace of God is wonderful, and this grace is what we must show to others. And this means, forgiving without demanding specific repentance. Family life is full of the lesson that this is how we have to live if we are to live in peace with both God and men.

3-3-5 God Makes Concessions

We need to recognize that God sets an ultimately high standard, but is prepared to accept our achievement of a lower standard- i.e. God makes concessions. We all disobey the same commandments of Christ day by day and hour by hour. Yet we have a firm hope in salvation. Therefore obedience to commandments is not the only necessity for salvation. " Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:48) goes unfulfilled by each of us- as far as our own obedience is concerned. It is possible to disobey Christ's commandments every day and be saved. If this statement is false, then salvation is only possible if we attain God's moral perfection, which is impossible.

If disobedience to Christ's commands is tolerable by God (on account of our faith in the atonement), how can *we* decide *which* of those commandments we will tolerate being broken by our brethren, and which of them we will disfellowship for? If we cannot recognize degrees of sin, it is difficult to pronounce some commands to be more important than others.

Throughout the Spirit's teaching concerning marriage in 1 Cor. 7, there is constantly this feature of setting an ideal standard, but accepting a lower one. This is demonstrated by the several occurrences of the word " But..." in the passage:

- It is better not to marry: " *But and if* thou marry, thou hast not sinned" (v.28).
- The same " but and if" occurs in vv. 10,11: " Let not the wife depart from her husband: *but and if* she depart..." . Separation is, therefore, tolerated by God as a concession to human weakness, even though it is a way of life which inevitably involves an ongoing breach of commandments.
- It is better for widows not to remarry; but if they do, this is acceptable (1 Cor. 7:39,40; 1 Tim. 5:11)
- This same 'two standards' principle is seen elsewhere within 1 Cor. Meat offered to idols was just ordinary meat, but Paul, like God, makes concessions for those with a weak conscience concerning this (1 Cor. 8).
- Likewise in 1 Cor. 9:12 Paul says he could have asked Corinth ecclesia to support him financially, but he chose not to. Thus he chose the higher of two options.
- Those who had the gift of tongues should only have used it to edify others, speaking intelligible words publicly; but Paul was prepared to allow the Corinthians to speak in

tongues to themselves (1 Cor. 14:28), although this seems to go against the tenor of his previous explanation of the *ideal* use of that gift.

- 1 Cor. 12:31-13:12 implies that Paul was faced with the higher choice of the ministry of love and the written word, compared to the lower choice of exercising the Spirit gifts. By all means compare this with the choice which he had in Phil. 1:21-26: to exit this life was made possible to him, but he chose the higher, more difficult and more spiritually risky option of living for a few more years, in order to strengthen his brethren.

- We have given more examples of how God makes concessions to weakness in *Living On Different Levels*. There are times when the standards of God contradict each other, on a surface level. Thus Boaz realized that a man *must* redeem the property of a dead relative in some cases by marrying his wife; but this would have resulted in polygamy (Ruth 4:5).

That there are Divine concessions to weakness, and that we should reflect these in our dealings with each other, does not mean of course that ultimately we never 'draw the line' as far as fellowship is concerned in our ecclesial decisions.

Spiritual Ambition

All this is not to say that God does not value principles, although God makes concessions. The fact that God will tolerate a lower standard should inspire us not to constantly depend upon it; rather should it make us ambitious to attain that higher standard which is more pleasing to Him. 1 Cor. 7 shows that God will tolerate a less than ideal standard in marital relations, which is the area of ecclesial life which usually provokes the most bitter division. This also has Old Testament precedent. Abraham was living under the standards of Eden, rather than those of the Mosaic law. The Edenic standard was that of Christ concerning marriage. Yet Abraham had relationships with Hagar, Jacob had two wives- and God tolerated this departure from the one man: one woman ideal.

It is irrelevant to reason that such 'inconsistencies' were tolerated before the new covenant came into operation. God's moral principles did not change the moment Christ died on the cross, and the new covenant came into full operation. It is possible for us to see the changeover between the two covenants as more dramatic than it was. They express the same principles in different ways. God's greatest principle is His mercy, and willingness to make concessions to human weakness, whilst still upholding His righteousness. That remains constant in both covenants.

3-3-6 Seeking God

We are frequently reminded in the prophets that the spiritual way of life is one which *is seeking* God. We are to seek His face (Ps. 24:6; 27:8)- which it is impossible to behold (Ex. 33:20). Actually finding God in the ultimate sense is therefore unattainable in this life; but our whole mortal life must be lived in this spirit of *seeking* ultimate perfection. Seeking God is often defined in the prophets as forsaking our sins and desiring to be righteous (Amos 5:5,8,14,15). None of us are completely successful in our seeking of God, and therefore it follows that none of us *completely* forsakes all our sinfulness.

What unites us in fellowship is that we are all *seeking* the same God, the realization of the same righteousness in our lives (Zeph. 2:3). We are united by this rather than by all being

righteous. It is those who *seek* evil with whom we find we have no fellowship; those whose direction in life is towards evil, who fail to appreciate God's righteousness. There are many with marriage problems whose turmoils have led them to value and seek true righteousness more than many of us. Again, there seems no reason to single out one particular aspect of seeking righteousness, and make this an indicator of the general direction of a believer's life. Because a couple are, e.g. separated, or because a brother occasionally drinks to excess, does not entitle us to proclaim them to be seeking *evil* rather than seeking God's righteousness.

There seems no reason to think that we should break fellowship with someone for not seeking God *enough*, if we admit that they are not seeking *evil*. Repentance and seeking God are related; thus Israel's restoration came when they were seeking God and (i.e.) repented (Jer. 29:12-14). However, there is good reason to think that Israel at this time were still spiritually weak; some of them had a *desire* to seek righteousness, and God accepted this. The connection between repentance and seeking God means that to withdraw fellowship from someone for not repenting enough, is to disfellowship them for not seeking God enough. The implication is that the rest of us have sought God enough- and therefore found Him. This is pure self-righteousness. In conclusion, God wants us to *be seeking* Him, but this *seeking* God does not imply *complete* repentance and forsaking of sin.

3-3-7 " Works meet for repentance" : OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

A number of passages which appear to run against the general thesis of our study call for closer analysis. Each of them could be (and are!) misunderstood to mean that *complete* forsaking of sin is required before God can accept us. Even a cursory consideration will reveal that God does not expect *complete* forsaking of sin. None of us is in a state of complete forsaking. Therefore these verses cannot be taken to mean that we must completely forsake every sin or else we cannot be saved- or fellowshiped by Christians!

" He that hath clean hands" (Ps. 24:3-6)

" He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart...he shall receive...righteousness from the God of his salvation" .

We must remember that our heart is corrupt, not pure (Jer. 17:9). This passage therefore implies that our purity is not so much from forsaking sin, but rather from the imputation of God's righteousness to us. The letter to the Romans makes it clear that such imputation depends upon faith, not works (e.g. rectifying marriage problems). It is *God's* righteousness which is credited to us, not our own (2 Cor. 5:21).

God's righteousness is 100%. Let us suppose that the righteousness which we achieve (e.g. by keeping our marriage in order) is (at a gross over-estimate) 5%. No amount of *forsaking* sin can make up that 95%. On account of our *faith* in God's righteousness in Christ, that 95% is made up to us. If, for sake of argument, the divorced brother has 4% righteousness, then 96% must be made up. He achieves this 96% by his faith. Who are we to say that this 96% is not possible for him, but the 95% is possible for us? Again, we see the difficulty which we have in defining degrees of sin, and of making judgments involving the sins of our brethren.

" Repent and do the first works" (Rev. 2:5)

The Lord's words to the ecclesia imply that His fellowship would cease with those who did not do " the first works" after their repentance. The implication is that the works they were failing to do affected their salvation. Only *Christ* can say the words of Rev. 2:5 to an ecclesia. And are we wise to apply an *ecclesial* rebuke to an individual? Christ alone knows the " works" upon which salvation depends. There is no Biblical evidence that " works" regarding marriage must be done, or Christ will disfellowship the individual. We all have works which we ought to do, but fail to perform. How are we to decide which omitted works should be made matters of fellowship? Only Christ can decide. Rev. 2:5 does not tell the sound members of the ecclesias to disfellowship those who had not done " the first works" . The " first works" of Ephesus were her " first love" (*agape*). Christ is using " works" here (as often in the New Testament) to refer to attitudes- Ephesus were doing all the right actions, but the " work" of a loving mind was missing. Only Christ can disfellowship someone for not having enough *agape* love. This is not something which we can make a test of fellowship. In passing, note a selection of passages where " works" refers to abstract spiritual fruits like faith, rather than to physical actions: Jn. 6:29; 8:39; Prov. 12:22 LXX; Rom. 2:15; Col. 1:10,11; 2 Jn. 11,7; Rev. 2:6 cp. 15.

" Fruits meet for repentance" (Mt. 3:8)

" Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance" must be connected with our Lord's description of the Gentile believers as " a nation bringing forth the (vineyard) fruits" of the Kingdom (Mt. 21:43). These are defined in Rom. 14:17: " The Kingdom of God is...righteousness, and peace, and joy" . Christ's parable of the vine in Jn. 15 explains that it is the word abiding in us which brings forth fruit. Bringing forth fruit is therefore a way of life (cp. Rom. 6:21,22). In each aspect in which we 'bear fruit', we have in a sense 'repented'. Our repentance and fruit-bearing is not something which we can set time limits on within this life. Christ would have been satisfied if Israel had borne at least some immature fruit (Lk. 13:7). Only when there is no fruit at all, in any aspect of spiritual life, will Christ reject us. Some will bear more fruit than others- some sixty, some an hundredfold. Mt. 3:8 connects repentance with fruit bearing. This shows that God may recognize *degrees* of repentance and response to His word, as He recognizes degrees of fruit bearing. It is far too simplistic for us to label some of our brethren as having repented and others as being totally unrepentant. In any case, the fruits of repentance are brought forth unto *God*, not necessarily to fellow believers (Rom. 7:4). There is a marked dearth of evidence to show that a believer must prove his repentance in outward terms before his brethren can accept him.

" Works meet for repentance"

Men " should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance" (Acts 26:18-20). As with Mt. 21:28-31, this refers primarily to baptism. " Repent and turn to God" surely matches " Repent and be baptized" in Acts 2:38. Turning to God is associated with baptism in Acts 9:35; 11:21; 15:19; 1 Thess. 1:9.

Following conversion, our works should match the profession of faith we have made. But there is no proof here for the equation 'Forgiveness = repentance + forsaking'. The " works" seem to refer to positive achievement rather than undoing the results of past failures. Works meet for repentance are fruits of repentance (Mt. 3:8 cp. Lk. 3:8). We have shown that there are different degrees of fruit/ repentance which God accepts, and that this fruit is brought forth to *God*, and that its development takes time. We cannot therefore disfellowship a believer for not bringing forth fruit in one aspect of his life. At least we should be able to

tolerate ecclesias who are willing to tolerate slow development of fruit in some of their members.

Working In The Vineyard

Mt. 21:28-31 condemns the man who tells Christ that he is going to work in the vineyard, but does not go. This has been taken to mean that sin must be forsaken completely, or else we will be condemned.

Working in the vineyard is defined later in the chapter as bringing forth the spiritual fruits of the Kingdom (Mt. 21:41-43; Rom. 14:17). The verbal confession "I go, Sir" (Mt. 21:30) connects with the calling on Christ as Lord (cp. "sir") at conversion / baptism. There is then a commitment made to bringing forth spiritual fruit, which some converts never live up to. But the judge of whether such fruit has been developed is Christ, not us. And the final assessment of whether the convert really has gone to work in the vineyard can only be made at the judgment seat. Mt. 21:32 defines the working in the vineyard as believing in John's message about Christ, and doing the will of God (v. 31). The will of God and the "work" which God requires both relate to our faith in His son (Jn. 6:29,40). 'Working' in the vineyard therefore refers to the work of faith, rather than specific forsakings of sin.

" Faith without works is dead"

James 2:17 shows that faith must be mirrored by works. However, we tend to make a false distinction between these two things. Real faith is, by its very definition, shown in practical ways. However, each of us fail to reflect the abstract principles of the "One faith" in our daily life. Does James 2:17 really teach that we are intended to single out one specific aspect of another's life, where his works do not match his faith, and disfellowship him for this? James 2:15,16 gives an example of faith not being matched by works: whenever we say 'I've got faith that God will help our hungry brethren (e.g. in Africa)' and make no practical response, we have not matched faith with works. So often we are all guilty of this kind of mismatch between our faith and works. Yet we do not withdraw fellowship over this issue. So why pick one specific area of life and insist that there, works must *exactly* match faith? If we are going to believe that past a certain level of mismatch between faith and works we must withdraw fellowship, then what is that level? Will it not vary between brethren and ecclesias- even if we decide that such a line ought to be drawn by any of us?

" Whoso confesseth and forsaketh..."

" He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. 28:13) cannot mean that God will not fellowship us unless we forsake every single sin we commit. We have given ample evidence for that earlier. And neither does this verse address the issues of whether *we* ought to forgive those who have not fully forsaken their sins, or whether we can fellowship those whom we have not forgiven. This verse speaks about God's response to confession of sin.

It may well be that Prov. 28:13 is the Old Testament equivalent of Paul's plea not to continue in sin, that grace may abound. If we "continue in sin" we are evidently not 'forsaking' our sins. We have shown that some sins cannot be 'forsaken', and that all of us continually sin, confess and commit the same sin again. 'Forsaking' therefore does not refer to never committing the sin again. If our brother sins 490 times a day and confesses his sin, we are to

forgive him- accepting that he has 'forsaken' the sin each time he confesses it. It is therefore difficult for *us* to say that a brother has not forsaken his sin if he confesses it. In the case of the brother who sins against us 490 times a day, his 'confessions' to us have to be treated by us as 'forsakings'. How *God* looks upon such a brother's continual sinning is not relevant to how *we* are supposed to respond to him. Therefore *for us*, 'forsaking' is to be understood as almost a synonym for 'confessing'.

Many verses in Proverbs allude to incidents in Israel's history. Prov. 28:13 clearly refers to David's confession of sin regarding Bathsheba: " I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin" (Ps. 32:5)- after a period of trying to 'cover' his sin. The emphasis on confession rather than any undertaking not to lust after women again suggests that 'confession' and 'forsaking' in Prov. 28:13 can be seen as synonymous.

The first part of Prov. 28:13 surely refers to Adam covering his sins in Eden, and the second half to his situation after confession. He did not 'forsake' disobedience to God's word, or giving in to the lust of the eyes and flesh. Likewise, David continued sinning after the Bathsheba incident, but Prov. 28:13 describes him, like Adam, as having 'confessed-and-forsaken'. He could not 'forsake' the specific sin with Bathsheba; but he had done so mentally, and God counts this as forsaking. There must be many who have *mentally* forsaken their sins of the past, and have truly confessed their sins; yet they find it impossible to rectify their position in outward terms.

Another feature of the Proverbs is their frequent allusion to the Mosaic law. The Hebrew for " forsaketh" literally means 'to let go', and a related word is used concerning the scapegoat being 'let go' into the wilderness, bearing Israel's sins which had been *confessed* over it. This is a reference to the day of Atonement. " He that covereth (atones for) his (own) sins (by himself) shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth (them over the scapegoat) and (lets them go) shall have mercy" . Thus the reader is encouraged to really believe that his confessed sins were being 'let go' in the scapegoat. This was the way to atonement, rather than trying to cover over one's sins as if they had never happened.

" Let the wicked forsake his way..."

" Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts (Is. 55:7) is in the context of conversion. Is. 55:1-3 describes the process of coming to Christ: " Ho, every one that thirsteth...incline your ear, and come unto me" . Then v.6 makes a prophecy concerning calling upon the Lord's name in baptism: " Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near" (cp. God being 'near' potential converts in Acts 17:27). Is. 55:7 then speaks of the works meet for repentance which should follow conversion. But note the parallel between the wicked's " way" and " his thoughts" ; they are unrelated to God's thoughts/ ways (Is. 55:8). Is. 55:7 is therefore saying that after conversion there must most importantly be a change of mind, an aspiring after God's unattainable thoughts/ways. We would not withdraw fellowship from those who do not attain God's thoughts/ ways. We are all in the *process* of forsaking our thoughts/ ways and adopting those of God, 'seeking the Lord while He may be found', 'returning unto the Lord'. This language of 'returning unto the Lord' is at the root of the prodigal son parable- which is therefore something which we live out many times over in our lives.

Is. 55:6,7 implies that we can find God in this life, we can return to Him. But Is. 55:9 then says that "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are (God's) ways higher than your ways". This seems to be one of the many Isaiah allusions to the book of Job: "Canst thou by searching find out God?", the answer being 'No'. This shows that although ultimately we *cannot* find God by our searching, such is His moral infinity, yet if we *seek* to find Him, He will count us *as if* we have found Him. Thus God will *impute* complete forsaking of human thinking to us. Our least response is to impute forsaking of sin to our brethren.

This does not mean turning a blind eye to their weaknesses- the thesis we have outlined in this study is often misunderstood that way. We cannot help be aware of their failures. Possessing human nature makes it well nigh impossible to pretend we just haven't seen others' weaknesses! Our Lord certainly did not turn a blind eye to the sins of first century Israel; and neither does God today. We must relate to "the man Christ Jesus" within each of our brethren, to their inward, hidden man, rather than to the outward man of the flesh. When their outward man imposes itself on our attention, we need to use the power of the word, aided by our own experience of constant spiritual failure, to bring out the Christ-man within them.

3.4 "One In Christ Jesus"

Paul's argument in Eph. 5 is quite clear: the man represents Christ, and the woman represents the ecclesia. But have a look down at 5:30: "We (all of us) are members of (Christ's) body, of his flesh, and of his bones". That the church *is* the body of Christ is a common New Testament theme. The figure of *being* somebody's body could not be more intense and personal. You touch your own body, feel your bones beneath your flesh- that's fundamentally *you*. Whilst of course Christ does have a separate bodily existence, we are fundamentally Christ. Without us and our inherent sinfulness, Christ would not have come into existence, nor would He now exist.

So, the man represents Christ, and the woman the ecclesia. But the ecclesia, all of it, *is* the body of Christ; so in this sense husbands should love their wives "as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh" (5:28,29). The more we appreciate the strength and power of typology, the more we will realize the spiritual unity which there should be between brethren and sisters. The physical body of Christ is not divided- there is only one Jesus in Heaven. If brethren represent Christ and sisters typify His body, then there should be no division- either between husbands and wives, or amongst brethren and sisters within Christ's body. Thus marriage breakdowns and internal ecclesial strife are equally wrong- they both spoil the typology presented in Eph. 5. They effectively tear Christ's body apart, as men tried to do on the cross. We say "tried to" because ultimately Christ's body is indivisible- in the same way as in a sense His body was "broken" (as it is by division in the body), whilst in another sense it remained unbroken, in God's sight. Likewise, the ecclesial body in God's sight is even now not divided- we are one in Christ.

The relationship between God and us is to be reflected in that between husband and wife. But because (in different ways) both man and woman represent Christ, the marriage relationship is to be seen between all brethren and sisters in the ecclesia. For this reason, the language of marriage is often used about the unity which should be seen between us all:

- " God hath *tempered* the (ecclesial) body together...that there should be no schism in the body" (1 Cor. 12:24,25) uses a related word as in Eph. 5:31 concerning how a man " shall be *joined* unto his wife...I speak concerning Christ and the church" . Because both man and woman ultimately represent Christ, there should be no schism between either believers, or husbands and wives. We should all be " perfectly *joined* together (marriage language) in the same mind" (1 Cor. 1:10). Recall how " Israel *joined* himself unto Baalpeor" (Num. 25:3) in a sexual context. Hos. 9:10 comments on this as meaning that Israel " Separated themselves unto" Baalpeor. We cannot be 'joined to' something unless we are 'separated from' something else. If we are truly joined to Christ and each other, we *must* be separated from idolatry. It is impossible to experience this 'joining' with believers who are not 'separated'- one cannot be 'joined' in intercourse to more than one person. We *cannot* serve two masters without *hating* God.

- " God hath...*given* more abundant *honour* unto that part which *lacked*" (1 Cor. 12:24), as the husband should " (*give*) *honour* unto the wife, as unto the *weaker* vessel" (1 Pet. 3:7). God's dealings with the ecclesia are replicated both within marriage, and within the ecclesia- for we too should give special respect and sensitivity to the weaker parts of the ecclesial body (Rom. 14:1; 15:1).

- Elders should desire to " present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:28), as Christ will " present (us) holy and unblameable" (Col. 1:22), as a spotless bride (Eph. 5:27). Again, the relationship between Christ and the ecclesia is to be mirrored within the ecclesia.

- The church should *obey* Christ if they are one in Christ- as within the ecclesia, wives *obey* husbands (1 Pet. 3:6) and brethren *obey* elders (Heb. 13:17).

- The church is *subject* to Christ, as wives are to their husbands (1 Pet. 3:1). Yet because the wife too represents the body of Christ, all of us are to be subject to each other (1 Pet. 5:5).

- Husbands and wives become " one flesh" . But " flesh" is almost equivalent to " body" (see Eph. 2:15,16; Col. 1:22)- their union of " one flesh" is parallel to the union of the " one body" within the ecclesia.

- Husbands and wives are " *heirs together*" (1 Pet. 3:7)- as the whole church are " heirs together" through being one in Christ (Gal. 3:29; Eph. 3:6).

- Because we all represent Christ, He dwells in the body of each of us, " we are members one of another" (Eph. 4:25)- on the same way as we read that " we are members of (Christ's) body" in Eph. 5:30. As man and woman are " one flesh" (Eph. 5:31), so we are Christ's flesh (5:30).

At least two highly practical exhortations spring out of all this evidence.

Firstly, because we all represent Christ, albeit in different gender roles, there should be no division within ecclesias- for Christ is one. Likewise, " God is one" , and we all bear the one Name of Yahweh through baptism into the Name.

Secondly, we must appreciate that the following things are all equally wrong, because they are symptomatic of a separation between us and Christ:

- Separation and schism between brethren in Christ's body
- Separation and schism between husbands and wives.

Therefore to create schism between brethren who by status are one in Christ is as bad as having schism within one's own marriage. It is tragic that some seem to view schism as a sign of spiritual maturity, whilst treating marital strife as something infinitely worse. If we recognize that our brethren really do typify Christ, then we will seek unity with them- as we seek unity with Christ, often having to change our mental perspectives to achieve this.

The act of intercourse makes husband and wife "one flesh". In the same way as there is "one *body*...one *flesh*" at this point, so "he that is joined unto the Lord is one *spirit*" (1 Cor. 6:16,17). Highlight, or underline, those phrases "one body" and "one flesh" in v.16, and also "one spirit" in v.17. Don't miss the point. We must "stand fast in *one spirit*, with one mind striving together..." (Phil. 1:27). We have seen that we are to be one spirit with the Lord, as a man is one body and spirit with his wife (1 Cor. 6:16,17). But that same intense union is to be seen within the ecclesia! The sheer challenge of these thoughts should lift us right above all ecclesial strife, above all the turmoil we may have in our private lives. The possibility of this intense relationship between us and our partners, with our ecclesia and above all with Christ our Lord, should lift us up on eagle wings of spirit, far above the flesh, far above a world which revolves around shallow relationships. The world can in *no way* appreciate the indescribable bond of fellowship which true believers experience.

God is building up His house, His ecclesia. But because we manifest God, we too are "labourers together with Him", not just puppets in His hand; we too are the builders of His house (1 Cor. 3:9-13; 2 Cor. 6:1). If we really *are* God-manifest, if we truly are the body of Christ, then we will show love to the ecclesia- for Father and Son loved the ecclesia, to the extent that God was in Christ in the death of the cross. The union between man and woman also typifies the unity of purpose between God and Christ (1 Cor. 11:3). So great is that unity between them that it seems almost impossible to correctly fathom- in the same way as the closeness between husband and wife, between us and Christ, and between us and each other, is so hard to define and appreciate. We experience it, we sense it exists, we sense we are experiencing a unity which we don't fully understand. The tearful missionary brethren as they embrace in an African airport, the spiritual couple as they watch their child immersed, the believer arising after two hours intense prayer and meditation at the bedside- in each case, in every dimension of our spiritual lives, we *experience* this spiritual unity which we cannot define, and fain would lay hold on the more permanently in our lives. Yet this is the joy set before us in the Kingdom, true fellowship with each other and with the Lord Jesus.

In the memorial bread and wine we see a foretaste of that time. "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16,17). Through the bread we discern the body of Christ, which is the ecclesia. The breaking of bread should connect us inseparably with each other, and with Christ- we are all part of that one bread, that one body. As our bodies metabolize the piece of bread which represents His body, so we must strive in our daily thinking and actions to be at one with Christ, as well as one in Christ, and with each other as parts of His body.

3-5. The Importance Of The Breaking Of Bread

Quite rightly, the breaking of bread is at the centre of our Christian lives. But because there is something very special about that meeting, there can be a tendency to regard it and the bread and wine as having some kind of mystical aura about them. This results in the meeting not being as meaningful and helpful to us as it should be. Yet at the other extreme, over familiarity with it can result in our not according it the vital importance which we should. In this study we want to analyze the basic aspects of the breaking of bread.

A Memorial Meeting

Our understanding of it is greatly helped by appreciating that the breaking of bread is the New Covenant's equivalent of the Passover feast. The Passover meal was in order to remember the great salvation which God had wrought for all Israel at the Red Sea. Egypt, representing the power of sin, was gloriously vanquished there. Yet the faithful Israelite of all ages was to also proclaim that "This is done because of that which the Lord did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt" (Ex. 13:8). Our memorial meeting has this same two fold structure; remembering the deliverance which God wrought for us personally, as well as for the whole community of the redeemed. This is why at the breaking of bread there ought to be an awareness of personal fellowship with God, and also with each other, and with those who have gone before. The equivalent of our Red Sea experience is baptism (1 Cor. 10:1). It is not unreasonable to conclude that in our very personal meditations at the breaking of bread, we should think back to our own baptism, our deliverance from the bondage of our personal sins and weaknesses. Paul speaks of "the cup of blessing which we bless" (1 Cor. 10:16), probably using "blessing" in its Biblical sense of 'forgiveness' (e.g. Acts 3:25,26). Whilst there is, therefore, an awareness of our own sins and salvation from them at the memorial meeting, there is not any specific mediation of forgiveness to us through the bread and wine. In prospect, we were saved at baptism, through our Lord's work on the cross. In prospect, all our sins were forgiven then. We must be careful to avoid the Catholic notion that the bread and wine do themselves possess some power of atonement. They are the appointed aids to help us remember what has already been achieved. And this is why the early brethren could break bread with joy- not as part of a guilt trip prompted by the worrying remembrance of the standard set for us in Jesus (Acts 2:46).

Because we are remembering our great salvation, the memorial meeting need not be a place for guilt tripping. Joachim Jeremias gives a whole string of quotes from Rabbinic and historical writings that indicate that "At the time of Jesus the diners sat down" to eat ⁽¹⁾. Yet the Gospel records are insistent that Jesus and the disciples reclined at the last supper (Mt. 26:20; Mk. 14:18; Lk. 22:14; Jn. 13:12,23,25,28). Yet at the Passover, it was apparently common to recline, because as Rabbi Levi commented "slaves eat standing, but here at the Passover meal people should recline to eat, to signify that they have passed from slavery to freedom". The breaking of bread is thus stressed in the records as being a symbol of our freedom from slavery. It should not in that sense be a worrying experience, taking us on a guilt trip. It is to celebrate the salvation and release from bondage which has truly been achieved for us in Christ our passover.

Self Examination

You may like to underline two phrases in your Bible in Matthew 26. "As they did eat..." they began to keep asking Him [Gk.] "Lord, is it I?" (Mt. 26:21)... and as they were eating Jesus took bread..." (Mt. 26:26). The whole meeting, according to the Greek tenses, involved the disciples asking "Lord, is it I?"- and as they were eating the Lord shared bread and wine with

them in the manner with which we are familiar at our communion service. In other words, the entire gathering was shot through with a spirit of urgent self-examination and recognition of their own possibility of failure and betrayal of the Lord. For all the joyful assurance which the communion speaks of, that assurance and joy is rooted in this other aspect- of self-examination with the knowledge that failure and betrayal of the Lord is a real possibility. The importance of self examination at the breaking of bread is indirectly hinted at in Jn. 13:10: "He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet". This is surely a reference to how Num. 19:19 prescribed that a Levite was required to take a plunge bath in order to be clean. The Lord is therefore saying that all His people, when they partake of His feast, are to present themselves as cleansed Levites. He understood His people as all being part of a priesthood. Additionally, we need to bear in mind that the Lord spoke those words just before the breaking of bread, in response to how Peter did not want to participate in the Lord's meal if it meant the Lord washing him. Surely the Lord was saying that baptism is a one time event- he has been thus bathed does not need to wash again, or be re-baptized. But, he does need to periodically wash his feet, which I would take to be a reference to the breaking of bread which Peter seemed to want to avoid. Thus whilst forgiveness is not mystically mediated through the bread and wine, there is all the same a very distinct connection between the memorial meeting and forgiveness, just as there is between baptism and forgiveness. To not break bread is to walk away from that forgiveness in the blood of Jesus, just as to refuse baptism is to do the same.

Once this is understood, the command to examine ourselves at the breaking of bread will not result in a frantic listing of a few sins from the past week, somehow hoping that taking the bread and wine will absolve us from them. "If we would judge ourselves (at the breaking of bread), we should not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31) in the sense of being condemned. Our self-examination must be so intense that we appreciate that we ought to be condemned; if we achieve that level of self-knowledge now, we will not be condemned at the judgment. In the context of the self-examination command in 1 Cor. 11, Paul is speaking of the need to completely focus our attention on the sacrifice of Christ. Yet this command must have its basis in the directive for Israel to search their house for leaven before eating the Passover (Ex. 12:19). "Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven...of malice and wickedness" (1 Cor. 5:8). The disciples' question at the first breaking of bread, "Lord, is it I?" is another prototype of the command to examine ourselves at the feast (Mt. 26:22). Combining Paul's command to examine ourselves that we are really focusing upon our Lord's sacrifice, and the Exodus allusion which implies that we should examine our own lives for wickedness, we conclude that if we properly reflect upon Christ and His victory for us, then we will inevitably be aware of our own specific failures which Christ really has vanquished. But this will come as a by-product of truly grasping the fullness of the Lord's victory. The Passover was to be a public proclamation to the surrounding world of what God had done for Israel. Likewise our feast 'shows forth' (Greek: publicly declares) the Lord's death. Our memorial meeting should therefore include a degree of openly declaring to others what spiritual deliverances the Lord has wrought for us. This is surely the sort of talk that should fill up the half hour between ending the service and leaving the hall.

If we really know Christ, if we love that salvation which He has achieved, then we will want to break bread, often. "If ye love me, keep my commandments". There can be no doubt that the bread and wine do make our Lord come so real to us once again. The more an Israelite believed that he really had been redeemed from Egypt, the more he would want to keep the Passover. Likewise, our attitude to the breaking of bread is a reflection of our confidence in salvation and forgiveness. Physical isolation, Sunday School duties, unco-operative family

members, none of these things will stop the confident believer from breaking bread, alone if necessary.

The Vital Importance Of Breaking Bread

It is noteworthy that God's offer of deliverance from Egypt was conditional on a number of things. One of these was that Israel would keep the Passover to remember the great salvation God was going to achieve for them. So often in the record it is stressed: "Ye shall observe this thing...for ever...ye shall keep this service". For this reason, it is necessary to explain before baptism (cp. the Passover salvation) that we must keep the breaking of bread service. God's eagerness for them to remember shines through the written word. The description of the memorial service as being a 'proclamation' of the Lord's death (1 Cor. 11:26 RV) is an allusion to the second of the four cups taken at the Jewish Passover: "the cup of proclamation". This was drunk after the reading of Psalms 113 and 114, which proclaimed Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Therefore our breaking bread is our proclamation that we really believe that we have been saved out of this world, and are on the wilderness path to the Kingdom. God forbid, really, that our breaking bread should come down to mere ritual and habit. It is a very personal proclamation of our own salvation- as well as that of the whole body of believers.

So important was it, that he that "forbareth to keep the Passover, even the same soul shall be cut off from among his people...that man shall bear his sin" (Num. 9:13). It seems from Num. 9:10 and the examples of Hezekiah and Josiah's Passovers, that it was more important to keep the Passover even if not everything was being done exactly in order, even if there was a sense of unworthiness, than to not do it at all. This should be borne in mind when some feel 'unworthy' to take the emblems, or where there are genuine problems in obtaining wine. Moses bound the people into covenant relationship with the words: "Behold the blood of the covenant" (Ex. 24:8). These very words were used by the Lord in introducing the emblems of the breaking of bread (Mk. 14:24). This is how important it is. We are showing that we are the covenant, special Israel of God amidst a Gentile world. Indeed, "the blood of the covenant" in later Judaism came to refer to the blood of circumcision (cp. Gen. 17:10) and it could be that the Lord was seeking to draw a comparison between circumcision and the breaking of bread. For this is how His words would have sounded in the ears of His initial hearers ⁽²⁾. This is how vital and defining it is to partake of it.

"Even the same soul shall be cut off from among his people...that man shall bear his sin" is the language of Ex. 12:15 concerning the man who ate leavened rather than unleavened bread, and of Gen. 17:14: "The uncircumcised man (who refuses to be circumcised)...shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant". Circumcision was the Old Covenant's equivalent of baptism. To not break bread over a prolonged period therefore shows that a person is no longer in covenant with God. It was due to an incorrect attitude to the memorial meeting that many at Corinth were struck down "weak and sickly...and many sleep" (1 Cor. 11:30), presumably referring to the power the apostles had to smite apostate believers with physical discomfort and death. Such was the importance accorded to that meeting by them. The sensitive Bible student will see the connection between the bread and wine offered with the daily burnt offering under the Law, and the breaking of bread service. The connection was surely intended to teach that the spirit of the memorial service is to go with us morning and evening in daily life. There is surely no believer who has not privately lamented the fact that they experience an almost inevitable loss of intensity after the climax of the breaking of bread.

The breaking of bread is described as eating at "the table of the Lord" (1 Cor. 10:21). This was Old Testament language for the altar (Ez. 41:22). By eating from it we are partaking of the altar, the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 9:13; 10:18; Heb. 13:10). If we don't partake of it, we declare ourselves to have no part in Him. Yet the very fact we partake of it, is a statement that we have pledged ourselves to separation from this present world; for it is not possible to eat at the Lord's table, and also that of this world (1 Cor. 10:21). The Passover, as the prototype breaking of bread, featured bitter herbs to remind Israel of their bitter experience in Egypt (Ex. 1:14). The breaking of bread should likewise focus our attention on the fact that return to the world is a return to bondage and bitterness, not freedom.

Whilst forgiveness itself is not mediated in any metaphysical sense by the memorial meeting, it is nonetheless a vital part of the life of the forgiven believer. When Peter didn't want to break bread, the Lord reminded him that he who has been baptized / washed is indeed clean, but needs periodic feet-washing. This, surely, was a reference to the breaking of bread (Jn. 13:10). The same word for 'wash' is found in Jn. 15:2, where we read of how the Father washes / purifies periodically the vine branches. Could this not be some reference to the effect the breaking of bread should have upon us?

The Breaking Of Bread Meeting: A Caveat

Not assembling ourselves together is of course not a good thing. If we love our brethren, we will seek to be physically with them. There can be no doubt that we must struggle with our natural selfishness, our desire to go it alone. But is this actually what Heb. 10:25 is talking about? A glance at the context shows that forsaking the assembly is paralleled with the wilful sin which shall exclude us from God's salvation:

Let us hold fast the profession of our faith
Without wavering [going back to Judaism, according to the context in Hebrews]

Let us consider one another to provoke unto love
Not forsaking the assembly-of-ourselves

Exhorting one another
Unlike the "some" who, according to how Hebrews uses that Greek word, have turned away from Christianity

Wilful sin, with no more access to the Lord's sacrifice

Certain condemnation- "a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation"

Despising the Law

Treading under foot the Son of God and reviling the blood of the covenant- what had to be done by Christians who 'repented' of their conversion and returned to the synagogue, the sort of blasphemy that Saul was making Christian converts commit.

Now are those awful things in the right hand column above really a description of someone who fervently believes in the Lord Jesus, but for whatever reason, doesn't 'make it out to meeting' on Sundays? Those terms seem to speak about a wilful rejection of the Lord Jesus. And this of course is the very background against which Hebrews was written. It was a letter

to Hebrew Christians who were beginning to bow to Jewish pressure and renounce their faith in Christ, and return to Judaism. "The assembling of ourselves together" can actually be read as a noun- not a verb. Those who 'forsook' 'the assembly together of us' would then refer to those who totally rejected Christianity. The same word "forsaking" occurs in 2 Pet. 2:15, also in a Jewish context, about those who "forsake the right way". So I suggest that forsaking the assembly refers more to turning away from Christ and returning to apostasy, than to simply not turning up at church as often as we might. The writer laments that "some" were indeed forsaking the assembly (Heb. 10:25). But that Greek word translated "some" recurs in Hebrews to describe those "some" who had forsaken the ecclesia and turned back to Judaism: "Take heed...lest there be in some [AV "any"] of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God" (and returning to Judaism- Heb. 3:12)... lest some [AV "any"] of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13)... for some, when they had heard, did provoke [referring to the earlier Hebrews in the wilderness who turned away from the hope of the Kingdom- Heb. 3:16]... some of you should seem to fail [like the condemned Hebrews in the wilderness- Heb. 4:1]... lest some fall after the same example of unbelief" (Heb. 4:11). In fact, right after the reference to the "some" who forsake the assembly, Heb. 10:28 speaks of "some [AV "he"]- but the same Greek word in all these places for "some"] that despised Moses' law". Clearly, those Hebrews in the wilderness who turned away from the spirit of Christ in Moses and the hope of the Kingdom, are being held up as warnings to that same "some" in the first century Hebrew ecclesia who were turning back from the Hope of the Kingdom. Now let me get it right. I'm not in any way saying that we needn't bother about our ecclesial attendance. Far from it! But I also feel it's not right to insist that if someone doesn't attend an ecclesia, for whatever reason, they are therefore guilty of the wilful sin and certain fiery condemnation of which Hebrews 10 speaks for those who forsake the assembly. In fact, the passage has almost been abused like that- as if to say: 'If you don't turn up on Sunday, if you quit meeting with us, then, you've quit on God and His Son'. This simply isn't the case.

There are some who find attendance at the memorial meeting difficult for whatever reason. Yet there is only one loaf, one cup, and all those truly baptized into the one body are partaker in it, so Paul explains. Even disfellowship can never be any more than a local issue between you and one ecclesia; whenever you partake the one loaf and one cup, you're in fellowship with the entire body of Jesus- even if some of them tell you that you're not. An ecclesia can part company with you, you can with them, but nothing can separate us from the body and blood and love of Jesus. They cannot tell you that you are no longer a part of the body of Jesus. Also, it's worth paying attention to Matthew 18, a passage invariably invoked by these types. If your brother sins against you, you can go to him, then get the church involved, and then, the Lord says to the person sinned against, let him be unto THEE as a Gentile / publican. I am such a fuddy duddy I am still reading from the AV and RV. About the only advantage of those versions is the way 'thee' signifies a 'you singular' as opposed to 'ye / you' which in KJ English meant 'you plural'. Modern English no longer makes a distinction. So, let such a person be unto THEE- you singular, not your ecclesia- as a Gentile and Publican. And what was Jesus' attitude to them? To mix with them, eat with them in table fellowship, and try to win them.

Also. Mt 18 continues. Peter asks "And how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?". Jesus replies, 70 x 7. i.e. to an unlimited extent. It's as if He's saying that yes you can go through the procedure of sorting it out with your brother and rejecting him from your personal company. But, the higher level, is to simply forgive him. It's like adultery under the Law. There were several options for the husband. Do a trial of jealousy and make

her infertile. Stone her. Divorce her. Or, just forgive her. We surely all ought to be aiming for the higher level. Those who quote Matthew 18 as a reason for withdrawal are in my view living on a lower spiritual level than those who forgive 70 x 7. But the gracious Lord doubtless shall accept them too in the last day.

Coming Together

And so for these reasons and others, brethren and sisters walk miles through the blazing African sun, travel for hours in sub zero temperatures in Eastern Europe, drive hundreds of kilometers along North American highways- to meet together for the memorial service. But again, Why? Why not just break bread at home? The answer to this lies in the fact that the breaking of bread (as the Passover) is intended to recall the salvation which was achieved for the whole body of Christ- which includes us personally. We should be aware of this if we have to break bread alone. It is understandable, therefore, that those in 'isolation' often try to break bread at the same time as their brethren are doing so elsewhere. "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread (Greek 'loaf'), and one body"- of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16,17). The bread represents the body of Christ; but it is hammered home time and again in the New Testament that the believers are the body of Christ. By partaking of Christ's body, we are sharing with each other. Paul drives home this point with an Old Testament allusion: "Behold Israel after the flesh: are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?" (1 Cor. 10:18). We are the living sacrifices, offered on the Christ altar (Rom. 12:1; Heb. 13:10). By being placed upon the altar, the sacrifice was counted as the altar. As Christ hung on the cross, all believers were counted as being in Him; Christ and the believers were, in this sense, indivisible on the cross. And they still are- hence the figure of us being the very body, the very being, of Christ. To personally share in fellowship with Him therefore must involve intense fellowship with other members of Christ's body. We must 'discern' the Lord's body (1 Cor. 11:29), and also "judge (same word as 'discern') ourselves" at the memorial meeting (1 Cor. 11:31). We discern the Lord's body, and thereby discern ourselves too- because we are part of His body. This further shows that our self-examination at the breaking of bread is both of Christ and also of ourselves (both individually and collectively, as the body of Christ?).

"Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20) surely promises a special closeness of Christ when we are physically gathered together. All those who have made real effort to gather together for the memorial meeting will know the truth of this. Our community increasingly features many in semi-isolation; this promise of special spiritual blessing in meeting together is something which they can and surely do know the truth of. The close fellowship which was engendered by the Passover feast, as Israel huddled together in family units around the slain lamb, the focus of their love and gratitude to God, explains why Israel were repeatedly warned not to share that meal with those not in covenant with God. To argue that our fellowship is only with God leads to a woolly attitude towards breaking bread with those in the apostasy; yet this runs counter to the teaching of the Passover type.

The Lord held the memorial meeting as a keeping of a Passover, and yet He changed some elements of it. In like manner He was made known to the disciples "in the breaking of bread" (Lk. 24:35), perhaps because it was usual for the host to say the blessing before the meal, and yet Jesus the stranger, the guest, presumed to lead the prayer. Joachim Jeremias cites evidence that "By the time of Jesus, individual cups were used at the Passover meal" [\(3\)](#), and yet Mk. 14:23 implies that He used only one cup, which was passed around amongst those at

the last supper: "He took the cup [RV "a cup"]...he gave it to them: and they all drank of it [singular]". They didn't take up their own cups and drink- the Lord gave them His cup, just as He passes on to all in Him a participation in His "cup" of suffering and final joy. Reflect how deftly and determinedly the Lord must have "received the cup" (Lk. 22:17 RV), knowing what it represented; imagine His body language. Paul's references to "the cup" imply the same. This change was surely to indicate the unity that His death, His blood, His life, was to inspire amongst those who share in it. This, in passing, is behind my undoubted preference for not using individual cups at the memorial meeting. It would seem to be a returning to the Jewish legalistic tradition, however unintentionally. I have elsewhere commented upon the clear link between the death of Jesus and our unity. The memorial meeting is the supreme celebration of that unity between us. To deny a brother or sister participation in it is something serious indeed. Tragically, and it is a tragedy, we have tended to use the memorial meeting as a weapon for exclusion rather than as a celebration of our unity. Yet this was the intention, without doubt. Comparing Lk. 22:20 and Mk. 14:24 we find the Lord saying that the cup of wine was "for you poured out, poured out for many"- as if He wanted them to be aware at the memorial meeting that it was not only they who had been redeemed in Him. Likewise the Passover was essentially a remembering of the deliverance of a community, through which the individual worshipper found his or her personal salvation. This is why it is just not good enough to insist on breaking bread alone, or with no thought to the fact that all of us were redeemed together, as one man, as one nation, in Him.

The unity between believers at the breaking of bread is brought out in Acts 2:42, where we read of the new converts continuing in

- the teaching of the apostles,
- the fellowship
- the breaking of bread
- the prayers.

It could be that this is a description of the early order of service at the memorial meetings. They began with an exhortation by the apostles, then there was "the fellowship", called the agape in Jude 12, a meal together, and then the breaking of bread itself [following Jewish Passover tradition], concluded by "the prayers", which may have included the singing of Psalms. The performance of this feast was a sign of conversion and membership in the body of Christ. This is how important it is.

Broken Body?

Considering how the bread represents the body of Christ leads us to a common query: 'Seeing that "a bone of Him shall not be (and was not) broken", how can we say that we remember the broken body of Jesus by breaking the bread?'. First of all, it must be understood that 'breaking bread' or 'eating bread' is simply an idiom for sharing in a meal (Is. 58:7; Jer. 16:7; Lam. 4:4; Ez. 17:7; 24:17; Hos. 9:4; Dt. 26:14; Job 42:11). 'Bread' is used for any food, just as 'salt' is used in the same way in Arabic. The breaking of a loaf of bread is not necessarily implicit in the phrase (although it can be). However, we must also be aware of a fundamental misconception which one feels is held by many; that the physical blood and body of Christ are all that we come to remember. This notion is related to that which feels that there is some mystical power in the physical bread and wine in themselves. Bro. Roberts makes the point in "The Blood of Christ" that "it is not the blood as literal blood that is precious or efficacious".

And the same might be said about the Lord's literal body. His body and blood were no different to those of any other man.

The fact that we are asked to symbolize His broken body, when it is stated that His literal body was not broken, is proof enough that Christ's body is to be understood as something more than His literal flesh and blood. Indeed, 1 Cor. 10:16,17 seems to suggest that the "body of Christ" in which we partake through the bread is a symbol of the whole body of believers, just as much as His actual body which enabled this salvation. Likewise the Passover was not intended to commemorate the red liquid which flowed from the first Passover lambs, but to remember the salvation which God had achieved for all Israel on account of that. Christ bore our sins "in his own body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24)- and it was more in His mind and mental awareness that this was true, rather than our sins being in (e.g.) His arms and legs. Other uses of "body" which require reference to our whole mind and being, rather than our literal body, include Mt. 5:29,30; 6:22-25; Jn. 2:21; Rom. 7:4; 1 Cor. 6:19; 9:23. Luke's record of the Last Supper shows how the Lord spoke of His body and blood as parallel with His whole sacrifice: "This is my body...this do in remembrance of me (His whole way of life- not just His physical body). This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you" (Lk. 22:19,20). Col. 1:20 likewise parallels "the blood of the cross" with "him" (the man Jesus). Rom. 7:4 puts "the body of Christ" for the death of that body; He was, in His very person, His death. The cross was a living out of a spirit of self-giving which was Him. The cup of wine represents the promises ("testament") of salvation which have been confirmed by Christ's blood. Note how Jesus quietly spoke of "my body which is (being) given for you...my blood which is shed for you". The pouring out of His life/blood was something ongoing, which was occurring even as He spoke those words. The cross was a summation of a lifetime of outpouring and breaking of His innermost being, or "body". It is this that we remember at the breaking of bread. The Passover was comprised of the lamb plus bread. The breaking of bread, the Passover for Christians, is wine and bread. The lamb was thus replaced in the thought of Jesus by His blood / wine. He perceived that His blood was Him, in that sense.

The prophecy of Ps. 34:20 about not a bone of the Lord being broken is clearly applied to Him in Jn. 19:36. But the context is clearly about all of us- any righteous man. The preceding verse speaks of how the Lord delivers the righteous man out of all his tribulations- and this verse is applied to other believers apart from the Lord Jesus in Acts 12:11 and 2 Tim. 3:11,12. The chilling fact is that we who are in the body of the Lord are indeed co-crucified with Him.

We 'discern' the Lord's body by correctly breaking bread (1 Cor. 11:29). The Greek translated 'discern' means to analyze, to pull apart, as a judge does. It is the same word translated "examine [himself]" in the previous verse; our examination of the Lord's body leads inevitably to our self-examination. Consideration of His death by His people leads to the thoughts of many hearts being revealed (Lk. 2:35). The purpose of an exhortation is therefore to centre our minds upon Christ, to analyze His "body", His very essence and spirit, so that our minds are focussed upon the slain lamb as clearly as Israel's were on Passover night.

It is also worth reflecting how the Hebrew writer saw the torn veil as a symbol of the Lord's flesh. It is just possible that the physical tearing of the Lord's flesh at His death through the nails represented the tearing of His flesh nature, symbolized in the physical tearing of the veil. But the tearing of the veil was something essential and far reaching- not a surface rip. The Lord's death is surely to be understood as a tearing apart of the flesh nature and

tendencies which He bore; and it is this we remember in breaking the bread which represents His flesh.

A Type Of The Kingdom

The Lord told us that the Passover feast would "be fulfilled in (i.e. by?) the Kingdom of God" (Lk. 22:16). This is confirmed by the description of "the marriage supper of the lamb" in Rev. 19:9. Likewise the parable of Lk. 14 speaks of "a great supper" at the beginning of the Millennium. As we share this feast together now, we are acting out a parable of the feast to be kept at the Lord's return. In the light of this, how important it is to ensure that there is no bitterness and disunity at the breaking of bread meeting! There will be a due sense of decorum to the whole meeting if its typical meaning is properly grasped; emblems laid out in time, so that they are in full view of the members as they file into the meeting room; at least 5 minutes of silence before the meeting starts, with the congregation focusing their thoughts upon the emblems, and the Kingdom which the meeting points forward to. To be invited to sit at the King's table is an honour indeed (cp. 2 Sam. 19:28). Remember that we are reaffirming our covenant. "This is the blood of the covenant" is a reference back to the blood of the Old Covenant being sprinkled upon the people, with their response of vowing obedience unto the end (Ex. 24:7). The solemnity of that distant moment should be ours, weekly.

Notes

(1) Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words Of Jesus* (London: S.C.M., 1973 ed.), p. 48.

(2) See A.J.B. Higgins, *The Lord's Supper In The New Testament* (London: S.C.M., 1952) p. 33.

(3) Joachim Jeremias, *op cit* p. 68.

3.6 Judge Not- ?

A common problem among new converts, especially when faced with problems in church life, is the feeling that we cannot 'judge' individuals or situations.

Any religious individual or community, believers included, will be tempted to morally and doctrinally retreat on issue after issue, until they come to a point where they cannot tell right from wrong; firstly, in the behaviour and belief of others, and then finally, in their own lives. The road to this position often involves the claim that we must not judge, and therefore we cannot label any behaviour or belief as right or wrong. This attitude arises from a faulty understanding of 'judging'. It may seem hard for the new convert to believe that such a clouding of right and wrong is possible; and yet Biblical and present Christian experience confirms that this is a major problem for us all.

Even the most basic reading of the New Testament will reveal that the Greek *krino* (usually translated " judge") is used in more than one way. The same is true of the idea of 'judgment' in many languages. Thus in English, " judgment" refers both to the process of deciding / judging a case, and also to the final judgment of condemnation. We read that the Father judges no one (Jn. 5:22); but (evidently in another sense), He does judge (Jn. 8:50). Christ did not come to judge (Jn. 8:15), but in another way He did (Jn. 5:30; 8:16,26). Paul tells the Corinthians to judge nothing, and then scolds them for not judging each other (1 Cor. 4:5 cp.

6:1-3). *Krino* (to "judge") can simply mean to make a decision, or think something through (Acts 20:16; 26:8; 27:11; 1 Cor. 2:2; 7:37; 2 Cor. 2:1; Tit. 3:12). And because of this, we are encouraged to "judge" situations according to God's word and principles; thus 'judging' can mean forming an opinion based on correct interpretation of the word (Jn. 7:24; 1 Cor. 10:15; 11:13; 2 Cor. 5:14). Therefore judging or opinion forming on any other basis is 'judging after the flesh', and this is wrong (Lk. 12:57; Jn. 8:15); judging rightly is part of our basis of acceptability with the Lord Jesus (Lk. 7:43). It is a shameful thing if we can't judge our brethren (1 Cor. 5:12). "Judge not" must be understood in this context.

Judging Our Brethren

With this understanding of 'judging', it is inevitable that we need to apply our 'judgment' to other people, especially within the ecclesia. The decision to baptize Lydia into the fellowship of the one body involved 'judging' her "to be faithful" (Acts 16:15). If we cannot judge in any sense, it would be impossible to make *any* fellowship decision, e.g. interviewing a candidate for baptism. James was faced with the problem of deciding how far the conscience of some Jewish brethren should be imposed on the Gentile converts. He reasoned from Biblical principles, and then gave his "sentence" (Greek *krino*), his judgment- that they need not be circumcised (Acts 15:19). The elders of the Jerusalem ecclesia "ordained" (*krino*), they 'judged', some ecclesial rules for the Gentile ecclesias (Acts 16:14; 21:25). They didn't read "judge not" as meaning they couldn't ordain anyone. It is evident from all this that there is nothing wrong with 'judging' our brethren in the sense of forming an opinion about their behaviour or doctrine, and carrying this out. Paul reasons that disputes between brethren ought to be settled by other brethren in the ecclesia judging between them, rather than resorting to the judiciary of the world (1 Cor. 6:1-3).

Paul reprimands the Corinth ecclesia for not doing this. It is quite possible that they justified going to law with the excuse that 'Well, we can't judge our brother, you know'. Paul is saying: 'If you were spiritually mature, you would realize that you can judge your brother, indeed it's a shameful state of affairs if you lack the maturity to be able to do it'. In the same context, Paul rebukes Corinth for not withdrawing from the incestuous brother, and he says that although he is not physically present, his judgment is that the brother should be disfellowshipped; and he implies that they should already have made the same judgment (1 Cor. 5:3). Clearly disfellowshipping a brother involves judging- and we are not in accord with the spirit of Christ if we refuse to do this.

Don't Condemn

And yet, almost in designed contrast, just a few verses earlier Paul has warned his Corinthians not to judge each other, because Christ will be the judge at the last day (1 Cor. 4:3-5). This is one of Paul's many almost unconscious allusions back to his Lord's words in the Gospels; this time to Mt. 7:1: "Judge not, that ye be not judged" at the judgment. Likewise, 1 Cor. 11:31,32 looks back to the same verse; and again interprets 'judging' as condemning. We will all be judged (2 Cor. 5:10); yet if we do not judge, we will not be judged. Evidently, 'judge' is being used in the sense of 'condemn'. If we don't condemn others, we will not be condemned. It can't mean don't judge in the sense of don't form an opinion, don't analyze; because we will all be judged in this sense. If we don't judge / analyze/ form an opinion of others, this won't save us from the process of judgment at Christ's return. But if we don't condemn, this will save us from condemnation. The context of Mt. 7 confirms this; judging others is paralleled with confidently proclaiming that our brother is blind (7:4)- a

common Biblical description of those condemned by God (Lk. 6:39; Jn. 9:39; Rom. 2:19; 2 Pet. 1:9; Rev. 3:17).

But there is an inspired commentary on the 'Sermon' of Mt. 5-7. Any good commentary on James will list the copious links between James and Mt. 5-7. The comment on Mt. 7:1 is in James 4:11,12: " He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother...there is one lawgiver (judge)...who art thou that judgest another?" . 'Speaking evil' here doesn't refer to slander; it is parallel with condemning. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 4:3-5, we must not judge each other in the sense of condemning, because Christ is the judge; we must not anticipate the outcome of the judgment. But it is inevitable that we must 'judge' each other in the sense of some amount of analysis and opinion-forming concerning doctrine and behaviour. Indeed, at least from my own self-observation, it would be impossible for the Lord to forbid us to 'judge' each other in this sense; it's an inevitable function of the human condition. It would be rather like condemning sneezing. We see and hear things, and inevitably we make a judgment concerning them. But we must " judge righteous judgment" , judgment moulded by the word, but not anticipate the outcome of the final judgment.

It seems that the following context of Mt. 7:1 (" judge not...") concerns judging in the sense of condemning. And the allusions to " judge not" in James and 1 Cor. also seem to read it as forbidding us to condemn. When the Lord repeated His theme of " judge not" in Lk. 6:37, He seems to have underlined exactly what He meant by not judging: " Judge not, and ye shall not be judged; (i.e.) condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned" . Either He meant 'don't judge in any sense', or 'don't condemn'. We have seen that He could not have meant 'don't judge in any sense', because He asks us to judge in this way. So He meant 'don't condemn'; and because He then goes on to say this explicitly (" condemn not"), it seems logical to read this as Him underlining the point, perhaps clarifying what had perhaps been misunderstood when He earlier said " Don't judge" in Mt. 7:1. So He was saying: 'Don't judge, what I mean is, don't condemn' ⁽¹⁾.

Self-examination

With this understanding of 'judging', we arrive at a telling interpretation of 1 Cor. 11:31,32: " If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged...should not be condemned with the world" . The context is of self-examination at the breaking of bread. If, in the light of our reflection on the Lord's cross, we arrive at that level of spiritual contrition where we know ourselves to be worthy of condemnation, we will not be condemned at the judgment. In this sense, our confrontation with Christ in His time of dying should provoke in us a small foretaste of the judgment to come. It is an agony of the writer's soul that the breaking of bread rarely produces this sense in him. And yet, in all intellectual and expositional honesty, this seems to be Paul's point.

We must judge / condemn ourselves, but not others. Paul 'judged' the incestuous brother as worthy of withdrawal, he 'judged' Lydia to be in a position whereby she could enter fellowship through baptism. Yet Paul could make these fellowship decisions without 'judging' in the way in which Mt. 7:1 condemns. This fact in itself cannot be answered by those who claim that to disfellowship someone is to judge / condemn them, and thereby we condemn ourselves. Paul scolded the Corinthians for their refusal to 'judge' as he judged. It seems the same rebuke is increasingly called for in the Christian community. If we cannot judge each other at all, the whole concept of ecclesial discipline must be dispensed with. The logical result of not judging is to have an 'open table', whereby we would fellowship any one for fear

of not judging. The need to 'judge righteously' is destroyed by a refusal to judge at all. Yet we must not condemn- anyone. In this sense, " Judge not" . For example, even though we know baptism is essential for salvation, it is not for us to label *anyone* as certain to be condemned at the judgment.

Thus the New Testament teaches that we must not condemn anyone, and yet we must withdraw fellowship and keep separate from certain people. This in itself demonstrates that not fellowshiping someone is not the same as judging them in the manner forbidden in Mt. 7:1.

Notes

(1) It is often maintained that " judge not" refers to not judging motives. If we are not to judge motives, but we are to 'judge' in some sense, this would mean that we must judge the outward works of men. And yet Biblical and human analysis reveals that outward behaviour is often not a reflection of inner motive (e.g. Samson's marriage, Jud. 14:4). To judge outward behaviour without considering motives is almost pointless. There are countless cases of where the same action may be right or wrong depending on motive. Thus both David and Uzziah acted as the High Priest, but only Uzziah was condemned for it; David refused to choose his punishment as God asked him, preferring to leave it to God, whereas when Ahaz did something similar, he was condemned for it; Rahab's lie is commended as an act of faith, whilst other lies are sins; Samuel and Eli both had the same experience of their children being apostate and them being criticized for it, but only Eli is condemned for this. For a first century Christian to still keep parts of the Law of Moses was in some a reflection of their lack of full spirituality; whilst others did this in order not to offend other believers, and thereby showed a superior spirituality. The *motive* was all important to how the outward behaviour should be judged. The commands to discipline weak brethren nearly all involve an element of judging motives; thus false teachers suggest false doctrine because their motive is leadership (Acts 20:30); those who would not work because they claimed the second coming was imminent were in fact " busybodies" , their motivation was not genuine, *and the Thessalonians were told to recognize them as such*, and " them that are such" should be reproved (2 Thess. 3:12); we should take note of those who " serve their own belly" by creating division (Rom. 16:17,18); and ecclesial elders should be appointed whose inner attitudes are right (Tit. 1:7). Indeed, one of the themes of Titus is the need for a sound mind, which should be evident in those the ecclesia chose to be elders (1:9,10,15; 2:2,5-7,12,15; 3:1,3,5,10 Gk.) This all demonstrates that there is a place for 'judging' motives, especially in ecclesial life.

3.7 Youth For Truth: Biblical Examples For Young People

One of the features of newly baptized converts is that they are generally young- often under 25. There are many Biblical examples for young people. The very first converts of the early church were comprised largely of the same age group- and yes, it's possible to Biblically prove this. 1 Cor. 15:6 states that the majority of the 500 brethren who saw the risen Lord Jesus were still alive when Paul wrote to Corinth, about 25 -30 years later. Seeing that life expectancy in first century Palestine was around 50, it would follow that the vast majority of those first witnesses of the risen Lord were under 25. Daniel was only 18 at the time of Dan. 2; Joshua, Jeremiah, the disciples and other notable Bible characters also bore the yoke in their youth. It is one of the wonders of God manifestation that He can use almost any kind of simile to reveal His character to us. Thus God is likened in the prophets to both a Father and a Mother; He is likewise depicted as an old man (" the ancient of days" with glorious white hair), and also as a young man. The point is that God uses different figures of speech to reveal different characteristics to us. Our present study is unashamedly designed to encourage the youngsters of our community to pour out their idealism, their optimism, their positive vision, before the Lord- without reserve!

" As a young man..."

So we want to begin by observing that God chose to liken Himself to a dynamic young man. In fact, a young man deeply in love with a young woman- the virgin daughter of Israel (Hos 3:1,2; Ez. 16:10,14). The love and attraction which God felt for Israel in the Sinai wilderness is held up as typical of His future feelings towards Israel: " As a young man...rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee" (Is. 62:5). Speaking of the same time, Hos.

2:14-16 allows us to infer something about the attitude of God to Israel at the time of the exodus: " I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness (as God did at the exodus), and speak comfortably unto her...as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt" . In the same way as God (as it were) spoke charmingly to Israel, encouraging her to 'go for' Him, Israel responded as a keen young woman would in this situation. Her feelings towards God matched His towards her; thus He could reflect later: " I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when *thou wentest after me* in the wilderness" (Jer. 2:2). The young man (God) tried to allure her, but she was keen anyway.

But...

So far, so good. We have shown, if nothing else, that God's love for His people (then and now) can be appropriately typified by the romantic relationship between two youngsters. But the Bible minded reader ought to have some big questions at the back of his mind. God and Israel being so mutually in love with each other is hard to square with the frequent accounts of the problems in their relationship- to put it mildly. " They do *alway* err in their hearts" (Heb. 3:10), in " turning back unto Egypt" - that is God's considered comment upon their relationship. God had wanted to destroy Israel even while in Egypt (Ez. 20:8), only refraining for the sake of His Name. Later, in the wilderness, He actually wanted to destroy them in a moment, making of Moses a greater nation. Instead, God slew the majority over a forty year period- for their unfaithfulness to His covenant. Ezekiel 20 describes how Israel took the idols of Egypt with them through the Red Sea; indeed, they lugged a whole pagan tabernacle system with them through the wilderness, in addition to the true tabernacle (Acts 7:43,44).

Yet the exodus and wilderness journey is described as God, a young man, being madly in love with the young woman of Israel. How could a God who loves purity, who cannot look upon iniquity, fall in love so passionately with such a reprobate crew? It cannot be that God turned a blind eye to their sin. And how can Israel be described as going after God in the wilderness, showing Him all " the love of thine espousals" (Jer. 2:2) when in their hearts, from Egypt right through the wilderness journey, " they despised my judgments...(and thus) rebelled against me" (Ez. 20:8,13,16,21)?

Faithful Youngsters

I suggest the solution to this problem lies in the fact that God was attracted to a certain faithful element within the people of Israel at this time. Robert Roberts rightly described the generation that was under twenty years old on leaving Egypt as the most faithful of all Israel's generations. The faithful element with whom God so 'fell in love' was not just comprised of the 'under 20s'. Joshua and Caleb also featured amongst them, as did the Levites (who the curse of destruction in the wilderness did not apply to: Num. 14:29 cp. 1:49). Numerically, the largest of these three groups who constituted the 'faithful element' was the under 20s. It is fitting, therefore, that this faithful remnant are personified as a young person. Thus God reflected to Hosea: " When Israel was a child (s.w. " young man"), then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (11:1). We are told that Israel were delivered from Egypt because they prayed for that deliverance. Yet God would not hear the prayers of sin-bitten Israel as a whole, who were content to share in Egypt's materialism (Ex. 16:3; Num. 11:5); it must have been the prayers of the righteous remnant which so moved God to respond.

Dt. 8:2-7 describes God leading Israel through the wilderness for 40 years *so that* they could then enter the land. 'Israel' here must refer to the under 20s, Joshua, Caleb and the Levites. It was only they who went through the wilderness for 40 years. It was 'Israel' in this sense with whom God was in love. They considered in their heart, that God was treating them as a father does his son (Dt. 8:5). This has a practical significance to it; the under 20s would have been at variance with their natural parents, who knew they were condemned to death in the wilderness, and who refused to take their covenant with God seriously. That young remnant were led to meditate that God was their Heavenly Father; natural relationships that were not based around a true love of God, paled into insignificance as they spiritually matured. Dt. 8:3 says that they learnt to live by every word of God during those 40 years. This is just not true of rebellious Israel generally. But the under 20s, Levites, Joshua and Caleb all developed into keen lovers of the word during that time. They are classic Biblical examples for young people.

Bible Students

There is further evidence that this group of young people were keen to 'do their Bible readings'. On the wilderness journey, God "raised up your *sons* for prophets (forth-tellers of God's word), and of your *young men* for Nazarites" (Am. 2:10,11). If it was the Levites and the under 20s who entered the land, it is likely that a strong bond formed between them. Therefore the young zealots took the Nazarite vow, which enabled a non-Levite to make the dedication expected of the priesthood. The long hair represented the high priestly mitre; and the restrictions concerning wine and defilement for the dead were identical for both Levite and Nazarite. We have suggested that the typical 'young woman' who married God in the wilderness years was primarily these keen young people. Rom. 7:1,2 significantly likens Israel's marriage to God as being a marriage to the *Law*. This adds further point to our deduction that those youngsters were bound together in love of the word.

One of the ringleaders of this group was Joshua- a great Biblical example for young people. His love of the word is stressed throughout the record. He was just over 20 at the time of leaving Egypt, and is styled a "young man". The Hebrew means 'growing one', and is translated "child" in Hos. 11:1. He "departed not out of the tabernacle" (Ex. 33:11), where the Angel spoke God's word to Moses. Ps. 91 comments upon how he dwelt in "the secret place", where the word was spoken (see the connections between the "secret" place and God's word: Job 15:8; 29:4; Ps. 25:14; Prov. 3:32; Is. 45:19; Dan. 2:18; Am. 3:7). It was because of this love of the word that Joshua was preserved in those wilderness years, as the bodies of his peer group were abandoned in mass graves in the Sinai scrub: "A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee". Joshua calmly looked at those sights, *knowing* whom he had believed: "Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold *and* see (i.e. meditate upon) the reward of the wicked" (Ps. 91:7,8). Similar feelings will doubtless be experienced by the faithful young believer, as the final judgments and plagues start to fall at the Lord's return.

Despite his youth, Joshua's love of the word, and subsequent spiritual insight, led him to be chosen to accompany Moses, to witness the mighty theophany in the mount. In his twenties, soon after leaving Egypt, Joshua was made the leader of the Israelite army which fought Amalek. He was told to compose that army of men of his personal choice (Ex. 17:9). One wonders if the condemned generation had much heart for a fight. Can we not imagine him choosing the zealous young reformers of Egypt, along with the warrior-priests?

Joshua appears to have been only one of a group of Moses' "young men", who moved around the camp running his errands (Ex. 24:5; Num. 11:27,28); as a similar group did for Nehemiah and Paul years later. The young men of the New Testament were also characterized by their love of the word (1 Jn. 2:14). Moses would have had a special fondness for this generation who were to enter the land. A large part of the Law was concerned with Israel's behaviour after they had settled in the land; these would only have been relevant to that younger generation. It is fitting that both Moses and Caleb (and Joshua?) maintained their youthful vigour right up to their death (Dt. 34:7; Josh. 14:11).

Bad Background

The extent of spiritual despair, despondency and apostasy amongst the condemned generation cannot be overstated. They neglected the circumcision of their children (Josh. 5:5,6), showing their rejection of the Abrahamic covenant with them. There is good reason to think that Rom. 1 is a description of Israel in the wilderness. Rom. 1:23 accuses them of changing "the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to...fourfooted beasts, and creeping things", clearly alluding to Ps. 106:29 concerning how Israel in the wilderness "changed their glory (i.e. God) into the similitude of an ox that eateth grass" by making the golden calf. The effective atheism of Rom. 1 is matched by Ps. 106:21: "They forgot God their saviour". The long catalogue of Israel's wilderness sins in Ps. 106 is similar to that in Rom. 1. "Full of envy" (Rom. 1:29) corresponds to them envying Moses (Ps. 106:16), "whisperers" (Rom. 1:29) to "murmerers" (Ps. 106:25), "inventors of evil things" (Rom. 1:30) to God being angered with "their inventions" of false gods (Ps. 106:29). Because of this "God gave them up" to continue in their sexual perversion and bitterness with each other, even to the extent of murder (Rom. 1:27,29). They were a rabble of about 2 million people living in moral anarchy, driven on in their lust by the knowledge that God had rejected them. Those young people had to violently rebel against the attitude of the world and older generation around them. The waters of the Red Sea truly made them new creatures. They were so evidently *not* the product of their environment and parental example. Psychologists mock young Christians of today for living out parental expectation, and conforming to background environment. Yet if our response to baptism has made us truly new creations, this just cannot be true.

Good Background

And now for a different Biblical example for young people. John Mark was an example of one 'brought up in it' (almost) who made it real for himself in the very end. His mother Mary owned the home where the first ecclesia met in Jerusalem- he would have known all the leading lights, the doubts, the joys, the fears, the debates of the early church. Barnabas was his kindly uncle, who took him on the first missionary journey with Paul. Cyprus was OK, but once they landed at Perga, Paul insisted on leaving the coast road and going up the dangerous road to preach on the uplands; and Mark quit, scared perhaps to risk his life that far. And so he went back to his mum in Jerusalem, and the safety of the home ecclesia. And no doubt he was warmly welcomed home, as the Jerusalem ecclesia by then were beginning to consider Paul as being just way out. But over the months, things changed. John Mark wanted to go again, and his uncle Barnabas encouraged him. But Paul would have none of it. That rejection must have sorely hurt Mark; and we hear nothing more of him for about 15 years. Then, when Paul was in prison, he starts to get mentioned. He is called there Paul's "fellow-prisoner" (Col. 4:10), as if he too had been imprisoned for his bold preaching. To Philemon, Paul writes that Mark is his "fellow-worker"; and in his last days, he begs Mark to come and see him (2 Tim. 4:9-11). Peter also, probably writing likewise from Rome ["

Babylon"] mentions Mark as his " son" (1 Pet. 5:13), and tradition has it that Mark wrote down Peter's Gospel. So the young brother who possibly had been made flabby by the nice background, eventually made it real for himself in the end.

Wilderness Generation - ?

God is ultimately perfect. He therefore loves spiritual idealism. " Be ye therefore perfect, *even as* your Father which is in Heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:48) is evidently designed to provoke idealism. Perhaps it was for this reason that God was so attracted to that generation of youngsters who left Egypt. Freedom, real freedom, was what they dreamt of in Egypt- and they got it! The youth of the world has ideals which it can never realize. Over the hill of 30, very few care for the ideals of their student days. Yet a truly unique feature of our faith is that as we grow older, the real possibility of realizing our spiritual ideals becomes clearer and clearer. Not for us is the disillusion and vapidness of the world. As the outward man perishes, the inward man is made new- day by day; at times, even hour by hour.

Those young people in the desert were fired up by the word. God's word " *is* truth" - another ultimate ideal. The frequent Biblical association of young men with prophets and the word of God is sure proof that youth *is* the time for truth. The exultant flame of the well trained mind should be set loose on God's word. The word alone can absorb all the rampant intellectuality of youth. Personally grasping its truths for ourselves, as that young generation did, will give us the motivation to hold our head up in a world desperately adrift from its God. Our life now is the antitype of the circular journeys of Israel's wilderness walk. The world sees its' careers as ladders, to be raced up. To us, our work is just that circular walk. The mind of those youngsters was not on the physicalities of that repetitious, aimless wandering. It was fixed upon the true *Hope* of Israel, the words of the Kingdom, the covenant of the fathers. Because of this, they were bound together in true fellowship with Moses (Jesus) and the older Levites, in an intensity which few generations have equalled. Our hope of Israel, coupled with experiencing the crass spiritual indifference of this century, ought to be forging another wilderness generation.

Finally...

When we're young, we dream of success, of 'making it'. But most people don't, and unless they turn to God, they remain trapped within the impossibility of achieving what they dreamed of. And it is common amongst those who rise to the peak of apparent success, that they in turn come to a crisis- they can't forgive themselves for having neglected some inner or spiritual call which they had earlier in life. They left God's call unanswered in earlier life; and now, they perceive that in the end only one thing matters. And they wasted their lives. Youth is the time to get it right, to make the decision for God which in some ways only gets harder the longer life goes on. Of course, at any point in life, no matter what the accumulated ruins of all our errors in judgment and poor decisions, we are never outside the plan of God- we *can* always enter it, providing we live, but it's so much better for our lives if we decide the *only* way right at the start. And somehow, all the rest will fall into place. I met recently two middle aged men. One had been raised knowing Christ, but had endlessly delayed that decision until in practice he just felt he couldn't make it. He felt guilty, guilt was written all over him. The second man was gifted artistically, but had followed a business life, and now looked back in guilt and anger, knowing that his career was over, he couldn't go

back and live life again... it's a fleeting, once-only affair. As someone who, for all my other misjudgments, *did* decide right in my youth, I appeal to you... decide for Him *now*. Not just by getting baptized, but by committing yourself to a life wholly for Him, in Him, because of Him, for His glory... Sense the intensity of the call of Jesus, to take up His cross, to live the crucifixion life. Death is an intense experience. Those who have the chance to draw near to death experience a new scale of values, true values and importances are the ones which abide the sifting out process. And we live as men 'given over to death for Jesus' sake', ever facing the intensity of death, of dying for Him. And this is the paradoxical thing, the difficult thing, for youth- to die when you're young, in a spiritual sense. To give it all for Him. But look at the ages of soldiers who die in combat. So many of them, and often the bravest of them, are youngsters. If they can do it for a worldly wreath, tear stained 50 year old mum and dad standing at the military funeral, and the memories slowly fading away over the next 20 years... surely you can do it for that eternal weight of glory, for the only cause truly worth fighting and dying for?

3-8-1 What Is Conversion?

"When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Lk. 22:32), the Lord told Peter. Yet Peter was converted already! The Lord had spoken of conversion as really seeing, really hearing, really understanding, and commented that the disciples (including Peter) had reached this point (Mt. 13:15,16). But he also told them that they needed to be converted and become as children, knowing they knew nothing as they ought to know (Mt. 18:3). Quite simply, there are different levels of conversion. Baptism isn't conversion: it's a beginning, not an end. Our 'conversion' of people doesn't just mean that we teach them true doctrine and see them baptized; the priests were to 'turn' [s.w. 'convert'] believers away from the life of sin and behind the way of God (Mal. 2:6 LXX, applied to all of us in James 5:19).

The mark of Peter's higher level of conversion was that he would strengthen his brethren. A deep seated care for the spiritual welfare of others, as opposed to simply worrying about our own salvation and the passing problems of daily life, is a sign of true spiritual growth. I would suggest that Peter reached this point of conversion, and began on the work of strengthening his brethren, in the Lord's interview with him in Jn. 21. Three times Jesus asks him: 'do you love me?', and three times he invites Peter to care for the lambs and sheep- to strengthen his brethren. He even asks him whether he really loves Him more than his brethren, as he had once claimed (Mt. 26:33). The triple denial and the triple re-instatement and triple confession of love both occurred by a fire, just to heighten the evident connection (Jn. 21:9). Peter's conversion can therefore be equated with his response to the denials- the repentance, the realisation of his own frailty, and desperate acceptance of the Lord's gracious pardon. Yet Peter invites his fellow elders: "feed the flock of God", repeating the Lord's commission to him, as if he saw in himself a pattern for each man who would take any pastoral role in Christ's ecclesia. The implication is that each man must go through a like conversion. And Peter points out that we are "a royal priesthood", as if he saw each believer as a priest / pastor. We all deny our Lord, camouflage it and justify it as we may. We all stand in Peter's uncomfortable shoes. And thus his conversion becomes a pattern for each of us.

To The Cross

So knowing his condemnation, where did Peter go? What was conversion for him? Probably he could quite easily have also gone and hung himself- for he was of that personality type.

But instead he went to the cross- he was a witness of the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 5:1), and his words and writing consistently reflect the language of Golgotha's awful scene. There, in that personal, hidden observation of the cross, probably disguised in the crowd, not daring to stand with John and the women, his real conversion began. Then his love for his Lord became the more focused. Now he could *do* nothing- and his thinking had been so full of *doing* until that point. All he could do was to watch that death and know his own desperation, and somehow believe in grace. "Who his own self bare our sins in his body up on to the tree" (2:24 RVmg.) suggests the watching Peter reflecting, as the Lord's body was lifted up vertical, that his sins of denial and pride were somehow with his Lord, being lifted up by Him. "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18) could well have been written by Peter with a glance back at the way that after his denials, he the unjust went to the crucifixion scene and reflected just this. And then there was that graciously unrecorded appearing of the risen Lord to Peter (1 Cor. 15:5; Lk. 24:34). These passages suggest that the Lord simply appeared to Him, without words. It was simply the assurance that was there in the look on the face of the Lord. And now, finally, this interview with the Lord, where specific questions were asked.

There are times between parents and children, brothers, sisters (in the ecclesia and in the flesh), boyfriend and girlfriend, newly marrieds, old married couples wedded for a lifetime...when there is a slip by one party. An unusually hard and hurtful word, a sentence quite inappropriately said in public that betrays, that denies. And then a private meeting. The hung head on the one hand, and the soft, sincere, seeking question from the offended party: Do you love me? And the hung head or awkward glance mouths something to the effect that yes, you know that I love you, more now than ever before. All these so human scenes are but dim reflections of the Lord's meeting with Peter. Here was the Son of God, with eyes as a blazing fire, the One who truly knew and discerned all things, and before Him was the Peter who had undoubtedly denied Him, with oath and curses. Surely as he answered the questions, he did so with tears, with a lump in the throat that would have made his voice sound so distorted and childlike. Do you love me? That was the question. Do you love me more than the others? You once thought you did. And finally he has to say from the heart: You (of all men) know all things. You really and truly do. Now Peter knew the truth of the fact that Jesus knows all things and thereby knows what is in men (Jn. 2:25). Some days before, Peter had exclaimed: '*Now* I understand that You know all things!' (Jn. 16:30). But now, he saw that this was but a rung up a ladder. Now he *really did know* that Jesus knew his heart. And with that new level of knowledge he could reason: '...And you know, therefore, that I love you. I can't say to what degree, you can judge that. Now I realise I'm not stronger than my brethren, and I didn't love you as much as I thought. But then, you know all things. And you know that, all the same, I truly love you'. Years later John alludes to this incident, encouraging us that *each of us too* can take comfort from the fact that God knows all things, and if our heart doesn't condemn us, then we can come to Peter's same freedom of conscience with the Lord (1 Jn. 3:20). Peter links conversion with repentance (Acts 3:19; see too Mk. 4:12; James 5:19,20). Although it is graciously unrecorded, it is left unspoken that Peter repented of his denials; and of his self-assurance, and of his feeling better than his brethren, and of so much else...

What Is Conversion?

And this was conversion. There are levels up the ladder, and Peter came to the higher conversion which we must all come to. As he stood with bowed head, converted to a child, knowing his own frailty, knowing the Lord's grace and his love of all the Lord was and is, he

was converted. The Lord *then* could tell him to go on following Him, and to feed His sheep. Now Peter was converted, he could strengthen his brethren. Surely Peter had found the Lord's words strange when he first heard them: "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren". He thought he *was already converted*; he was sure of it. And you and me thought likewise when we rose from the water of baptism. It concerns me, it worries me no end, that in our preaching of the Gospel we can merely be teaching propositional truth- one God, no trinity, baptism by immersion, resurrection, no immortal soul...all of which is quite true and necessary to a true understanding of the Gospel. And our interviewing of candidates ensures that their understanding is in harmony with the statements in the Statement of Faith...and so they are baptized, and go off as many of us did to debate with the likes of JWs and Adventists the truths which they have learnt. But this is not the full message of the Gospel. The full message is life with Christ, with His life as your life, with your heart and soul given over to fellowship with Him in every sense, to the glorification of Yahweh's Name. It means knowing your desperation, bowing with an unpretended shame before His righteousness, coming to a real on-your-knees repentance, and meekly rising up in service to the brotherhood. This was conversion for Peter, and it must be for each of us; and this is the Gospel of power and conviction and repentance we should be preaching. This is what we should seek to elicit from the process of baptismal instruction and interview- not just a checking that someone believes certain propositions which we do. There will be some who in the last day will really think they have misheard: "I never knew you". *Never*. They knew the right propositions, they fought for the preservation of those doctrines, they can say that they "kept" the talent given them (the same word is used about 'keeping' the faith in the pastorals); but they never knew their Lord. And therefore He never knew them. For all their knowledge, they never knew Him (cp. Prov. 4:7). They never bowed before Him. They never muttered to Him in all the awkwardness of a true self-contrition: *You know that I love you*. Have you said those words, and felt them? *Have you wept for your wretched inadequacy*? I hope, earnestly, that each reader has, and does. And if we have, we know what is conversion.

And like Peter we will stand up and quite naturally witness to all "the words of this life", full of God's word (12 out of the 22 verses devoted to Peter's speech in Acts 2 are simply him quoting Scripture), pouring it out to men in the earnest hope that they will share our path of conversion. His preaching and strengthening of his often weak brethren were thus done from a motive of recognising his own failure and experience of grace. When he warns his brethren to not be like they who "*even deny the Lord that bought them*" (2 Pet. 2:1), committing the worst imaginable sin, he was full of reference to his own denying of the Lord. Any tendency to pride in our witness to the world or warning of our brethren will be squashed if our motives are rooted in our own experience of grace. It takes a converted man to convert one; he stood up only a few hundred metres from the spot where he denied his Lord, and appealed to men to *repent* and be *converted* (Acts 3:19)- just as he had done a month or so ago in the same locality. Of course, all Jerusalem would have heard the story of his denials (with some embellishments, we can be sure). No wonder his witness was so credible that his hearers were baptized on the spot. David likewise turned men to God after he himself had turned back to Him in repentance about Bathsheba (Ps. 51:13). And we will only be powerful preachers if we preach likewise.

Peter's conversion was fuelled by his tearful, self-loathing reflection upon the cross. The doctrine of the atonement and the weekly breaking of bread, whether done alone in isolation or in a Christian gathering, is quite rightly at the centre of the Christian faith. The Hebrew and Greek words translated 'convert' mean to turn back or turn to; after each turning away

from God in weakness, however apparently petty, we are converted again. Those who fear Him will live a life of turning back behind Him (Ps. 119:79). Regular, sustained reflection on the cross will play a central role in this. As a result of the Lord being lifted up on the stake, “all the ends of the world shall...turn unto [s.w. ‘convert’] the Lord” (Ps. 22:27). Jn. 12:38-41 draws a parallel between being converted, and understanding the prophecies of the glory of the crucified Christ. To know Him in His time of dying, to see the arm of Yahweh revealed in Him there, is to be converted.

But I must ask: do we *really* repent? Do we even give enough emphasis to it in instruction and interview of candidates for baptism? Do we ourselves allow the power of God’s word, the height of His holiness, to convict us to repentance for failure, great or small, public or private? Or do we just have a vague sense of regret for that snap at your wife, that gross exaggeration, that hiding of your light from the world, that decision to store up for yourself rather than give to the Lord’s cause...and hurry on with the more external affairs of a religious life? We can confuse a desire for change, a fleeting twinge of conscience, with real repentance. “They return, *but not to the most High*” (Hos. 7:16); “If thou wilt return, O Israel, saith the Lord, return *unto me*” (Jer. 4:1)- they had the sense that they must turn away from the way they were in, but this wasn’t necessarily the same as turning back behind the Lord. The Lord taught, in His demanding way: “If any man will come after me [s.w. ‘be converted’, turn again after me], let him *take up the cross* and follow [s.w. ‘come after’] me” (Mt. 16:24). He clearly understood that we can follow Him, turn behind Him, be converted to Him, but on a surface level only. If we will really follow, it is a matter of taking up the cross, daily. Many readers of these words will have been baptized a relatively short time. Don’t rest where you are, and don’t think you will be left by the Lord where you are, either. Before you lies the life of conversion, of the Truth meaning more and more; all of us have many a level to rise up yet.

Job’s Conversion

Job began a converted man: just and upright, in God’s own estimation. But he is converted through the slander and betrayal of his friends, through his illness, through deep spiritual depression, and thereby led to an altogether higher level. A feature of Job’s conversion was that he was convicted of his own sinfulness, and then he makes some brief statement to Yahweh (uttered surely in the same spirit as Peter’s), and like Peter manifests all this in ‘strengthening his brethren’ by praying for them. In his brief, staccato statements at the end, he basically repeats facts that he has already earlier stated in the book- but this time, he speaks them with a full understanding of their real import. The links are masked in the translations, but use of the concordance shows that he is using the same Hebrew words that he has uttered some hours or days ago in the speeches:

“I am *vile*” = 3:1; 7:6; 9:25.

“What shall I *answer* thee?” = 31:14; 11:10; 23:13

“I know that thou canst do everything” = very commonly stated by Job. Elihu, speaking on God’s behalf, pointed out that Job lacked real understanding that “God is greater than men” (23:12). Yet Job had so often stated this! Elihu’s speeches and God’s display of power convicted Job of a true understanding of God’s highness and his lowness.

“Things *too wonderful* for me” to understand = 9:10; 10:16

“I have *heard of thee* by the hearing of the ear” = 13:1;

“And repent *in dust and ashes*” = 7:5; 16:15; 30:19. What he did at the beginning, sitting in dust and ashes in sorrow for himself (2:80), he now did in willing self-abnegation on realising his moral frailty and God’s holiness.

There are some further examples of where Job at the end re-states his basic principles, even though there were times in the book where he had contradicted them. But now, in final conversion, he recognised that the principles he had once known, and yet doubted at times, were the ones firmly etched in his consciousness. In deep reality he accepted ‘the truth’ in his innermost being. One example. Job said at the end: “Therefore have *I uttered* that *I understood not*”. But he said this in his earlier words (9:11; 23:8; 26:14); and yet at that same time he also sometimes says that he spoke what he *did* understand (13:1; 23:5). He came at the end to recognise in a brutal, self-crushing finality that actually, he spoke what he didn’t understand- and he meant those words. The truth of them was engraved upon his heart. Other examples include:

“I will *proceed* no further” = 20:9. But he did: 27:1; 29:1

“*I know* that...*no thought can be withholden* from thee” = 10:13; 13:23 but Job also felt God didn’t know all (22:13; 31:6).

“But now mine eye *seeth* thee” = 13:1; but he said he didn’t see God (9:11; 23:9)

“I *abhor* myself” = 7:5,16; 9:21 (s.w.); but he objected to being abhorred (10:3; 19:18).

One aspect of conversion, therefore, is that the basic doctrine and precepts which we learnt before baptism takes on an altogether more powerful compulsion as we ‘convert’ over the years (which is why we must teach them thoroughly before baptism). If you are in isolation or without the opportunity for doctrinal discussion with others, make it your business to re-read a statement of basic doctrine on a regular basis...and reflect on what these basic principles *mean* in daily living.

Humbled Preachers

Like Elijah and like Peter, Job’s conversion included a deep recognition that he was not better than his weaker brethren. And on that basis he was able to pray for them, preach to them, strengthen them and somehow win them salvation. He prayed for God to forgive them of words they shouldn’t have said. But first of all, he recognised that what they had done, he had also done. Elihu, on God’s behalf, says that Job has spoken wrongly (33:6-12; 35:2). Job is commended for speaking that which was ‘prepared’ (this is the usual translation of the Hebrew in 42:7); his few brief words of repentance were wrung from the heart, they were a prepared statement, in response to God’s request that Job make a ‘declaration’ (42:4). And because of this, he was able to pray for God to forgive the others who had not repented with such a prepared and heartfelt declaration “as my servant Job hath”. So like Peter, like Paul, like David, he interceded for others from a motivation deep rooted in his own experience of forgiveness. Job’s confession of repentance, like Peter’s, is studded with recognition that he was no better than his weaker brethren. “I will lay mine hand upon my mouth”, he says, which is exactly what the friends did (21:5; 29:9). He realized he too had spoken inappropriately, but because of this recognition he was asked to pray for forgiveness for them

for their words. Confessing his own failure in speaking unwisely was the basis for his prayer for others to be forgiven for the same sin. “Once have I spoken”, but I will speak no more (40:5), Job mutters from the heart: just as the friends likewise ceased speaking (32:16). He had considered them vile (18:3)- but now he realized how he was (40:4). He had said he knew the friends’ thoughts and devices (21:27)- now he recognised that God knows his (42:2 s.w.). He had accused them of uttering what they didn’t understand (26:4)- now he admits he had done the same (42:3). May we, in our witness to the world and in our efforts to stimulate our weaker brethren, recognise *from the heart* as Elijah did: that we of ourselves are no better than our fathers, or the men we preach to and plead with. We have been called to know the grace that saves, and in that knowledge we go forth with a humbled but insistent, compelling and converting witness.

Conversion Is Radical

Peter and Job came to crisis points at which they made major paradigm shifts, and were ‘converted’. Our experience may not be so intense, it may take a longer period of time, but nevertheless, the change in outlook is no less drastic. And there is a logic to wholehearted, unreserved conversion. Now, we must *turn unto* [s.w. ‘convert to’] God, “for in that day every man shall *cast away* [turn back, ‘convert’] his idols of silver and his idols of gold” (Is. 31:6,7). In the day of final judgment, the rejected will go through the conversion scenario- of throwing away the things of this world, the pomp and the power and the pride of this petty life, and turning unto the things of God. But then, in the finest and acutest tragedy of the whole human experience, it will be all too late. *We must all go through the conversion process*: either now, or in the rejection experience of the judgment. Please, think this one through. *Feel and know* the logic of devotion and conversion. The ecclesia in the wilderness were ‘types of us’. They were rejected from entry into the Kingdom; and when that finally sunk in, they “returned [s.w. convert, turn back] and wept before the Lord; but the Lord would not hearken to your voice” (Dt. 1:45). The rejected will “return [s.w. convert] at evening: they make a noise like a dog [whining for acceptance], and go round about the city [cp. the foolish virgins knocking on the closed door]” (Ps. 59:6,14). “Return [s.w. ‘convert’] unto me...saith the Lord of Hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?...in that day [of judgment] when I make up my jewels...*then* shall ye *return* [‘convert’], and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not” (Mal. 3:7,18). I suggest this last verse is talking to the same group of people (“ye”) as the earlier verse- i.e., the rejected. *Then* they will go through the sensation of conversion, realising with crystal clarity the separation between the ways of the flesh and spirit which they ought to have grasped in their day of opportunity. Then they will “discern”, just as Christ will “appear” [s.w. ‘discern’] at the judgment; they will then see things through His eyes, from the perspective which He will have at the judgment (Mal. 3:2). Malachi begins by saying that at the day of judgment, Edom’s eyes “shall *see* [s.w. ‘discern’], and ye shall say, the Lord will be magnified” (Mal. 1:5)- although they refused to make this recognition now. Then the rejected will liken the Kingdom unto ten virgins...(Mt. 25:1). This crucial understanding, this eagerness for conversion, must be gone through by all the responsible. Brethren, sisters: go through it now, for your Lord’s sake, for the sake of Yahweh’s Name, and quite simply, on the lowest level: for your own sake.

3-8-2 Converting The Converted

People learn the Truth, they are baptized, they are born again, and they begin spiritual life in some kind of contact with others who have been living the new life for years. For those

without a Christian background, the feeling soon arises that things are not as they should be within this community they have joined; there is a sense that the fire which burns in *their* heart does not burn so strongly in the rest of the community they have joined. This is an extremely common feeling amongst newly baptized members, and I want to discuss it. It is in a way related to another problem which is faced by those brought up in the Faith: the problem that they don't feel like a convert, they only feel that in some ways they are living out parental and community expectation. From whatever background we came to the Faith, let's try not to bleat on about " Christians this, that...they don't..." ; for you yourself are a Christian! We're all in the one body together. And also, remember that if the Lord tarries, twenty years down the road the new converts will probably be saying the same about you.

The majority of our Community were brought up in an environment which breathed the doctrines of the Truth. Social friendships, relatives, the reading matter lying around the family home, girlfriends, husbands...*everything* breathed Christianity. Of course, this is just as things *should* be. But inevitably, after two or three generations of it, there are going to be problems. No wonder some psychologists have a field day with us! Some of them would look at us as people unable to really relate to the rest of the world, ignorant of what makes others tick, fearfully defensive and self-justifying, subconsciously living out parental expectations, hopelessly codependent...and getting *worse and worse* in all these ways.

It would be a blind believer who shrugged all this off as pure libel (" We must expect such persecution, brethren!"). We must know that *elements* of this are true. Ask why it is that totally fresh converts to well-established churches increasingly don't seem to fit in, and you'll see a lot of head scratching. Suggest we go out door to door instead of bashing bills (and skating back down the path), and you'll have a church riot on your hands. The fact is, we find it increasingly difficult to relate to those we rub shoulders with in life.

Doctrine In Practice

Another aspect of the problem is the frightening lack of appreciation many seem to have of the basic doctrines of the Gospel. Do we *know* the Father and the Son? Do we relate with the Son, as we do with the Father (Jn. 5:23)? Are our prayers just words, or part of a real two-way relationship with God? Is our Bible reading God speaking to us, or just running our eyes over black print on white paper? When we pray, is it just one part of our brain talking to another part, a black box we call 'God'?

Israel's Indolence

Ours is not a new problem. Much of Scripture is concerned with how Israel fought- and largely lost- this battle with familiarity breeding contempt. They too clung on to their faith in God, and made some half-hearted testimony of it to the surrounding world. Yet the reality of their relationship with God slipped right away from them. Deep inside them, they felt that God was somehow in limbo; some day He would be an active God, but not now (Zeph. 1:5,12). " You only have I known, of all the families of the earth" , God encouraged them. Their response to this was two-fold. Some of them reacted right against it, by mixing with those other " families of the earth" as thoroughly as they knew how. Others went the other way; they cut themselves off from the world, revelling in their own traditions and the world's persecution of them, cocooning their children, defending their religion to the point that they became aggressive towards any who did not share their views- even within Jewry. The new Israel are faced with the same temptations.

Born Again

But there *is* a solution. Baptism into the Gospel of Christ creates a new man; it doesn't just ease the conscience of the Christian child. It is a new birth. We must perceive ourselves as being the new man inside us. Paul spoke of his new man as " I myself" (Rom. 7:25). The real spiritual 'us' is *totally* free from all the things the psychologists accuse us of suffering from: subconscious living out of parental expectation, peer pressure, self-perpetuation instinct. 'I'm being baptized into Christ, not a church, aren't I...?', I was nervously quizzed after one recent baptismal interview in Eastern Europe. Yes, absolutely! Whilst we *are* eternally grateful to those who taught us the doctrines of Truth, the *effect* of those doctrines should make us " free indeed" , with a freedom which the world cannot begin to imagine (Jn. 8:36). Our faith is a *relationship* with God, not a 'religion'. I has been pointed out that Jesus went out of His way not to found a religion; He gave no rituals, no special terminology. It was more of a personality cult based upon His own devotion to the spirituality of the Father; a movement to be followed first and foremost by individuals, whose only basis for collective gathering and existence was in order to articulate the love and grace which they had experienced. Our reward will be " a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it" (Rev. 2:17); our relationship with God now, *and* in the Kingdom, will in some ways be totally personal [\(1\)](#). Tragically, some who have realized the need for this relationship-based approach to our Faith have apparently not found it in our own community. They have therefore been attracted to other communities which have such an approach, but who lack the doctrinal basics which are the pre-requisite to any relationship with the Father and Son. Herein lies our challenge. *We* have those doctrinal basics. What we must do is dynamically *apply* them in our relationship with God.

"Awake!"

If we are properly converted, we ought to live in the same " newness of life" which we see in those who find the pearl of great price without a Christian background. Our ecclesias should have that spirit of urgency and spiritual reality seen in new ecclesias in the mission field. If at our 'conversion' and baptism we *didn't* feel like the man who suddenly finds treasure in a field, or the sparkling pearl of his dreams, if we don't feel Christ *living* in us, if we don't feel there is a two-way communication between us and God...perhaps we need another conversion. Not another baptism; but an awakening of the new man which was born again then, and has perhaps been lying dormant. Remember that there were some who believed in the first century, who were told by the Lord Himself that if they continued in His word, then they would be His disciples indeed, " and ye shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:31,32). 'Knowing the Truth' isn't just at our conversion and baptism. There are some stages more in 'knowing the Truth' and really becoming His " disciples indeed" . At baptism, we were " quickened together with Christ" (Col. 2:13). But Paul wrote to the baptized saints at Ephesus: " Awake thou that sleepest, and Christ shall give thee light" (Eph. 5:14). It is thought that Paul is quoting here from a first century baptism hymn; he is encouraging them to be as it were baptized again, spiritually, in coming to life in Christ. Note that the Ephesians were active in the outward work of the Truth (Rev. 2:2,3); but their real spiritual man was asleep.

Most of us can look back and recognize at least one re-conversion in our lives. If it has happened once, it can happen again. The natural man may complain that our spiritual life is sterile, based around a humdrum repetition of mental and behavioural constructs. Yet we must remember that around the corner may lie a completely new spiritual horizon; not a new

faith, in doctrinal terms, let it be stressed. But a dynamically new relationship with God and His Son, the characteristics of which we cannot begin to imagine now- a new paradigm in some elements of our daily walk ⁽²⁾.

Harry, Job, Peter, Ephesus

We will not be the first to be 're-converted' after baptism. Many can testify to how they woke up spiritually quite some time after baptism. Harry Whittaker in *Letters To George And Jenny* relates how he bitterly reacted to his Christian background. The result: his re-conversion, to become (my words now!) Bible student and missionary *extraordinaire* of the 1900s. And Job came to realize: " I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear (as many of us did in cosy ecclesial halls); but now mine eye seeth Thee" (Job 42:5). To see God was something which Job, living in patriarchal times, must have previously thought impossible (Ex. 33:20); but now he had reached a new paradigm. Before his re-conversion, Job was aware of the basic tenets of the One Faith, e.g. resurrection and judgment at the last day. His belief that there was a reward for righteousness led him to puzzle over why he certainly wasn't receiving it in this life. As his intellectual and physical agony increased, he was driven to grasp hold of the reality of those basic doctrines which he was already aware of. There really *would* be a judgment, an open manifestation of God's justice on earth, and the open relationship with God which his soul longed for. Living broadly contemporary with Abraham, he would have been aware of his description of himself as merely dust and ashes (Gen. 18:27). Yet Job was brought to realize that "I am become like dust and ashes" (Job 30:19). He always had been; but now he realized the desperation inherent in his nature. He clothes himself in ashes to mourn his material losses at the beginning of the book; but at the end, he does this again, as a sign of his repentance for his general sinfulness and weakness.

Or take Peter. He must have seemed a good convert, in many ways. But for him, the true meaning of *agape* love was unknown. " When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" , Christ challenged him. He had to be re-converted, to know the love of Christ that passes human knowledge. And then- " strengthen thy brethren" . The re-converted person will inevitably and unconsciously communicate their 'knowing' of Christ to others. We can " convert" our brethren within the ecclesia (James 5:20). This is but one example of the language of preaching being used about our 'preaching' of the word to those within the ecclesia ⁽³⁾.

Or the believers at Ephesus. " Many that were now believers" there (RSV) " came and confessed and shewed their deeds. Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men...so mightily grew the word of God, and prevailed" (Acts 19:18,19). The language here seems to be intended to connect with the description of baptism in Mt. 3:6, where converts confessed and shewed their deeds *at baptism*. The way the Ephesians made their statement " before all men" again recalls the concept of baptism as a public declaration. Yet the Ephesians did all this *after* they had believed. It would seem that we are being invited to consider this as a re-conversion, a step up the ladder. The context is significant. Some who had pretended to be believers and to have the Holy Spirit are revealed for who they are: " they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this was known to all...dwelling at Ephesus. And fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified" . The fact that the Lord Jesus is so essentially demanding, the way in which ultimately He will judge insincere profession of His Name- this motivated the new Ephesian converts to take their relationship with Him seriously (compare

how the Lord's slaying of Ananias and Sapphira also inspired a great desire to associate with Him, Acts 5:11-14).

The gradient of our spiritual growth curve will not be even. We may go through several conversions, as rungs up a ladder, in the course of our spiritual life. They may be occasioned by intense physical trial, as in Job's case, or by reflection on our sinfulness, as for Peter and David. The fact we still have rungs of the ladder to ascend does not mean that we are necessarily sinful, or displeasing to God. After all, a Father isn't angry with his child for only being 5 years old. Lack of growth is a cause for *concern*, not anger.

Even Christ...

Our Lord Jesus seems to have gone through stages of progressive humbling of himself, rungs up (down) the ladder, before He was *made* perfect (complete) by His sufferings (Heb. 2:10): Christ

1. " Made himself of no reputation, and
2. took upon Him the form of a servant, and
3. was made (Gk. 'made himself') in the likeness of men: and...
4. He humbled himself, and
5. *became* obedient unto death" (Phil. 2:7,8).

The repeated use of the word " and" seems to imply a series of stages. In our Lord's progression towards that ultimate height, of laying down his life for others, we see our ultimate prototype. He stepped progressively downwards in the flesh, that He might climb upwards in the Spirit. This is why we remember His death upon the cross in this bread and wine. As He hung there, He was the summation of all the spiritual growth that had occurred in His life.

The Conversion Of Christ

It seems to me that so often in His teaching, the Lord was speaking to and about Himself. We understand from Phil. 2:8 that on the cross, the Lord "humbled himself". He used just those words in speaking of how the greatest in the Kingdom, the one who would be the most highly exalted (and He surely had Himself in view) was the one who would be the most servile in this life. His references to *becoming* as a servant He therefore spoke partly as exhortation to Himself (Mt. 18:4; 23:12; Lk. 14:11; 18:14). The Mt. 18:4 reference speaks of humbling oneself in terms of being converted and becoming like a little child. This was lived out by the Lord in His life and ultimately in His acceptance of the death of the cross. Yet this is what "conversion" is essentially about. In the same way as the Lord Jesus Himself had to be "converted" even at the very end of His life, to accept the awfulness of the crucifixion with an almost child-like simplicity (in some ways- e.g. His silence when surrounded by evil accusers, just like "the child in the midst"), so we too will pass through stages of 'conversion'. Note in passing that the same idea of the humble being exalted is used by the Lord in Lk. 18:14 with reference to how the humble man recognizes His own sinfulness. Whilst the Lord

was sinless, perhaps part of His humiliation and taking on a servant-form involved His acceptance of the full horror of sin, and His willingness to bear it for our sakes.

There are certain similarities between the cross and the judgment seat, which we will not detail now. When we meet Christ then, the summation of our spiritual lives will be presented before God. If we are trusting in our own strength, that thought should worry us. Our own strivings and development are just inadequate. We *could* have done more, and better. We know that the weakness of our own natures is not a good enough excuse for our lack of development, our spiritual laziness. For that is what it is. The only way out is through Christ. We are really *in* Him, God looks at us as if we are as perfect, as spiritually developed and completed, as the Lord Jesus. As the bread and wine becomes part of us, Christ really is *in* us, and we *in* Him. The end result of all His spiritual development, His uphill struggles, is now truly shared with us. In the great day of account, that is how God will look upon us; as sharing the spiritual maturity and perfection, in every sense, of that Man who lived and died for us.

And so in the end, our baptisms were but a beginning. A very small one at that. James and John thought they could live the life of identity with Christ and deserve a great reward in the end. But the Lord asked them if they could *really* be baptized with His baptism. They had, presumably, been baptized by John already. But He tells them that the essential baptism is the life of painful identity with Him. And He tells them that He Himself, who had been baptized in water, had a baptism to be baptized with, that pained Him till it be realized. There is water baptism, and then there is the life of baptism, of dying daily with the Lord, as Paul put it. It may be that this is the simple meaning of the difference between birth / baptism of water and birth / baptism of the Spirit. The literal baptism must be followed by the spiritual baptism, i.e. the life of identification with the death and victory of the Lord in whom we live and move and have our spiritual being.

Notes

(1) Compare the engraving on the stone "which no man knoweth" with the Urim and Thummim stones; the engraving upon them would not have been known to anyone except the High Priest, who perhaps saw them once per year in the Most Holy. Rev. 2:17 earlier speaks of the "hidden manna", hidden in the Most Holy. It would fit the context if the "white stone" refers to the Urim and Thummim. Alternatively, the reference may be to the "white stone" of the tables of the covenant. The new name written upon them would then connect with the covenant which God writes on the believer's heart as part of the new covenant: "I will put my law in their inward (cp. "hidden") parts, and write it on their hearts" (Jer. 31:33; 2 Cor. 3:3). Whilst the terms of the covenant are the same for each believer, the personal promise of the Kingdom is something which no other person can enter into. So we should *never* be 'bored' with hearing talks about the basic Gospel, the promises which comprise that covenant.

(2) A 'paradigm' refers to a way of understanding and approach which is exclusive of other paradigms. In passing, honest philosophers of science admit that the evolutionist paradigm could just as easily be overthrown by the Creationist.

(3) For more examples of this, see *James* p.131.

Related Study: [The Personal Lord.](#)

3.9 Sin Is Serious

For those living in an ecclesial environment, it is inevitable that over a period of time, we will be inclined to adapt our view of God, His Truth and our commitment to it, of right and wrong, to the general consensus view held by the brethren and sisters with whom we regularly meet. The spiritual environment in which we live will tend to affect us, and affect

our personal growth in understanding of our Heavenly Father. Our judging of issues becomes a function not only of our personal, prayerful study of the word, and the personal revelation of it's truths which the Lord grants us, but also of the consensus opinion in the ecclesia which surrounds us. It would be as well to point out this tendency to the newly baptized, and encourage them to read and *study* the word for themselves *daily*, always.

We all know- or we ought to by now- that our moral judgment is inevitably incorrect. Things we feel are very wrong may not be seen in the same way by God, and things we see little harm in may be gross in His sight. Because of this, it is almost certain that our perception of how God will judge us at the judgment is not totally correct. Think of how Israel so loved the temple and God's law; and yet in effect they defiled that temple just as much as the Babylonian invasion did (Ezekiel often makes this point); and they " cast away the law of the Lord of Hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel" (Is. 5:24). I want to consider a number of examples of where God's attitude to sinfulness is somewhat different to our own.

On a personal level, we tend to think that we are only guilty for what we actually do. Yet the theology of the N.T. implies that in AD33, at the time of the Lord's death, we were seen as " sinners" (Rom. 5:8); we were forgiven for the quarrel that we had with Him (Col. 3:13 implies); " we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God..." , even though at that time He was dying for our sins (Is. 53:4,5). These are just some examples of many, where sinfulness is attached to us personally apart from the things which we now do wrong. Sin is serious. Another example of this occurs in the fact that the last generation of Israel were judged for their sins not because they had sinned more than any other generation, but because the collective, unforgiven sin of Israel had accumulated with God to such an extent that His judgments fell (2 Kings 17:2,13-18; Ez. 9:9). God is not passive and overlooking of unrepented sin, even though His patience and the high threshold level He sets before releasing judgment may make it look like this. The Amorites were likewise only judged once the cup of their iniquities reached a certain level (Gen. 15:16). Herod " added yet this above all, that he shut up John in prison" (Lk. 3:20), as if God was keeping a cumulative record of one man's sinfulness, without apparently showing this. We tend to think that God ignores the sin of such pagans; but not so. He even saw the people of Jericho as " them that believed not" , just as the people of Israel are described (Heb. 11:31; 3:18). The sensitivity of God to pagan sin, whether or not He raises them to account at the last day, is far higher than we would think. He even notices " the eye that mocketh at his father" (Prov. 30:17); even body language is analyzed by Him, as are our unconscious thoughts as we sleep (Ps. 17:3). And His sensitivity to our failures, as those responsible to Him, is even greater. The responsible who are rejected at the judgment will be characterized by " murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters" (Rev. 21:8). I wonder how many of them will have literally done those things. Surely it is more reasonable to suppose that this is how their other deeds and attitudes were counted in God's sight.

I don't want to make a theological treatise on the nature and seriousness of sin; but the more you realize it, the deeper our sense of grateful response and the finer our appreciation of the *extent* of our great salvation. This sense is also heightened by a realization that sins of omission are reckoned to us as much as sins of commission. Thus the Lord Jesus saw as parallel the commands to honour parents and also not to curse them. These two separate commands (from Ex. 20:12 and 21:17) He spoke of as only one: " *the* commandment" (Mk. 7:9). He therefore saw that not to honour parents was effectively to curse them (Mk. 7:10). *Omitting* to honour parents, even if it involved appearing to give one's labour to God's temple, was therefore the same as *committing* the sin of cursing them. To just have an attitude

that we haven't sinned, is read by God as stating that He is a liar (1 Jn. 1:10)- even though we would never dream of saying this. And similar examples could be multiplied.

New Testament Ecclesias: Corinth

But we want to concentrate on our perception of sin in an ecclesial context. Think of the Corinth ecclesia. They had cases of gross immorality, even incest; some got drunk at the memorial meeting, and some even denied Christ's resurrection. There can be no question that such belief and practice was not ultimately tolerated either by Paul or God. Yet notice the first thing which the Spirit 'takes up' with Corinth. It wasn't any of these more obvious things. It was the fact there was a spirit of factionism within the ecclesia. Paul repeats this emphasis in 1 Cor. 11:18, where in the context of rebuking them for drunkenness at the memorial meeting, Paul emphasizes that *first of all* (i.e. most importantly, Gk.), there are divisions among them (1 Cor. 11:18). This is also what the epistles conclude with (2 Cor. 13:11); Paul doesn't tell them 'Now don't forget what I said about adultery and having concord with Belial'. Instead: " Finally, brethren...be of one mind, live in peace" . Likewise Gal. 5:20,21 lists anger and divisiveness along with adultery and witchcraft- as all being sins which will exclude from the Kingdom. Indeed, the list in Gal. 5:19,20 seems to be in progressive order, as if one sin leads to another, and the final folly is division between brethren. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that divisions in the sense of separation from error are *always* wrong. But a spirit of jealous factionism most certainly is.

Ephesus

The Lord Jesus had " somewhat against" six of the seven ecclesias in the Lycus valley. He had " somewhat against" one ecclesia because they allowed prostitution to go on within the ecclesia. But exactly the same rubric is used in the letter to Ephesus; Christ had " somewhat against" them because they had left their first *agape*, they no longer had a spirit of true love within the ecclesia as they once did- even though they were full of zeal in other ways. The similarity of the rubric is surely intended to teach us that lack of true love is just as obnoxious to the Lord Jesus as those other sins which appear so much bigger in human eyes. Indeed, sin is serious, in all its guises.

Old Testament Israel

Many of the prophets' criticisms of Israel's behaviour were in terms which the people would have laughed off as extreme. Thus Ezekiel (16:33) described their giving of money to neighbouring kings to provide mercenaries to fight for them as them being a desperate whore who was so crazy for contact with men that she even gave money to them rather than vice versa. But this was how seriously God saw the sin of their behaviour. In Malachi's time, Israel had greatly slacked in keeping the Law: " What a weariness is it!" , they grumbled to each other. They divorced faithful wives so they could marry Gentiles, they practised sorcery and sexual perversion (Mal. 2:14-16; 3:5). But the *first* problem which the Spirit addresses is their lack of appreciation that God really did love them deeply (Mal. 1:2).

Isaiah's prophecy is another albeit more extended example. Israel had lost their hold on true doctrine, many scarcely knew the Law (Is. 57:4,5; 59:3). They got drunk at the temple feasts (36:10-12; 58:3,4), like Corinth they had an " eat, drink, for tomorrow we die" mentality (22:12,13); they committed all manner of sexual perversions, along with almost every other form of doctrinal and moral apostasy (5:11-13,24; 8:19; 9:15; 22:12,13; 24:5; 27:11; 28:7;

30:10; 31:6; 44:8-20; consider the similarities with Corinth). This list is worth reading through. And consider the terrible implications of their perversion in 66:17. But the early chapters of Isaiah sternly rebuke Israel for their *pride*- there is not a whisper of all these other things until later (2:11-22; 3:16-20; 5:15; 9:9). And even throughout the later rebukes, there is the repeated criticism of their pride (13:11; 16:6; 23:9; 24:4; 25:11; 26:5; 28:1,3,14; 29:4; 30:25; 50:33; 57:15). This is why Isaiah's prophecies of Christ stress His humility (Acts 8:33), and the "lofty", "high", "exaltation" of God. These words, common in Isaiah, are those translated "pride" in Isaiah's condemnations of Israel's arrogance; as if to say that *God* was the only one who could be 'proud'.

Will We Learn?

Now we really ought to be learning from all this. Divisiveness, not bothering to appreciate God's great love towards us, lacking a true love and humility etc. are all as fundamentally evil as the apparently grosser sins which Scripture rebukes. Consider those things which Israel and the New Testament ecclesia were guilty of: prostitution, drunkenness at religious meetings, incest, the perversions of idolatry etc. These are all things which strike many in the world as wrong; and therefore we too react in the same way. Yet a bit of pride, being unmoved by the love of God, a church splitting into factions- the world doesn't see *those* things as very serious. Our problem, both collectively and individually, is that what seems wrong to the world seems wrong to us, and *what they tend to ignore we tend to minimize*. Yet sin is serious.

Will I Learn?

But there is another, similar problem. What seems (or has seemed) acceptable to other believers may seem acceptable to us: our sense of right and wrong is influenced by the perspective of our community. To give a personal example. I'm aware of (at least!) two commandments concerning sisters:

- 1) They should cover their heads at ecclesial meetings;
- 2) They should not smother themselves in "outward adorning".

If a sister sat down to break bread one Sunday without a hat, I would react strongly- far more strongly than if she came wearing a hat but caked with cosmetics. Why? Both those commands are categorically stated, both are based on Old Testament typology. I react to the breaking of 1) more strongly simply because our community has chosen to emphasize that rather than the equally important 2). I'm not right in this. The word alone should form our perception of sin and righteousness, not our spiritual background.

If we are doctrinally or morally apostate, our salvation is in question. There is therefore, quite rightly, an outcry at any move towards apostasy in these areas. But these other things, the things which our background both in the world and even in the Christian community tends to minimize, we don't react so strongly to. It may really be that we are placing our salvation on the line by being (e.g.) proud and factious, by being unmoved by the love of God, just as much as we would be if we turned away doctrinally or morally. To do anything, *anything* that handles our salvation lightly is logically crazy. We mustn't let the moral judgment of the world or even Christians influence our sense of right and wrong. Increasingly, "this present evil world" cannot tell right from wrong. If we continue to be influenced by their attitudes,

this is where we will end up. If, by contrast, we are daily studying the word, we really *can* find the correct sense of balance and awareness of sin's seriousness. We will see sin and righteousness in their Divine context and perspective. We will personally grasp the implications of the Lord's arresting statements concerning His perception of sin: that, e.g., just an angry thought is enough to be dragged along to the local court for. Then we will find the basis for a true appreciation of our sinfulness, and thereby God's grace. We will marvel the more deeply that He has blessed us when we railed at Him (1 Pet. 3:9), even though that may not be how we see our apathy towards Him (cp. how sin is likened to violence in Is. 53:9 cp. 1 Pet. 2:22). Idolatrous Israel never *consciously* tried to provoke Yahweh to anger with their apostasy; the words of the prophets must have seemed to them a gross exaggeration. But this was really how God saw it (2 Chron. 34:25). We are only forgiven on account of the fact we truly sorrow for our sins, knowing them as our own sore and our own grief (2 Chron. 6:29,30). The Lord carried our sorrows, i.e. our sins. It is only *these* sins, for which we have sorrowed, that He carried. *This* is why we need to appreciate that sin is serious. We can be active *enemies* of the Lord's cross (Phil. 3:18) unless we carry it, no matter how soporific and unaggressive our lifestyles may be.

But this appreciation of sin's ultimate seriousness will not come overnight. Giants like Paul, Job, Jacob and Moses only progressively came to this appreciation (see Study 9). Likewise, the ecclesia of God has had to be taught progressively over time how essentially sinful we are. Eliphaz thought there were only a few very sinful people in the world (Job 15:35); but His words are quoted by the Spirit in Is. 59:4 concerning the whole nation of Israel; and this in turn is quoted in Rom. 3:15-17 concerning the whole human race. This same path of progressive realization of our sinfulness must be trodden by each faithful individual, as well as on a communal level.

Related study: *Our Desperation*.

3.10 Private People: The Problem Of Introverted Christians

Many brethren and sisters struggle with the problem of feeling rejected. It may be that we preached zealously, distributed leaflets, placed advertisements, tutored students, spoke to our family and contacts about the Truth- and ultimately, there was no response. Our efforts were rejected and even mocked. Or it may be that we feel not accepted somehow by our brethren, not understood, not appreciated. This can especially be a problem in small ecclesias of new converts. Our high expectations of our Christian brethren may be dashed by negative experiences with them. Perhaps the thought can even occur to us that they simply don't live the Truth as they should in the small things of life, but it is just pointless to try to correct them. And what seem to us to be their failings can start to irritate us unbearably, until in some way we retreat from them. Or it may be that we have been unfairly rejected on a formal level by the Christians with whom we once associated, even though we know we have not changed our beliefs at all. All these are very real problems which many readers face. Our likely response is not necessarily to question our faith, but rather to become private people; to withdraw onto our own spiritual island, to have responsibility for ourselves alone, to look inwards.

Unfortunately, we live in a world which encourages us to adopt this kind of stance. Sometimes as one stands on a corner distributing leaflets to an endless stream of people, it

seems to me that in essence, their faces all tell the same story: private people, very private, who can't open to anyone. At work people play games to survive and keep their job down; they return to a domestic life usually centred on the television (and this increasingly applies to African family life too, not just European). All attention is there on that box, rather than on inter-personal contact between the family members. And they rise again in the morning to the same old scene. Weekend and holiday relaxation becomes simply a method of letting off nervous stress. 'Entertainment' becomes a tickling of the senses rather than a serious expression of thought. 'Religion' becomes a kind of self-help psychology for the hobbyist, designed to help the private needs of the individual. And thus the art of deep conversation and personal communication- and it is an art- is rapidly being lost. Serious, deep, open-hearted discussion of *anything*, not just religion, is a rarity. The idea of responsibility *for others* goes out of the window- whether for their spiritual needs, or for the need of an elderly woman for some help to climb onto a bus. No wonder relationships of every kind break down all around us. No wonder there are so many introverted Christians.

On a human level, I could answer the feeling of disappointment, rejection and lack of appreciation by saying that generally in every office department, every school or college, every society, every family unit- those who *really* work and sweat themselves are usually unrecognized or treated badly by those they do so much for. But for us who have been eternally redeemed by the outgoing, outflowing love of the Father and Son, redeemed by pure, undeserved *grace*: we are called to not just to do a bit better than our neighbour, not just to grin and bear it and keep on, *but to go right against this tide*, to walk out squarely against that wind. It is not for us to be private people. Whilst holding on to our intensely personal relationship with the Lord who bought us, we are called to be lights in this dark world, to show forth, *time and again*, in the face of every kind of rejection, the constant unselfishness which was epitomized in the cross. John began his Gospel record with this theme clearly in mind: that the glorious light of the Lord's life and character was a solitary light, in the midst of a darkness which although generally uninfluenced by it, was unable to overcome it (Jn. 1:5-9).

But a very few in that darkness *did* receive the light. There are some fine passages in the New Testament which dwell upon the spirit of true service which was shown forth on the cross, both by the Father and Son. There the love that passeth knowledge (Eph. 3:19), love unto the end (Jn. 13:1), greater love than was ever showed (Jn. 15:13), was poured out *and spat upon and rejected and mocked* by those for whom it was shown- for first and foremost, the Lord Jesus died to redeem Israel, those who rejected and slew Him (Gal. 4:5). Our Gentile salvation is only by taking part in the hope and salvation of Israel. And even for those who would ultimately accept the Lord's love, we were then enemies and sinners. God commendeth His love to us (as if He should need to...), in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:8). When we were enemies, we were reconciled by the cross (Rom. 5:10 cp. Eph. 2:12-14).

And those few, those very few, who at the time of the cross claimed to have accepted the Lord- they had forsaken Him and fled. They became introverted Christians. "Ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone" (Jn. 16:32). Each of them ran off to their own little family, to safeguard their own petty little human possessions, and left Him alone; alone, when He most needed some human comfort and compassion, a wave from a friend in the crowd, a few silently mouthed words, a catching of the eye, perhaps even the courtesy of a brief hand-shake or clap on the shoulders before the 11 ran off into the night, the word 'thank-you' called out as He stumbled along the Via Dolorosa. But nothing. They

cleared off, they got out, every man to his own. And the pain of betrayal with a kiss by a man He was gracious enough to think of as His equal, with whom He had shared sweet fellowship (Ps. 55:13,14). And to hear Peter's cursing, perhaps cursing of Him; his denial that he'd ever known the guy from Nazareth. And yet in the face of *all this*, the Lord went on: He laid down His life *for us*, we who betrayed Him, scattered from Him, hated Him, did Him to death in the most degrading and painful way our race knew how. In the face of rejection to the uttermost, He served us to the end, even to death, and even to the death of the cross.

God And The Cross

And it was not only the Lord Jesus who did all this for us, in the face of such rejection and lack of appreciation. There is good reason to understand that in those wretched hours of crucifixion, God was especially manifested to the world. There was a matchless, never to be surpassed partnership between Father and Son in the cross. God was in Christ on the cross, reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5:19). There the Lord Jesus manifested and declared the Father's Name, His essential character, to the full (Jn. 12:28; 13:31,32; 17:5,6,26). The Lord's references to 'going to the Father' referred to His coming crucifixion. In the very moment of His death the observing Centurion gasped, twice: " *Truly* this was the Son of God" (Mk. 15:40; Lk. 23:46). There was something so evidently Godly in that death. God was so near.

There are a number of incidental reasons for seeing the cross as the ultimate manifestation / declaration of God Himself.

- According to some, " Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" written in Hebrew would require the use of words, the first letters of which created the word YHWH. This is why the Jews minded it so strongly when the title was put up. Pilate's retort "What I have written I have written" may well have been an oblique reference to 'I am that I am'. It was his attempt to have the last laugh with the Jews who had manipulated him into crucifying a man against whom there was no real charge. It was as if the Lord suffered as He did with a placard above Him which effectively said: 'This is Yahweh'. The Name was declared there, as the Lord had foreseen (Jn. 17:26). The declaration of Yahweh's Name to Moses in Ex. 34:6 thus becomes a foretaste of the Lord's crucifixion. Some texts render Ex. 34:6 as 'Yahweh, Yahweh, *a man* full of mercy...'. In the crucifixion of the man Christ Jesus, the essence of Yahweh was declared. And we, John says with reference to the cross, saw that glory, as it were cowering in the rock like Moses, *full* of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14 cp. Ex. 34:6 RV).

- The Lord was crucified for blasphemy; this was the charge on which He was found guilty at His trial by the Jews, and the basis upon which they demanded His crucifixion. The Mishnah claims that this was only possible if someone actually used the Yahweh Name. *Sanhedrin* 7.5 outlines the protocol for condemning someone for this, in terms which have accurate correspondence with the Lord's trial: "The blasphemer is not guilty until he have expressly uttered the Name...When the trial is over...the judges stand up and rend their clothes" (quoted in F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 1995 ed., p. 53). So when the Lord responded to their question as to His Messiahship by saying "I am", and went on to appropriate the Messianic words of Dan. 7:13 and Ps. 110:1 to Himself, He must have explicitly used the Yahweh Name about Himself. This is why they were so quick to accuse Him of blasphemy, and why the High Priest rent his clothes. The Lord died because He declared the Yahweh Name, unashamedly, knowing that His declaration of it would take Him to the cross. Our declaration of the essence of Yahweh, by truthfulness, forgiveness...this may cost us, although maybe not

so dearly. Yet we can be inspired by the Lord's example. This also explains why, as suggested above, Pilate tried to have the last laugh over the Jews by writing the Lord's 'crime' over His body in such a way which spelt out the name 'Yahweh'.

- It has been observed that the blood of the Passover Lamb on the lintels of the doors at the Exodus, three sides of a square, would have recalled the Hebrew letter repeated in 'Yahweh', as if His Name was manifested in the blood of the slain lamb.

- Yahweh laid on the Lord the iniquity of us all, as if He was present there when the soldiers laid the cross upon the Lord's shoulders (Is. 53:6).

- Yahweh had prophesied of what He would achieve through the crucified Christ: "I am, I am: He that blots out thy transgressions" (Is. 43:25 LXX). He declares His Name as being supremely demonstrated in His forgiveness of our sins through and in the Lord's cross.

- The LXX uses the word translated "propitiation" in the NT with reference to how God forgave / propitiated for Israel's sins for His Name's sake (Ex. 32:14; Ps. 79:9). That propitiation was only for the sake of the Lord's future death, which would be the propitiation God ultimately accepted. Having no past or future with Him, Yahweh could act as if His Son's death had already occurred. But that death and forgiveness for "His name's sake" were one and the same thing. The Son's death was the expression of the Father's Name.

- There was a Jewish tradition that the only time when the Yahweh Name could be pronounced was by the High Priest, when he sprinkled the blood of Israel's atonement on the altar. The Name was expressed in that blood.

- The Red Heifer was to be slain before the face of the priest, "as he watches" (Num. 19:3-5 NIV), pointing forward to the Lord's slaughter in the personal presence of the Father.

- It seems reasonable to conclude that Isaac was offered on or near the hill of Calvary, one of the hills (Heb.) near Jerusalem, in the ancient "land of Moriah" (cp. 2 Chron. 3:1). The name given to the place, Yahweh-Yireh, means 'in this mount I have seen Yahweh'. The events of the death and resurrection of the Lord which Isaac's experience pointed forward to were therefore the prophesied 'seeing' of Yahweh.

- Paul saw the cross of Christ as parallel with "the things of the Spirit of God", the wisdom of God, what eye has not seen nor ear heard, but what is revealed unto the believer and not to the world (1 Cor. 1:18,23,24; 2:7-13). The cross of Christ was the supreme expression of the Spirit of God, and its true meaning is incomprehensible to the world. In the cross, according to Paul's allusion back to Isaiah, God bowed the Heavens and came down. He did wonderful things which we looked not for. The thick darkness there is to be associated with a theophany presence of God Himself.

- The smitten rock was an evident type of the Lord's smiting on the cross. And yet in Deuteronomy especially it is made clear that Israel were to understand Yahweh as their rock. And yet "that rock was Christ". God Himself said that he would stand upon the rock as it was smitten- presumably fulfilled by the Angel standing or hovering above / upon the rock, while Moses smote it. And yet again it is Yahweh who is described as smiting the rock in Ps. 78 and Is. 48:21. He was with Christ, directly identified with Him, at the very same time as He 'smote' Him.

- Consider the implications of 2 Cor. 5:20: "On behalf of Christ, as though God were intreating by us: we beseech you on behalf of Christ: be ye reconciled to God [because] him who knew no sin he made to be a sin [a sin offering?] on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him". *Because* of the cross, the atonement which God wrought in Christ's offering, we beseech men to be reconciled to God. Appreciating the cross and the nature of the atonement should be the basis of our appeal to men. And indeed, such an appeal is *God* appealing to men and women, in that there on the cross "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself". The blood and spittle covered body of the Lord lifted up was and is the appeal, the *beseeching* of God Himself to men. And this is the message that we are honoured to preach on His behalf; we preach the appeal of God through the cross.

- "Behold, the hour [s.w. "time"] cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me" (Jn. 16:32). The Lord's 'hour' which was to come was His death (Jn. 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 17:1; 19:27). The disciples scattered at the crucifixion, probably they came to see it and then scattered in fear after the first hour or so. But He was not left alone; for the Father was with Him there. Just as John began his Gospel by saying that "the word was with God", with specific reference to the cross (see *The Cross In John's Gospel* for justification of this).

- Both Jew and Gentile were gathered together against the Lord (God) and His Christ on the cross (Acts 4:26). Peter thus makes a connection between the Father and Son on the cross.

- There are several NT passages which make an explicit link between God and Jesus in the context of the salvation of men. Phrases such as "God our Saviour, Jesus..." are relatively common in the pastorals (1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; Tit. 1:3,4; 2:10 cp. 13 and see also Jude 24; 2 Pet. 1:1). These and many other passages quoted by trinitarians evidently don't mean that 'Jesus = God' in the way they take them to mean. But what they *are* saying is that there was an intense unity between the Father and Son in the work of salvation achieved on the cross.

- Just before His death, the Saviour spoke of going to the Father, and coming again in resurrection (Jn. 13:36,37 cp. 14:28; 16:16,17; 17:11). He somehow saw the cross as a being with God, a going to Him there ('going to the Father' in these Johanne passages is hard to apply to His ascent to Heaven after the resurrection). Note in passing that when in this context He speaks of *us* coming to the Father, He refers to our taking up of His cross, and in this coming to the essence of God (Jn. 14:6 cp. 4, 13:36).

- The altar "Jehovah-Nissi" connected Yahweh personally with the pole / standard / ensign of Israel (Ex. 17:15). Yet *nissi* is the Hebrew word used for the pole on which the brass serpent was lifted up, and for the standard pole which would lift up Christ. Somehow Yahweh Himself was essentially connected with the cross of Christ. "There is no God else beside; a just God and a Saviour (Jesus)...look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth" (Is. 45:21,22) is evident allusion to the snake on the pole to which all Israel were bidden look and be saved. And yet that saving symbol of the crucified Jesus is in fact God Himself held up to all men.

- "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19) seems to be a comment on the death, rather than the nature, of the Lord Jesus. It is in the context of the statement that Christ died for all men (2 Cor. 5:14). In that death, God was especially in

Christ. Perhaps it was partly with reference to the cross that the Lord said: "I shall shew you plainly of the Father" (Jn. 16:25).

- The mention that Jesus stood before Pilate "in a place that is called the Pavement" (Jn. 19:13) reminds us of Ex. 24:10, where Yahweh was enthroned in glory on another 'pavement' when the old covenant was made with Israel. The New Covenant was inaugurated with something similar. "In him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9) would have been easily perceived as an allusion to the way that Yahweh Himself as it were dwelt between the cherubim on the mercy seat (2 Kings 19:15; Ps. 80:1). And yet the Lord Jesus in His death was the "[place of] propitiation" (Heb. 2:17), the blood-sprinkled mercy seat. "There I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat...of all things which I will give thee in commandment" (Ex. 25:20-22). In the cross, God met with man and communed with us, commanding us the life we ought to lead through all the unspoken, unarticulated imperatives which there are within the blood of His Son. There in the person of Jesus nailed to the tree do we find the focus of God's glory and self-revelation, and to this place we may come to seek redemption.

- The High Priest on the day of Atonement sprinkled the blood eastwards, on the mercy seat. He would therefore have had to walk round to God's side of the mercy seat and sprinkle the blood back the way he had come. This would have given the picture of the blood coming out from the presence of God Himself; as if *He* was the sacrifice. Acts 20:28 seems to teach (in the AV) that God purchased the church with *His* own blood. His manifestation in His Son was especially intense.

- There are links between the concept of 'truth' and the cross. In Ps. 60:4 God's Truth is displayed on the banner (s.w. "pole", on which the snake was lifted up). John struggled with words, even under inspiration, to get over to us the tremendous truth and reality of what he witnessed at the cross (Jn. 19:35). God is the ultimate Truth, and the cross was the ultimate declaration of His Truth. I would even suggest a chronological progression in Jn. 1:14:

"The word was made flesh" - His birth

"And dwelt among us" - His life

"And we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth" - His death on the cross. Christ's glory is elsewhere used by John with reference to the glory He displayed on the cross (Jn. 12:38-41; 12:28; 13:32; 17:1,5,24). John thus begins his Gospel with the statement that he saw the Lord's death. However, it is also so that John "saw his glory" at the transfiguration; and yet even there, "they saw his glory" (Lk. 9:32) as "they spake of his decease which he should accomplish". His glory and His death were ever linked. The fullness of grace and truth is one of John's many allusions to Moses' experience when the Name was declared to him- of Yahweh, a God *full* of grace and truth (Ex. 34:6 RV). The Name was fully declared, as fully as could be, in the cross. The Law gave way, through the cross, to the grace and truth that was revealed by Christ after the Law ended (Jn. 1:17). In His dead, outspent body grace and truth finally replaced law. John goes on to say that the Son has *declared* the invisible God (Jn. 1:18)- another reference to the cross. The implication may be that as Moses cowered before the glory of the Lord, *even he* exceedingly feared and quaked, we likewise should make an appropriate response to the glory that was *and is* (note John's tenses) displayed to us in the cross.

God Himself

Isa 64:1-4 had foretold: "Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence...For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him". This latter verse is quoted in 1 Cor. 2 about how the "foolishness" of the cross is not accepted by the wise of this world. Only the humble and spiritually perceptive eye of faith realized that there in the naked shame of Golgotha, God Himself had as it were rent the heavens and come down, as all the faithful had somehow, in some sense, foreseen and yearned for. There, in the battered body of Jesus, was God revealed to men.

1 Tim. 3:16 seems to have been a well known confessional formula in the first century church; perhaps it was recited by the candidate in the water before being baptized. It can be read as a chronological description of the Lord's death and resurrection:

1. " God was manifested in the flesh" in the Lord's *crucifixion*, not just His *life*. The manifestation of the Son was supremely in His death (s.w. 1 Jn. 3:5,8; 4:9 cp. Jn. 3:16; Heb. 9:26 Gk.; Jn. 17:6 cp. 26).
2. " Justified in the Spirit" - the resurrection (Rom. 1:4)
3. " Seen of Angels" - at the tomb (Mt. 28:2)
4. 'Preached unto the Gentiles for belief in the world' (Gk.)- cp. Mk. 16:15,16
5. " Received up into glory" - what happened straight after the commission to preach the Gospel world-wide.

This chronological approach suggests that " God was manifest in the flesh" refers to the Father's especial manifestation in His Son's crucified human nature during those hours of final suffering- rather than just to His birth. There on Calvary, Almighty God Himself was supremely revealed. He, *God Himself*, was despised and rejected by men; *His* love and self-sacrifice were so cruelly spurned; *He* was spat upon and made the song of the drunkards (Ps. 69:12).

The crucified Son of God was the full representation of God. The love of Christ was shown in His cross; and through the Spirit's enlightenment we can *know* the height, length, breadth of that love (Eph. 3:18,19). But this passage in Ephesians is building on Job 11:7-9: " Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is high as heaven, what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth and broader than the sea" . The purpose of the connection is to show that through appreciating the love of Christ, unknowable to the unenlightened mind, we see the Almighty unto perfection, in a way which the Old Testament believers were unable to do. It was as high as Heaven, and what could they do? And yet it must be confessed that we do not in practice attain to such fullness of knowledge and vision. We look to the Kingdom, one of the excellencies of which will be the full grasp of the Almighty unto perfection, as manifest in the death of His Son. All we *now* know is that that cross was the fullness of God, it was " the Almighty unto perfection" . But then, we shall know, we shall find it out.

The Form Of God

Philippians 2:6-9 describes the progressive humiliation of the Lord Jesus on the cross (not in His birth, as Trinitarian theology has mistakenly supposed. Note the allusions back to Isaiah 53). *There* He was supremely "in the form of God", but notwithstanding this He took even further the form of a servant. In that blood and spittle covered humility and service, we see the very form and essence of God. My understanding of Phil. 2:8 is that being in the form of God, being the Son of God and having equality with God are parallel statements. The Lord understood being 'equal with God' as some kind of idiom for His Divine Sonship (Jn. 5:18; 10:33; 19:7). He was in God's form, as His Son, and He therefore didn't consider equality with God something to be snatched; He had it already, in that He was the Son of God. In other words, "He considered it not robbery to be equal with God" is to be read as a description of the exaltedness of His position as Son of God; not as meaning that it never even occurred to Him to try to be equal with God. He was equal with God in the sense that He and the Father were one, spiritually, and on account of the fact that Jesus was the begotten Son of the Father.

This interpretation depends upon understanding 'being equal with God' as an idiom for being the Son of God; it doesn't mean that 'Jesus is God' in the Trinitarian sense. There, on the cross, the Lord Jesus was the form of God, equal with God in that sense, the only begotten Son. And yet on the cross His form was marred more than that of any man, He finally had no form that could be desired (Is. 52:14; 53:2). And yet this was the form of God. *He* was contorted and marred more than ever, there was no beauty in *Him* that men should desire Him, in those hours in which His Son suffered there. The Lord Jesus then had the form of God, although in His mind He had taken the form of a servant. The Lord made Himself a servant in His mind; He looked not on His own things, but on those of others (Phil. 2:4,7). This is the context of Philippians 2; that we should have the *mind* of Christ, who disregarded His own status as Son of God and humbled Himself, even to death on the cross ⁽¹⁾, so that we might share His status. His example really is ours, Paul is saying (which precludes this passage describing any 'incarnation' at the birth of Christ). The Lord had spoken about the crucial need for a man to humble himself if he is to be exalted (Lk. 14:11); and this is evidently in Paul's mind when he writes of Christ humbling Himself and then being exalted. He saw that the Lord lived out on the cross what He had asked of us all. If that example must be ours, we can't quit just because we feel rejected and misunderstood and not appreciated by our brethren. *For this is the very essence of the cross we are asked to share.*

The Serving Master

The Lord *taking upon himself* the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7) is to be connected with how at the Last Supper, He *took* (s.w.) a towel and girded Himself for service (Jn. 13:4). He was no introverted Christian. The connection between the Last Supper and Phil. 2, which describes the Lord's death on the cross, would suggest that the Lord's washing the disciples' feet was an epitome of His whole sacrifice on the cross. The passage describing the Last Supper begins with the statement that the Lord "loved us unto the end" (Jn. 13:1). This is an evident description of the cross itself; and yet His service of His followers at the Last Supper was therefore an epitome of the cross. As that Supper was "prepared" (Mt. 26:17,19), so the Lord on the cross "prepared" a place for us in the Kingdom (Jn. 14:1 s.w.). As the observing disciples didn't understand what the Lord was doing by washing their feet, so they didn't understand the way to the cross (Jn. 13:7 cp. 36). There is thus a parallel between the feet washing and His death. But in both cases, the Lord Jesus promised them that there was

coming a time when they would understand His washing of their feet; and then they would know the way to the cross, and follow Him.

John describes the Lord *laying aside* His clothes in order to wash the feet of His followers with the same word he frequently employs to describe how Christ of His own volition *laid down* His life on the cross, as an act of the will (Jn. 10:11,15,17,18); and how later His sacrificed body was *laid aside* (19:41,42; 20:2,13,15). As the Lord laid Himself down for us, epitomized by that deft laying aside of His clothes, so, John reasons, we must likewise purposefully lay down our lives for our brethren (1 Jn. 3:16). As He did at the last supper, so He bids us do for each other. John uses the same word for Christ's "garments" in his records of both the last supper and the crucifixion (13:4,12 cp. 19:23). It could be noted that the man at the supper without garments was seen by the Lord as a symbol of the unworthy (Mt. 22:11 cp. Lk. 14:16,17). He humbled Himself to the level of a sinner; He created the story of the sinful man who could not lift up His eyes to Heaven to illustrate what He meant by a man humbling himself so that he might be exalted (Lk. 18:14). And He humbled Himself (Phil. 2:9), He took upon Himself the form of a servant and of a sinner, both in the last supper and the final crucifixion which it epitomized. As the Lord Jesus laid aside His garments and then washed the disciples' feet with only a towel around His waist, so at the crucifixion He laid aside His clothes and perhaps with a like nakedness, served us unto the end: the betrayers and the indifferent and the cautiously believing alike. Throughout the record of the Last Supper, there is ample evidence on the Lord's awareness of Judas' betrayal (Jn. 13:10,11,18,21,25). The account in 1 Cor. 11:23 likewise stresses how the Supper was performed with the Lord's full awareness of Judas' betrayal. It is perhaps therefore inevitable that we in some ways struggle with the problems of rejection, of betrayal, of being misunderstood and not appreciated by our brethren. For these were all essential parts of the Lord's passion, which He asks us to share with Him.

The Lord Jesus "humbled himself", and was later "highly exalted" (Phil. 2:9), practising His earlier teaching that he who would humble himself and take the lowest seat at the meal would be exalted higher (Mt. 23:11,12; Lk. 14:10,11). The Lord Jesus at the Last Supper humbled Himself from the seat of honour which He had and took not only the lowest seat, but even lower than that: He washed their feet as the servant who didn't even have a place at the meal. And both James and Peter saw the Lord's humbling Himself at that supper and His subsequent exaltation as a direct pattern for us to copy (James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6). Paul takes things one stage even further. He speaks of how he humbled himself, so that *his hopelessly weak and ungrateful brethren* might be exalted (2 Cor. 11:7). He is evidently alluding to the Gospel passages which speak of how we must humble ourselves so that *we* may be exalted (Mt. 23:11,12; Lk. 14:10,11). But Paul sees *his* exaltation, which his humbling would enable, as being identical to *theirs*. He doesn't say: 'I humbled myself so that I may be exalted'. He speaks of how he humbled himself so that *they* might be exalted.

He saw his reward, his eternal destiny, as so intimately bound up with theirs. "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming? For ye are our glory and joy" (1 Thess. 2:19,20; Phil. 4:1). This was why Paul could just not restrain himself any longer when for a time he had no news from the Thessalonians; he so earnestly wanted to know of their spiritual growth (1 Thess. 3:5,6). If they failed to be in the Kingdom, it would be a great personal loss to Paul (1 Cor. 3:11-15); even though he himself would be saved. Thus he feared greatly if his labour for the converts had been in vain (Gal. 2:2; 4:11; Phil. 2:16). Paul looked to that very moment when the sentence of acceptance would be pronounced at the judgment seat; he imagined them being

accepted, and truly felt that they, then, would be *his* crown of reward. They being in the Kingdom was his reward. The Philippians being there would be Paul's eternal joy (Phil. 2:16). Their spiritual strength was all Paul lived for; he lived, if they stood fast (1 Thess. 3:8). If any stumbled from the faith, he felt as if he was already being burned in the symbolic fire of their condemnation; he was weak in the faith if they were (2 Cor. 11:29). John likewise saw a parallel between looking to ourselves and looking to the doctrinal welfare of our converts, as if their reward and ours are bound together (2 Jn. 8 cp. Jn. 15:16). After the pattern of the Reubenites, we have been given the promised rest of the Kingdom here and now (Josh. 1:13 cp. Heb. 4:3); but we will, like them, only take possession of that inheritance after we have ensured that our brethren have received their possession (Josh. 1:15). Josh. 1:13,15 present a paradox: the Reubenites were given their "rest", but they would only get their "rest" once their brethren had. Those Reubenites really were symbols of us: for this passage is surely behind the reasoning of Heb. 4, where *we* are told that *we* have entered into rest, but that we must labour if we want to enter into it.

"If thou forbear to deliver them that are drawn unto death...if thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not...He that keepeth *thy* soul (as you should keep your brother's), doth not he know it? and shall he not (at the judgment seat) render to every man according to his works" for others (Prov. 24:12 cp. Rev. 22:12)? The redemption of our brethren is so tied to our personal redemption. And likewise with the Lord; we cannot separate His salvation, nor His cross and resurrection, from ours. And further, we cannot separate our salvation from that of our brethren. These things all follow from the profound implications of our being part of the one body of Christ. Thus "Christ" is not only the personal title of the Lord Jesus, but also of the whole community of believers who comprise His body (1 Cor. 12:12). To love Christ is therefore to care for His people (Jn. 21:15-17).

If we love the Father, we must love all those whom He has begotten (1 Jn. 5:1,2). We can't be introverted Christians. If we love the children of God, this is the proof that we truly love God. We simply can't claim to love the Father and Son if we have the 'private people' mindset. Cain, the epitome of 'the devil' (Jn. 8:44), was characterized by the attitude that he was not his brother's keeper (Gen. 4:9). It was for this reason that his sacrifice wasn't accepted; it was not impossible for God to accept non-blood sacrifices (Num. 15:17-21; 18:12,13; Dt. 26:1-4). But the Lord Jesus perhaps offered a commentary on the incident when he said that our offering can only be accepted if we are first reconciled to our brother (Mt. 5:24). Cain's insistent lack of responsibility for his brother was the real sin, and therefore his sacrifice wasn't accepted by God. He wanted to serve God his own way, disregard his brother, justify his disagreement with him... to be a private person. But this was the basis of his rejection. Our unity with the rest of the body doesn't only mean that we must have a sense of unity with and responsibility for the rest of our brethren whom we now know. David seems to have sensed his unity with the rest of the body *over time*, not just over space at the present time. He felt as if he was with Israel at the Red Sea, that their wondrous deliverance really was *his*, in the crises of his own life. And great Paul likewise had this sense. He confidently expected that he would be alive at the Lord's return, and would not therefore need bodily resurrection from death (1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:15). And yet he speaks of how "God not only raised our Lord from the dead; he will also raise us by his own power" (1 Cor. 6:14; 2 Cor. 4:14). This is no contradiction; it's simply that there were times when Paul so strongly associated himself with the rest of the body of Christ *in the past* that he spoke as if he with them would be raised from the grave.

And so we return to our original problem: being private people. Crying out for understanding and appreciation and gratitude, not finding it, and withdrawing into ourselves, joining the crowds of hopelessly private people who surround us. But we are faced with the kneeling, washing, towel-holding Son of God as our living example, and the matchless pattern of the love of the Father and Son on the cross: a suffering, self-crucifying love which shone through the cruellest of rejection, of lack of appreciation. And it *kept on shining*, and even now keeps on shining in the hearts of all His true people, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). And we all, with unveiled face, " beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Note

(1) Note how the seven downward steps in the Saviour's humiliation (Phil. 2:6-8) are followed in vv. 9-11 by seven upward steps of glorification.

3.11 " Yea, all of you..." : Unity In Christ

Our Christian community world-wide is dogged by the tendency for only a few to contribute actively to the life of the brotherhood. This arises partly from the fact that there are some very capable brethren and sisters amongst us, compared to whom our efforts seem insignificant and unnecessary. The newly baptized especially may feel that they have nothing to contribute in comparison to them. In many mission areas, women, the poor, those who don't know English, the illiterate- all these groups tend to be sidelined into a position where they (and others) feel that they can't contribute to our community. Other converts come from religions where there is a dependent mentality; i.e., the duty of a believer is perceived to be simply attendance at meetings, but all responsibilities are left with a priest or pastor. Those from these backgrounds may find it difficult to accept the concept of responsibility for others. Or there is simply the problem of basic selfishness and laziness: not taking on any sense of responsibility for our brethren and sisters, leaving everything to others, assuming others will always provide, whilst we concentrate on ourselves.

Materially

Bible teaching about materialism is not simply that the richer ones amongst us should give their wealth for the work and establishment of the Gospel. Scripture *does* teach this: but it also has much to say about how poor people should give.

Because we know people (and brethren) who are richer and more wealth-seeking than we are, it's fatally easy to conclude that therefore we aren't rich, therefore we aren't materialistic. " Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break (Gk. dig) through and steal" (Mt. 6:19) was spoken to a huge crowd of Jewish peasants. The Lord wasn't only referring to the few rich men who might be hanging around on the edge of the group. He was talking to all of them. He knew their mud walled homes which thieves could so easily dig through. That little cheap bangle, that ring, thinly buried under the bed mat after the pattern of Achan, that prized tunic...the petty riches of the poor which they so strove for, which *to them* were priceless treasures. This is what the Lord was getting at; and His point was that *every one of us*, from beggar to prince, has this 'laying up' mentality. He is almost ruthless in His demands. He warns a similar crowd, living in first

century, famine-plagued Palestine of the first century, not to everlastingly worry about where the next meal was coming from; and then in that very context, tells *them* to sell what they have (Lk. 12:29-33). He wasn't just talking to the rich. He was telling the desperately poor to forsake what little they had, so as to seek His Kingdom. He probably didn't mean them to take His words dead literally (cp. cutting off the offending hand or foot); what He surely meant was: 'Resign, in your mind, the possession of everything you have, concern yourselves rather with the needs of others and entering my Kingdom'. No wonder those crowds turned round and soon bayed for His blood.

The Mosaic Law countered this idea that only the rich can be generous. The purification after childbirth and the cleansing of the leper allowed a lower grade of offering to be made by the very poor- to underline that *no one* is exempted from giving to the Lord, no matter how poor they are. Consider the emphasis: " Every man shall give *as he is able*...he shall offer *even such as he is able to get*...then the disciples (consciously motivated by these principles?) *every man according to his ability*, determined to send relief [one gets the picture of a convoy of brethren going to Jerusalem, carrying a little bit of meal from Sister Dorcas, a few coins from brother Titus...] ...let *every one of you* lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him" (Dt. 16:17; Lev. 14:30,31; Acts 11:29; 1 Cor. 16:2). The Lord taught men to give alms of such things as they had (Lk. 11:41); as we have opportunity / ability, we must be generous to all men (Gal. 6:10). All these passages are teaching a *spirit* of generosity; and even a sister with literally *no* money can have a generous spirit. The key passage is 2 Cor. 8:12: " If there be first (i.e. most importantly) *a willing mind*, it is accepted according to what a man hath, and not according to that he hath not" . *Every man* was to contribute to the building of the tabernacle (cp. the ecclesia) *with a willing heart* (Ex. 25:2- Paul surely alludes here). They weren't told: 'Whoever is willing and able to contribute, please do so'. And yet the majority of us have at least *something* materially; and as we have been blessed, so let us give. " *Every man* according as he *purposeth in his heart* (generosity is a mental attitude), so let him give; *not grudgingly*, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver" . So when, e.g. we have visiting brethren, let's not mentally tot up what it actually costs us to entertain them; let's contribute towards our fares to gatherings *as far as we are able*; let's conquer our natural concern with costs with *a generous spirit*. " Use hospitality one to another *without grudging*" (1 Pet. 4:9).

Spiritually

Having said this, Peter continues: " Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace [gift] in its various forms" (4:10 NIV). We have each received some gift which is intended to be used " to serve others" (1 Cor. 12:7 cp. 1 Cor. 7:7,17). We *each* have our talent: and, worryingly, a characteristic of the rejected is that they won't have attempted to use their talent (Mt. 25:15). Each member of the early church had a spiritual gift in this sense, although only some of them had miraculous ones. All who have been baptized into the body of Christ have a part in that body; and by its nature, the body is dependent upon the contribution of *every* part. This is why wilful separation from the rest of the body is wrong: be it by belonging to an exclusive Christian 'fellowship', not contributing to our ecclesia, 'cold-shouldering' certain brethren... we not only limit our own spiritual growth, but that of the whole body.

" Each part does its work"

" The whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Ephesians 4:16 NIV). In the context, Paul is demonstrating the necessity of Jew and Gentile to work together in the ecclesia; they couldn't just run parallel ecclesial lives, even though there seems to have been temporary concessions to their humanity at the beginning. The newly baptized, Old Testament-ignorant Gentiles had something to contribute to the Bible-saturated Jewish believers; and, of course, vice versa. " Let no man seek his own, but *every man* another's (spiritual) wealth" (1 Cor. 10:24)- no matter how little we feel we have to contribute. What this means in practice is that we should be concerned, *truly* concerned, for the spiritual growth of our brethren. This isn't equivalent to a spirit of nosy observation of others' weaknesses. When we observe a brother, let's say, with a fleck of pride as he speaks; a sister with a tendency to gossip... *earnestly pray* for them. Make a prayer list if necessary, either written down or mentally. " Pray *one for another*" (James 5:16)- all of us. Ask yourself, how many minutes / day do you spend in prayer? Not that number of minutes / day is necessarily a reflection of spirituality; but think about it. In addition to prayer, let's simply *make spiritual conversation* with our brethren, overcoming our natural reserve to talk about spiritual things. All in the new covenant should be teaching every man his neighbour and brother, saying " Know the Lord" (Heb. 8:11).

There is a consistent Biblical theme that the community inevitably has elders- that is, those who earn respect as elders, rather than presume upon or are even voted into a position of authority. And yet we have seen that there is also significant emphasis on the fact that each baptized believer has a vital contribution towards the spiritual growth of other believers, which *cannot* be compensated for by the words or work or example of any elder, however spiritually dynamic he may be. We have commented elsewhere that we're all preachers, too; it's not something that can be delegated to just some brethren. Paul reasons that as he and Apollos were ordained as ministers of the Gospel, so the Lord had also in principle given such a ministry " to every man" (1 Cor. 3:5).

The Inspiration Of The Cross

If we are to live lives devoted to the rest of the brotherhood, we need a motivation more powerful than just steel will-power. The constant out-giving of the cross, in the face of the most studied rejection and lack of appreciation, can be the only motivation that time and again, without fail, will revive our flagging will. Paul paints a powerful picture of the Lord's progressive self-humbling in service to others, culminating in " the death of the cross" ; and with this in mind, he asks us: " Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ..." (Phil. 2:4). The Mosaic command to give, every man according to the blessing with which God had blessed him (Dt. 16:17), is purposely similar in phrasing to the command to eat of the Passover lamb, every man according to his need; and to partake of the manna (cp. the Lord Jesus), every man according to his need (Ex. 12:4; 16:6,16). According to the desperation of our need, so we partake of Christ; and in response, according to our blessing, we give, in response to the grace of His giving.

A Unique Unity

There will develop an utterly unique unity amongst us as a result of appreciating the Bible doctrine of the one body; and from the experience of regularly, genuinely, contributing to the spiritual and material needs of the brotherhood. We will see how the body itself, energized by the spirit and pattern of Christ, builds itself up. It is this unity in Christ which is unique to

Christians: no other religion has this sense of being so inseparably linked. Sometimes when arriving somewhere to meet unknown brethren, I somehow know: 'That's them!', even from a distance. And others have commented likewise. This almost uncanny sense of unity is referred to in Eph. 4:3 as "*the* unity" ; although, as Paul shows, the *keeping* and experience of that unity is dependent upon our patience with each other and maintenance of " the one faith" (i.e. the unifying faith that gives rise to the one body). This unity is potentially powerful enough to convert the world. Through it, " the world may know" , " the world may believe" (Jn. 17:21,23). And yet, in Johanine thought, " the world may know" was a result of the Lord's death (Jn. 14:31), and yet also of the love that would be between His people (Jn. 13:35). The Lord's death would inspire such a love between His people that their resultant unity would let the world know the love of the Father and Son. Paul alludes to all this when he says that because of the new unity and fellowship between Jew and Gentile, " all men (would) see" , and even to the great princes and powers of this world would be made known by the united church " the manifold wisdom of God" (Eph. 3:9-11). The miraculous Spirit gifts were given, Paul argues, to bring the Jewish and Gentile believers together, " for the perfecting (uniting) of the saints" , into " a perfect man" , a united body. And thus, once Jewish and Gentile differences were resolved within the ecclesia by the end of the first century, the gifts were withdrawn.

This unique unity was enabled and created by the cross. *The* communion, *the* fellowship, was brought about by the Saviour's body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16). Indeed, "*the* fellowship" is a common NT phrase (e.g. 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:3). Because this has been created in prospect, from God's perspective we are all united in *the* fellowship, therefore we should seek to be of one mind (Phil. 2:1,2). It broke down, at least potentially, the walls which there naturally are between men, even the most opposed, i.e. Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14). The laying down of the Shepherd's life was so that the flock might be one, in one fold (Jn. 10:15,16). The offering of the blood of Christ was *so that* He might " make in himself...one new man" (Eph. 2:15). Thus the theme of unity dominated the Lord's mind as He prepared for His death (Jn. 17). Reading Jn. 17:20 as a parenthesis: " For their sakes I sanctify myself [in the death of the cross]... that they all may be one" (Jn. 17:19,21). The glory of God would be the source of this unity in Christ (Jn. 17:22); and that Name and glory were declared supremely on the cross (Jn. 12:28; 17:26). The grace, mercy, judgment of sin, the goodness and severity of God (Ex. 34:5-7)... all these things, as demonstrated by the cross, bind men together. And thus in practice, both a too strict and also too loose attitude to doctrine and practice, an unbalanced understanding of the glory of God, will never bring unity. The whole congregation (LXX *ekklesia*) of Israel were " gathered together" before the smitten rock, which " was Christ" crucified (Num. 20:8 cp. 21:16; 1 Cor. 10:4). The " ensign" , the pole on which the brazen serpent was lifted up, would draw together the scattered individuals of God's people (Is. 11:2); and as stricken Israel were gathered around that pole, so the lifting up of the crucified Christ brings together all His people (Jn. 12:32 cp. 3:14). And yet the cross of Christ is also associated with the gathering together of all God's enemies (Acts 4:26). Even Herod and Pilate were made friends at that time (Luke 23:12). The cross divides men into two united camps; they are gathered together by it, either in the Lord's cause, or against Him. The crucifixion was the judgment seat for this world (Jn. 12:31). Likewise the day of judgment will be a gathering together, either against the Lord (Rev. 16:16; 19:19), unto condemnation (Jn. 15:6); or into the barn of His salvation (Mt. 13:30). And likewise, in anticipation of the judgment, the breaking of bread is a " gathering together" either to condemnation or salvation (1 Cor. 11). This is why the preaching of the Gospel is a gathering together of God's people to Christ (Gen. 49:10; Mt. 12:30) ⁽¹⁾. We are now being gathered together, and yet the final gathering together will be at the day of judgment; therefore our response to the calling

together of the Gospel now, is a foretaste of the gathering unto the day of judgment (Mt. 3:12 cp. 13:30).

The Essential Intention

This unity in Christ, this fellowship between the redeemed which the cross enabled, had been God's original intention. The mystery of His will, His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, was that "in the dispensation of the fullness of time he might gather together all things in Christ" (Eph. 1:10). Thus the unity of the redeemed is not just an incidental product of our redemption and unity in Christ; it was the essential intention and goal of God from the beginning of the world, and was only revealed through the unity achieved by the cross (Eph. 3:9,10). This was His "eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:11). These passages in Ephesians need meditation; for it is easy to underestimate the tremendous emphasis given to how the mysterious unity of the body of believers, *together* glorifying His Name, was so *fundamentally* and *eternally* God's main purpose. And so Paul marvelled that *he* had been chosen to plainly reveal this, God's finest and most essential mystery, to all men; for it was not revealed at all in the OT, nor even (at least, not directly) by the Lord Jesus. And we may likewise marvel that we have a living part in it.

Notes

(1) "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt. 18:20) cannot mean that the presence of Christ is only available if two or three physically gather together, and that He does not tabernacle in the individual. I would suggest that it means rather that if two or three gather in His Name, this is because of Him being in their midst; i.e. unity, gathering together, is only possible around the person and presence of Christ.

"All that is not given is lost"

- Indian Proverb

3-12 Conflict And Reconciliation

The hurt of broken relationships is significant, and it affects us all. We are asked to pick up the cross of Jesus as our own experience; to not merely be vaguely associated with His death and new life, but to actually insert ourselves into His very death and rising again. We may think that our lives are wonderfully comfortable compared to what He went through; yet without minimizing *His* suffering and pain, I suggest that we can also minimize our sufferings. We should be able to say with Paul that we are indeed co-crucified with Him. For most of us, this co-crucifixion isn't in terms of literal pain or violent persecution for His sake. So in what terms, then, are His sufferings articulated in us? Surely, therefore, in our mental suffering with Him. Thus Paul can quote a prophecy of Christ's crucifixion and apply it to our sufferings as a result of bearing with our weak brethren (Rom. 15:1-3).

All the hurts which come from interpersonal contact within the ecclesia have led some to retreat from ecclesial life into an isolated existence; occasional attendance, visiting websites, a few emails. Yet we are to approach the ecclesia from the viewpoint that we are here to give rather than to receive. The ecclesia is designed by God to be the arena in which we learn to show patience, forgiveness and the love which gives for no return. Thus the idea of not resisting evil and offering the other cheek (Mt. 5:39) we normally apply to suffering loss

from the world without fighting for our rights. Yet Paul took this as referring to the need to not retaliate to the harmful things done to us by members of the ecclesia (Rom. 12:16,17; 1 Cor. 6:7; 1 Thess. 5:15). Likewise the command to forgive our debtors when we pray (Mt. 6:14) is applied by Paul to the need to forgive those who sin against us in the ecclesia (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). Paul evidently expected believers to have a pretty rough ecclesial life. Perhaps we ought to warn new converts about this; for all too many have joined us with high expectations, only to become bitterly disillusioned after a few years by the behaviour within the ecclesia. It's a strange paradox- for the unity of the ecclesia, the radical love between believers, is what attracts unbelievers to Christ. But then they soon find that the body of Christ is seriously divided and dysfunctional, and this has led many in recent times to fall away. Whilst on one hand the ecclesia is the body of Christ, we still have to separate out church from God, the Lord Jesus personally from those who are in Him. There are weeds sown among the wheat; that's a fact, which we inevitably sense, but it's equally a fact that we are unable to discern who's who. Seeing we cannot make the ultimate judgment, we must simply accept all those truly baptized into Christ as our brethren, and feel towards them as brethren. For the ultimate divide is between the believer and the world, not between believer and believer. Paul's letters are a great example of this; yet his positive approach to his brethren didn't mean that he personally could no longer tell black from white or right from wrong. Our parents drummed into us from childhood: "Because they do it, doesn't make it right". And that's simply so.

Telling The Lord

But what, then, are we to do when brethren... refuse to speak to us, divide our families, cause others to stumble; and all the other long list, the endless sentence, which we could now write or come out with? How are we to feel, how are we to cope with it? When the fellow believers saw the unreasonable attitude of a brother against another, they were "vehemently distressed" (AV "very sorry" doesn't do justice to the Greek; Mt. 18:31). Matthew uses the same Greek words to describe how distressed the disciples were to learn that there was a betrayer amongst them (Mt. 26:22). That extent of distress can destroy men and women. So "they came and told their Lord all that was done". They didn't just "tell Him". They *went* and told Him. We are invited to imagine the process of coming before the Lord's Heavenly presence in prayer, like Hezekiah spreading Sennacherib's letter before the Lord. The parable suggests there was no response from the Lord to the grieving servants. He called the offender to Him, asked for an account, and punished him. This speaks of how we shall be called to account at the Lord's return. But until then, there's silence from the Lord. But that silence is to develop our faith and perspective in the day of judgment. If there were bolts of fire from Heaven in response to our prayers, there would be no faith required, no longing for the Lord's return, no trust in His ultimate justice. The Greek translated "told" means 'to declare thoroughly'. Tell the Lord every detail of what happened, how you feel; what colour shirt he was wearing, exactly how she looked at you. Just as children artlessly retell every detail of a hurtful event. When they saw "what was done", they came and declared thoroughly to their Lord "what was done" (Mt. 18:31). The double repetition of the phrase suggests we should indeed tell all the details to Him; but not more, and stripped of our interpretation of them. Prayer isn't to be merely a list of requests; it's a pouring out of ourselves and our situation before God, as David taught us in his Psalms. And in this sense one rises from their knees healed and able to cope.

More Practical Advice

-Don't paper over issues and call that reconciliation. We can easily misunderstand "peace" to mean an absence of tension. But the Biblical *shalom* is far more positive than that; the state of *shalom* between God and us, and between believers, involves an intimate connection between

them; a completeness and wholeness of relationship, rather than merely an on-paper agreement.

-Solomon immediately demonstrated his wisdom by the way he judged between the two prostitutes who came to him (1 Kings 4). They lived in the same house, and had given birth at the same time. The whole situation spoke of the kind of shameless prostitution which the Mosaic Law demanded should be punished by death. But the way of Divine wisdom in this case was not to automatically apply Divine law in condemning sinners. Instead, by cutting to the conscience within those women, and appealing to it, they were led to at least the possibility of repentance, transformation, salvation. Solomon's wisdom was given him in order to know how to guide God's great people. The way of wisdom is therefore sometimes not to press a point when someone's in the wrong. We see this in all levels of relationships. There are weak points in relationships, fissure lines, which when pressed or brought under tension will cause earthquakes and destruction. It's best not to press on them; and yet if they are ignored, then the quality of relationship suffers and descends into interacting only over 'safe' matters. So what are we to do? By not raising the obvious issue- you're whores and must be put to death- Solomon showed grace, but he showed it in such a way that those women surely couldn't have felt the same again; rather like the woman taken in adultery. The very fact she was not condemned by the One who could condemn her- meant that she went away indeed vowing to "sin no more".

-We must therefore recognize that there will be anomalies in the lives of our brethren- just as there are in the lives of us all (if only we would examine ourselves ruthlessly enough to see them). And in some ways at some times, God goes along with them. Thus He gave Saul's wives to David (2 Sam. 12:8), which would've involved David being married to both a mother and daughter- for he had married Saul's daughters. And this giving of Saul's wives to David may not have occurred simply after Saul's death. For David's eldest son, Amnon, was borne by Ahinoam (2 Sam. 3:2), who was initially Saul's wife (1 Sam. 14:50). Now this is not to justify sin. Adultery, taking another's wife or husband, is all wrong. Let there be no mistake. But God at times sees the bigger, or longer, perspective, and tolerates things which we may quite rightly find intolerable. And if He loves us despite of our sin and failure- are we surprised that we are invited to show love to others in the face of their sin and failure toward us? A black and white insistence upon God's standards being upheld in the lives of others, demanding their repentance for having hurt us, is what has caused so much division between believers. Whilst God alone will apportion the guilt for this, in the final, unalterable, ultimately just algorithm of Divine judgment, it's worth observing that the fault for division isn't always with the sinners, the wider thinkers, the freewheelers; but with the inflexible intolerance of those in power.

- Recognize that God has made us all unique. According to the parable of the talents, He has given different potentials and abilities to each of us- and, quite simply, some have more than others. We need to recognize that others will have more or less than us. Try to rejoice in what we have in common, rather than the more cosmetic things and different callings which are what make us differ from each other. Unity isn't the same as uniformity.

- The doing of right often leads us into conflict. Conflict situations shouldn't always be read by us as meaning that we are guilty. Go out into this world and try to serve and help people, and you won't be met with open arms. Those whom you try to assist will so often turn against you. Only those who sit on the sidelines and don't get involved avoid this kind of conflict. But this kind of conflict is what the cross was of Christ was and is all about; that was the ultimate facing of the issues which there are between God and us. No papering it over nor avoiding the crux of the matter. The Lord Jesus came to gather fruit from Israel to God's glory; to sit down with God's people at the Kingdom banquet, because all things were ready. Whilst the crucifixion was foreknown by God and predicted by the Lord Jesus, this takes

nothing away from the fact that it need not have happened. Jesus didn't come to die, He came to be accepted. But Israel rejected Him. The pain of that rejection and crucifixion was all because the Father and Son had bothered to get involved with this ungrateful and rejecting world. If we are to carry even something of the cross of Jesus, we are going to have to experience rejection and the conflicts involved with that. That's axiomatic. When you think about it. So conflict in the ecclesia shouldn't actually surprise us. We should expect it. For it was the ecclesia of Christ's day who were the ones who rejected Him. "As much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18) surely suggests that Paul saw conflict with others as arising due to others' attitudes over which we have no control.

- It's easy to take false guilt for the fact others don't understand us. We are candles lit to give light, and we shouldn't "cover" that light (Lk. 8:16). Yet the same Greek word occurs again in 2 Cor. 4:3, where we read that our Gospel is 'covered' or "hid" to those who chose not to see it. Others' attitudes to us can therefore result in our light being covered and not get through. The fact others fail to perceive us for who and how we really are can in some cases be their fault and not ours.

- Love after the pattern of Christ's love is radical. It's going to have to hurt us to show it; it must cost us something. A lot, in fact. If it is in fact the love of Christ which we are reflecting. It cannot be merely part of a cosy, self-complacent social life within some club of mutual admiration.

- When people reject or manipulate us, refuse to play their game. The Pharisees tried to catch Jesus by pitting Him against the government. He refused to play, "But perceiving their malice, Jesus said, "Why are you testing Me, hypocrites? Show Me the coin used for the tax." So they brought Him a denarius. 'Whose image and inscription is this?' He asked them"(Mt. 22:18-20 HCSB).

- The usual human responses to conflict are to escape or attack back. Neither of these are the spiritual, Biblical response. God's 'response' to our conflict with Him has been to patiently reason, to invite sensible dialogue, and above all to pour out His grace in sacrificial love, hoping against hope that we will respond to it. And this must be our pattern. Job was in conflict with God. God heard him out, but when it came to replying, God didn't pick up the points Job made and answer them word for word. Instead, He confronted Job with eternity. The Son of God likewise tended to answer questions by appealing to a wider context. The problem with horns-locked conflict is that people lose the wider perspective.

- In dealing with conflict with fellow believers, we really must stand back and ask ourselves basic questions: Are they in Christ? Was their baptism into Him for real? Do I intend spending eternity with this person? Are my sins and receipt of grace any different in essence from theirs? If my Lord could address His betrayer as "friend" (Mt. 26:50)- do I have the spirit of Christ, without which I am eternally none of His? Is my difference of opinion with them over Biblical interpretation really relevant in the perspective of both of us standing before the judge of all the earth, begging for grace and tolerance?

- Have a Kingdom perspective. In Lk. 12:13-21 we encounter the Lord being asked to get involved in a conflict between two brothers over an inheritance. The Lord's response was to tell the parable of the rich fool- a parable which ought to be seriously worrying for every one of us, rich or poor. He put the immediate argument between the brothers in the perspective of eternity; the eternity we may miss because we got too distracted with the immediate argument of the moment. And the Lord's basic message in this case was: "Be rich toward God. Give Him whatever you have". This cut right across the issues of life's unfairness, missing out on wealth, not getting our share of respect... to the essential question which should have made both brothers feel uncomfortable. Had they, have we, given all they had to the Lord's cause? We may lack the quick thinking or penetrating analysis required to make this kind of fast response when confronted by others' conflicts. But we can surely analyze our own conflicts,

at our own pace, in the light of eternity; and regain perspective, even if our opponent fails to do this. We need to cut to the essence of why we are feeling as we are; pray for God to help you in this, for accurate self-examination is so hard. If we don't connect and engage with the core issues, then even if the immediate problem [e.g. the argument about the inheritance] is resolved, then other issues will still then arise. It will only be a matter of time. The more we focus on resolving just one conflict, the more we will realize that in fact we are dealing with a tangled web of multiple conflicts. We cannot change others, but we can come to understand ourselves, and to define and engage with the essential issues which we personally face in the whole conflict.

- Conflict is a normal part of life and processing. It is inevitable that a certain amount of 'politics' intrude upon our ecclesial experience; one group wants this, another wants that; one sees things one way, another perceives things from a different viewpoint. But here again, the principles of the most basic Gospel must govern us. The Greek word for 'politics' does in fact occur in the New Testament.- when Paul says that our *politeuesthe* must be "worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil. 1:27). The principles of the loving, saving, reconciling, patient Christ must work their way through even the politics that are inevitably part of life together.

- Learn a new process for processing. Learn to use other spaces and places to process my hurts, less in the moment and more on reflection, later, without dumping on others.

By grace we stand

We must also never forget our own need for grace. Paul progressively realized the depth of his own failures and need for grace. In his early letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of himself as the least of the apostles (1 Cor. 15:9); some years later, he tells the Ephesians that he is "less than the least of all saints" (Eph. 3:8); but as he faced his end, he wrote to Timothy in his final maturity that he felt the chiefest of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Yet the letters to Timothy show a growing assurance that he believed he truly would live eternally in God's Kingdom. And in Paul we are to find our own pattern of growth (1 Tim. 1:16). You, me... we shall live for ever. And ever. And ever. We who are but water, bones, complex chemicals. We who are so very weak. For ever and ever. And the quality of that eternity is wonderful beyond words; for "we shall be like *him*". And God... just thought this up for us, decided to bring us into existence so He might lavish His grace upon us in His beloved Son throughout the eternal ages to come (Eph. 2:7). We cannot get even a moment's glimpse of that future which awaits us without being moved to show grace, compassion, acceptance; and without knowing that we ought to be giving our lives to thinking up how we can in our turn lavish grace upon others. We will not live through those eternal ages alone. We will spend them in community. There's only one man who has ever resurrected to live for ever, and that's the Lord Jesus.

Our experience of this will be insofar as we are "in Him", in His body. But His body isn't just us; it's all the others baptized into Him. If we reject them, won't forgive them, won't tolerate them, don't want to fellowship them... we are signing ourselves out of the hope of salvation. I don't doubt that God's grace is such that it will extend also to the self-righteous, the nitpickers, the critics, the bitter, the troublesome. But in this case they will be saved, like all of us, despite having done things and lived attitudes which ask them to be excluded from the salvation which is in Jesus. Quite simply, if we are to live together eternally with each other, we had better start doing so now. For we have right now been given "eternal life" in the sense that we can right now start living the kind of life which we will eternally live in God's Kingdom. If we don't wish to live it now, we are turning down the future aspect of that eternal life.

Reconciliation: Radically Important

There is a repeated, continual emphasis upon the simple fact that relationships between true believers will be characterized by strong, enduring love between believers themselves (Phil. 1:9; Col. 3:14; I Thess. 3:12; Eph. 5:2; Gal. 5:13; Rom. 12:10). Our eternity depends upon this. The importance of it cannot be underestimated. Picture a judgmental, unforgiving brother or sister whom you know, who's always stirring up strife by their intolerance of others; yet remember their constant Bible reading, preaching, writing, unworldliness, clean living, constant attendance at meeting, hall cleaning... how their lives are simply full of their commitment to their understanding of the Lord. And think of this person standing before the Lord at the day of judgment and being condemned. Maybe he was the Secretary, or she was the secretary's wife; the Bible School speaker, the writer. And they are told: 'Go away. I don't know you. You rejected my weak little brothers and sisters. You drove them from My table. You criticized and beat them down, some never to rise again. You demanded, demanded, demanded... conformity to how you understood things, to your standards of spiritual achievement. When you yourself seriously failed Me, disobeyed Me, and yet you never really worried about that'. That well known face, with tears flowing down the cheeks and teeth banging against each other in rage, forehead contoured as never before as he thinks of his loyalty to his clauses, his points, his constitution, his denomination; the emails and articles he laboured so long to write in defence of the faith... is ushered to death in the lake of fire. His committee members, friends, family who told him 'You did the right thing there...' are all strangely absent, and he walks unusually alone. As we watch. Maybe reciting 1 Corinthians 13 to ourselves. Now I'm not saying this is how it will be; I'm sure God's grace is big enough to cover very much self-righteousness and very many blind spots. But... it might be. And, according to the plain teaching of the Lord and His apostles... it may very well be. Because how we treat our fellow believers is so utterly crucial.

The Christian life is likened to a man on his way to his judge along with his adversary (Lk. 12:58); and evidently, he ought to settle his differences with his brother before he arrives, for this judge will be extremely hard upon those who cannot be reconciled to their brethren. This would suggest that the Lord foresaw that getting along with our brethren would be a major part in the development process of His people; and as they draw closer to the day of meeting with Him, the more urgent is the need to settle their disputes, as He will be unsympathetic towards them. The Lord prefaces this parable by appealing for His people to 'judge righteously' because His judgment is about to come (Lk. 12:57 Gk.). By forgiving our brother and reconciling with him, we are judging righteously; we are in essence deciding our own judgment which is to be revealed at the Lord's return.

4.1 Bread From Heaven

4-1-1 The Meaning Of The Manna

The Lord Jesus and His word is the antitype of the manna which Israel were given (this thesis is developed throughout John 6). It is a well hacked New Testament theme that Israel's exodus from Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea typified our baptism (1 Cor. 10:1-4); and our struggle through the wilderness of life was prefigured by their wandering through the

Sinai scrubland. The manna was provided as the practical means by which they would get through. That thought should set us eagerly looking for how we can eat of it, how we can also relate to this manna which God has given to enable us to reach the Kingdom.

The Manna And The Word

“Bread” or manna was a phrase the Rabbis commonly applied to the Torah- e.g. they interpreted Prov. 9:5 (“Come, eat ye of my bread”) as referring to the Law. And the Lord was clearly playing on and extending this idea in John 6. The Lord taught that in the same way as Moses gave Israel manna, so He was giving them Himself, and His word. He defines the meaning of the manna in Jn. 6:63 as His words. He is inviting us to eat Him in the sense of His words; He is the word of God. Remember how Jeremiah says that he found God's word and ate it, God's word was unto him the joy and rejoicing of his heart. Think too of the words of Job in 23:12, speaking as a type of Christ on this occasion: " I have esteemed the words of his mouth more than my necessary food" . We tend to think that as we eat physically, so we should eat spiritually. The point is often made amongst us that as we always find time to eat physically, so we should to eat God's word. But this is not quite what Job is saying. He says that we should relate to our spiritual food even *more* importantly than to our natural need for food. It's second nature for us to eat regularly, every day; we don't have to schedule time to eat, it flows naturally into our daily organization of life. Now more than this, we should have the word of God in our lives. How often do we complain of the problem of finding time to read the word? Now in a way that's right and understandable, but in another way we ought to be naturally finding a certain amount of time for feeding on the word. And then, after that, we can complain of a lack of time for further study. As the manna was utterly vital for Israel's survival in the wilderness, so is feeding on God's word. Eating the manna was a crucial daily necessity. And so our Bible study is. The victory of the Lord Jesus is described as Him 'prolonging his days' (Is. 53:10), in allusion back to the way Dt. 17:20 teaches that the King of Israel must study the word all the days of his life, with the result that he would " prolong his days" . The almost unbelievable victory of the man Christ Jesus against every aspect of the flesh was due to His saturation with the spirit of God's word.

Israel were to be filled with the manna, so that they would know that " I am Yahweh your God" (Ex. 16:12). This was to be the meaning of the manna. There was a daily manifestation of God's glory along with the manna (Ex. 16:7 cp. 12). The daily sense of living with *God's glory* is so vital for each of us in our deeply personal spirituality. We know that faith comes from hearing God's word; so our feeding on God's word should lead us to know Yahweh. There was something intensely personal about the teaching of the manna: " He fed thee (singular- not " ye") with manna, that he might make *thee* know that (every) man (lives spiritually) by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord" (Dt. 8:3). We must ceaselessly ask: Do we really *know* God, as a personal Father? God told them to gather the manna to prove them, " whether they would walk in my law, or not" . So their attitude to the manna was their attitude to the law of God. The manna tasted like honey, which is another symbol of God's word. In Neh. 9:20,21 Nehemiah runs through the history of Israel: " Thou gavest also thy good spirit to instruct them" , and gave them manna. So there is a parallel here between the instruction of God's spirit, and the manna. He speaks of how God's word came down from Heaven, and then the manna too came down from Heaven (Neh. 9:13,15).

Although God opened the doors of Heaven to rain manna upon Israel, they “trusted not in his salvation” (Ps. 78:22). The manna, as in John 6, became a symbol of

their salvation; and yet the repetitious ordinariness of it all meant they missed the point. Every time we read God's word, take again the bread of Heaven each week, the more familiar we are with it, the more likelihood there is that this can happen to us.

4-1-2 Gathering The Manna

As Israel were commanded to gather the manna daily, so we should be gathering the strength of the word daily. Prov. 8:34 records the words of Wisdom, a personification of God's Law: "Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates" . They had to get up early to gather the manna, before the sun was up. Rising up early is a common Bible idiom for making effort. So there must be an element of effort in our Bible reading; whether it means setting the alarm clock those vital few minutes earlier each morning, or making the mental struggle to really take in the real spirit of God's word. In practice, it is so important to get off each day in a good spiritual gear. Doing our Scripture reading first thing is something which shouldn't be beyond most of us.

Think back to when the manna was first given. Israel were there in the wilderness, laden with the gold and silver of Egypt, but with no food. They really were in a desperate hole. They even decided to return to Egypt, rather than die of hunger amid the howling winds of that desert. So we can imagine the sense of relief when that manna appeared for the first time in the ground. Our sophisticated lives, perhaps with too much of Egypt's gold and silver, are spiritually as desperate as Israel physically were in that wilderness. It is difficult for us to appreciate this as we should. We hold in our hands the only, the only thing which can feed us, which can give us the hope of survival and ultimate success on our journey. The joy they had when they found the manna should be ours; like David we should rejoice at finding the word, as one who finds great spoil. David spoke of doing that after he'd been reading the word for years; that sense of discovery really can be ours, all through our lives. But do we really have that sense of gratitude for the word, that ecstasy of elation as we learn its truths? Are we truly gathering the manna? Most of us will have to admit that familiarity with our salvation has made us somewhat weak in this direction; we treat one of God's greatest gifts to us as something ordinary.

Real Satisfaction

Israel had to be gathering the manna very early in the day, before the sun was up. That would have meant that the whole family economy was structured around that daily task of gathering the manna. Now I'm sure you can see the similarities with the place our reading of the word should have in our domestic lives. Israel would have had to change their daily routine to collect it, prepare it, to learn to live by it as their only food. It's twice emphasized in Ex. 16:8,12 that the manna would completely fill them. In the morning, said Moses, you shall be filled. So the families were to have one big meal a day. Most rural African cultures likewise survive quite happily on one big meal in the morning. The manna gave complete satisfaction; and Jesus commented on this when He said that through His word we would be completely filled, we would eat and not hunger, drink and not thirst. Now this sense of fullness isn't necessarily related to the amount of time we spend with our eyes on Holy Scripture. It comes down to our attitude. The Lord Jesus is our supreme example in this in His busy life as a working man, perhaps helping Mary bringing up the other children, constantly battling against a lack of cash, all the domestic problems of a working class family, living hand to

mouth. It is doubtful if in terms of hours per day the Lord Jesus spent that long in eye contact with the word. But that word was in His mind hour by hour. And there is good reason to think that He got off each day to a real spiritual feast. Isaiah 50 prophesies of the Lord: " Morning by morning" God awoke Him to learn His spiritual lesson.

Ex. 16:14 describes the manna as a " small round thing" . The Hebrew for " small" doesn't really mean that; it means something which is broken open, which is complex. And so with the word, as with the manna, there was no point in just gathering it, it had to be broken open and prepared. There were a number of different ways in which the manna could be prepared, but the effort still had to be made. And so if we are to live by the word of God, just physically reading won't necessarily give us the strength we need. There must be this process of preparing it before we eat it, breaking it open so we can digest it, eating the bread from Heaven, the real essence of the Lord Jesus as revealed to us in the word. This process of 'eating' should not be equated with mere reading of the word; it goes on, or should do, in the back of our minds, all through the day. Israel complained that the manna was stodgy and tasteless. Presumably this was because they failed to make the effort to prepare and appreciate it properly. There are similarities with those who complain that God's word just isn't nourishing for them. Israel felt that they wanted something other than the manna. They were bored with it. After a few years of Bible reading, we can be faced with the very same temptation. We can merely read rather than truly feed. We seem more attracted to the self-help psychology of the world, to the endless tales of personal experience of one sort or another, than to some good old-time getting down to Bible reading. This isn't to say that we can't benefit from reading other literature; but our love of that word for its pure sweetness ought to grow rather than decrease. The wonder of the manna became lost on Israel. They ate the manna on the very day they made the golden calf. The wonder of that daily miracle no longer meant anything. Now it won't take you long to work out what the equivalent is in the antitype: Our doing Bible readings, and then behaving in a way which is a total denial of the spiritual food we have just eaten. Day by day Israel were gathering the manna and ate it, as they at the same time rebelled against Moses, as they yearned to return to Egypt. The routine of collecting that manna totally deceived them, and made the daily miracle meaningless. They failed to perceive the meaning of the manna.

The Wonder Of It All...

Back in John 6, we read how the people walked round the lake in the boiling midday sun in order to be with Christ and perhaps benefit from the physical food He might provide ⁽¹⁾. He tells them not to labour for the food which would perish, but for that which would endure for ever. The labouring of those people, trekking round that lake in the heat of the day, should be the effort we put in to eating the manna of God's word- according to how the Lord. There was a theme of urgency in Israel's gathering of the manna; it had to be gathered before the sun was up, or it would be lost. Would that we could have that same sense of urgency as we read, realizing that the rising of the sun at the second coming of will put an end to our opportunity to feed and grow. If Israel didn't gather the manna, or if they left it to another day, it bred worms and stank. The active anger of God was to be expressed against those who didn't take the wonder of the manna seriously. So our gathering of the manna / word must be taken seriously; it's not a question of skim reading familiar words, or doing mental gymnastics with it in an intellectual world of our own.

Israel had to eat that manna until they entered the land, and then they ate the food which grew in Canaan. So our understanding of God will move into new paradigms in the Kingdom. The

wonderful depths of the Bible are only like the manna, compared to the spiritual depths which we will then feed on ⁽²⁾. Let's notice that in the type, there will still be the feeding process throughout the Kingdom. We need to get in the love of feeding on God's word now.

Manna And Passover

There are a number of similarities between the record of the gathering of the manna and that of the Passover. They could seethe the manna, as the Paschal lamb could be seethed. They were to gather the manna according to the size of their families, and the collection was to be organized by the head of the house. This is all the language of the Passover. The lamb represented Jesus, and so did the manna. In John 6 the Lord says that we must eat His flesh and drink His blood to have eternal life; and He says the same about eating His words (v.63). So often the Lord says that we have got eternal life, here and now. He keeps on saying it in John 6. The word of God gives us eternal life. If we feed on the word properly, we are in the process of receiving eternal life, we have received it through our eating the word of life. Now this is the point of all our Bible study. We aren't seeking to inspire each other to do great mental gymnastics with Scripture. But we are inspiring each other to feed on, to eat that word, to live by it. Towards the end of John 6, we see how so many of the people just couldn't accept the Lord's teaching. They couldn't take on board the offer of eternal life, the idea of present possession of salvation, conditionally, through the power of response to His word. And as we face up to God's immense offer of salvation in His word, the question arises: Do we fully believe it? We can almost sense the lump in the Lord's voice as He quietly said to the twelve: "Will ye also go away?". And then we feel the sigh of relief in His mind at Peter's words: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life".

Notes

(1) Why did they make such effort? Was it really because they wanted a free meal? Was their shortage of food *so* acute? Perhaps the bread and fishes Christ had created before tasted especially nice? Or was it just for the intrigue of seeing a miracle?

(2) This raises the issue of whether we will use the Bible in our preaching in the Millennium. We will be prophets- the least in the Kingdom will be a greater prophet than John the Baptist, the greatest earthly prophet apart from the Lord (Lk. 7:28). Perhaps as in the first century, and under the system of prophets and priests in the Old Covenant, we will speak forth God's word as inspired messages to the people, which will (perhaps) be written down by them.

4.2 A House On A Rock

I'd like us to focus our minds upon that parable of the two builders, at the end of Lk. 6. Have a look at v.46: "Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" In Matthew's account of this same parable, we read that at judgment day, "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord...then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me" (Mt. 7:22,23). From this we can conclude that our attitude to Christ in this life (e.g. "Lord, Lord!") will be our attitude to Him at the judgment seat. If we think He is a hard, unreasonable Lord: that is how He will be. To the froward (in this life), He will shew Himself froward. Straight away we are met head on with a major challenge: Our attitude to Christ in this life will be our attitude to Him at the judgment seat. John's letters reason down the same line: "If (in this life) our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence (now) toward God...this is the confidence that we have in him... abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence...before him (at the judgment) at His coming" (1 Jn. 3:21; 5:14; 2:28). The confidence we have towards Christ now will be the confidence we have at

judgment day. This fact should pull us up out of the spiritual indifference which characterizes so much of our lives. If we see Christ as an abstract theological necessity, a black box in our brain called 'Christ'; if we don't have a dynamic, two- way relationship with Him now- then this too is how we will regard Him then.

Our Attitude To Christ

The parable of the builders is fundamentally about our attitude to the Lord. There is good reason to think it mainly concerns the attitude of the responsible; these words of Jesus are set against the background of v.27: " I say unto you which hear" . The rest of the chapter seems to be addressed primarily to the disciples- e.g. v.41,42 speak of them beholding the mote in their brother's eye; warning surely more relevant to believing disciples than to the world generally. The parable of the builders likewise refers to those within the ecclesia, who know Christ as their Lord: " Lord, Lord" , they say. Among this class of people there would be " many" (Mt. 7:21- 23) who would hear Christ's sayings, but not do them. The Lord alludes to the builder parable in Jn. 13:13,17. There He says to the disciples, " Ye call me Master and Lord (cp. " Why call ye me Lord...?") ...if ye know these things (cp. " he that heareth my sayings"), happy are ye if ye do them" - instead of bickering among themselves, as they were doing then (and studiously avoiding the opportunity which they had of fellowshiping the sufferings of Christ). Further evidence that Christ was directing His parable to the disciples is found in v.47: " Whosoever cometh to me..." . Time and again the disciples are described as coming to Jesus- on 12 separate occasions in Matthew's Gospel alone. The Lord continued: " Whosoever cometh to me and heareth my sayings" . It is the disciples who are often described as hearing Christ's words (Mt. 10:27; 11:4; 13:16,18; 15:10; 17:5; 21:33).

I'm obviously labouring this point, that the builders in the parable are those within the ecclesia, or at best the responsible. This is because the parallel record in Mt. 7 is rather unpleasant to apply to the ecclesia; it says that " many" of us will be in the category who say " Lord, Lord" , and whose house will be destroyed. The Greek for " many" can imply 'the majority'. Even the majority of those who hear Christ's words simply don't do them. Now that's an uncomfortable statistic for us who sit before the bread and wine each week, seeking to hear Christ's words and do them. This parable was spoken in the context of crowds of the ecclesia of Israel coming to Christ, hearing His words, and doing sweet nothing about it. Such an attitude is not building a house on a rock.

So then, how do we hear and do? We are helped to get the answer by considering how Christ elsewhere appealed to people to " Hear *and understand*" (Mt. 15:10). Truly understanding is related to action, 'doing'. In the parable, hearing and doing is like the hard work of digging the foundation on a rock. This is how hard it is to truly understand the words of Christ. Remember how the one talent man also dug into the earth (Mt. 25:18). He did some digging, he did some work. But he failed to truly understand. The very physical action of digging deceived him into thinking he had done enough, as the physical action of building deceived the man who built on earth. Of course we are progressing somewhere spiritually, as we live day by day. But our movement can deceive us.

Hard Labour

The figure of building a house on a rock conjures up the idea of sweating labour. Do we feel that we are spiritually sweating, in a sense? Is it that hard to understand and therefore do the words of Christ? A number of passages make this connection between labouring and

understanding the word. Elders labour in the word (1 Tim. 5:17), as the prophets laboured in writing the word of God (Jn. 4:38); and the true Bible student is a labourer who will not be ashamed of his work at the end (2 Tim. 2:15). And the Lord Jesus spoke of us labouring for the manna of God's words, even harder than we labour for our daily bread, and more earnestly than the crowds ran around the lake of Galilee in the blazing midday sun in order to benefit from Christ's miracles (Jn. 6:27). One could be forgiven for thinking that most of us find hearing the words of Christ easy. But there is an element of difficulty, even unpleasantness for us, in truly understanding Him in practical application.

In the parable, the flood which came was like the day of judgment. This fits in exactly with the way Christ used the figure of the flood to describe His second coming in Mt. 24. Peter does the same in 2 Pet. 3. The beating of the stream upon the house on a rock (v.49) is a truly apposite figure for the day of judgment. It certainly implies a process of judgment, in which the unworthy will experience a gradual collapse of their spirituality. For the man with the firm foundation, the flood of the parable would have been a worrying experience. Would the house stand up to it? In many of the parables, we can profitably speculate as to likely details of the story. The wise man would have remembered his hard work on the foundation, not with any sense of pride or self-gratitude. But he would nevertheless have been aware of it. Our real spiritual effort will be so valuable in that day. Only then will we realize the extent of the fact that there can be no short cut to true spiritual development. A man cannot be crowned, unless he strive lawfully. The Lord's parable was no doubt partly based on Is. 28:17, which speaks of the day of judgment being like hail which "shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters (which) shall overflow". The spiritual house of the foolish builder was a lie, effectively; an appearance of real development which deceived men. For externally, men cannot know anything about the different foundations of houses built side by side. We are left to imagine the details of the parable. The foolish man would have run outside and watched his house being beaten down and washed away. He would have thought of trying to do something to stop the destruction, but then given up, realizing it was too late. The foolish girls saw that "our oil is running out" (Gk.). The unworthy will have that terrible sense of their opportunity and spirituality ebbing away from them. The impression is given in the parable that the two houses were next door to each other; again confirming our feeling that this parable is about different attitudes to the word within the ecclesia.

To get down to the rock, the man who truly heard Christ had to dig through the earth which the foolish man also dug into. Hearing Christ's words is likened to digging into that earth. Doing and understanding them is likened to then digging into the bed-rock. The foolish man did allow the word to go into him- skin deep. We need to ask ourselves how often these days the word really goes right through our skin, and forces us to hack into the bed-rock. Are we truly building our house on a rock? The force of Mk. 16:16, for example, went more than skin deep just before our baptism. We read it, thought about it, and did it. But now. Are we old and brave, thick skinned, hardened by the humdrum of repetition, no longer building a house on a rock? My sense is that many of us are. Let's be aware that Heb. 6:1,2 defines "the foundation" as "repentance", and an awareness of the reality of the resurrection and coming judgment. In some ways, the longer we are in Christ, the more likely it is that we will not reach down to the bedrock of these things as we ought to. I mean, how often these days do we really repent of something? How often does the reality of the judgment seat truly come home to us? The poetry of the Bible's language, especially if we read the same version, makes God's word glide over us. Exhortations, even the recollection of Golgotha's tragic scene, the final, friendless end... can all slip so easily over our heads. We rest on the laurels of past spiritual victories. Nothing really shakes us up, reaching right down to the bedrock. Surely

each of us should be sensing a surge of spiritual urgency when we look at ourselves like this. Yet God will help us; it is He Himself who will "settle" us, or 'make a foundation for' us, as the Greek can mean (1 Pet. 5:10).

" That rock was Christ"

The rock which our response to the word must reach down to is that of the crucified Christ. That rock represents Christ and Him crucified, according to Paul (1 Cor. 10:4 and 3:11 cp. 2:2). The Lord's parable of building on the rock was surely quarried from His understanding of Is. 28:16,17: "I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone...a precious cornerstone. The hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place". Truly doing God's word will always lead us back to the spirit of the suffering Christ on Calvary. If it does not, our building, our apparent development within the much-vaunted biblicism of our faith, is just a "refuge of lies". All our spiritual effort and suffering finds its ultimate summation in Christ's crucifixion. His suffering there is the quintessence of all spiritual struggle. It is quite possible that as we break bread weekly, we are merely digging a little deeper than usual in the earth, yet still not reaching down to the real meaning of building on the example of Christ's death. The wise man's house was "founded upon a rock". The same Greek word occurs in Col. 2:7, describing how we are "rooted and built up in him". The parallel Eph. 3:17 expands this to mean that if Christ dwells in our hearts, we are "rooted and grounded in love...able to comprehend...and to know the love of Christ", which was supremely shown in His death. Col. 1:23 associates this being "grounded and settled" with not being "moved away from the hope of the Gospel, which ye have heard". If the word really sinks down deep within us, it will reveal to us the love of Christ on the cross, it will result in true love, and all this will be the outworking of the basic doctrines of the Truth which we understood at baptism. Thus the hacking away at the rock is not only hard, grim work against human nature. It reveals the wondrous love of Christ. The implication is that we can only really understand this love, that passes human knowledge, if we are really sweating away to obey Christ's words, to build our house on a rock.

4.3 Blind Men

4-3-1 Spiritual Blindness

There is one theme that the Bible continually pushes: human beings, including the believers, are incredibly spiritually blind and obtuse when it comes to spiritual things. We just don't see (i.e. understand) what's in black and white. There are some obvious examples of this:

- First century Israel didn't recognize Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, even though the writing was more than on the wall. It must have broken the Lord's heart to hear that the people thought that He was perhaps only a resurrected John the Baptist (who did no miracle), or Isaiah (Mk. 8:28). He had done among them the works that none other man did, He had spoken to them of the depths of spiritual wisdom, which many a prophet and righteous man had desired to see and hear. But they passed off the majestic Son of God, standing before them in the Name and Glory of the Father, as a mere man.
- The disciples were told, time and again, that their Lord would die (by crucifixion, He even said), and be resurrected the third day. The Lord Jesus could not have spelt it out any plainer, time and again. But His death was a shattering blow to them, and they dismissed the news of

His resurrection as the babblings of a mentally ill woman. Dear Mary thought that the risen Lord was a gardener. There is something artlessly pathetic about this. It is an eloquent essay in the spiritual blindness of man to the glory of the Father and Son. And even despite the experience of the resurrected Lord Jesus, dear Peter, in frustration, tells the guys that he's going back to the fishing which he once quit for the Lord's sake (Jn. 21:3). And it seems they went with him; only to be met by the risen Lord on the beach, with breakfast already prepared for those tired, angry-with-themselves men. Exactly *why* they were so blind to the teaching about His death and resurrection is hard to fathom. It could be that because the flesh resents the idea that the cross must come before the crown, therefore they switched off to the preaching of the cross. And many of those who quite genuinely 'can't see' the urgency of the Gospel may have the same problem of spiritual blindness.

- And still they didn't learn their lesson. The Lord told them to go into all the world and preach the good news of His resurrection. But they didn't, it took Peter a special vision to shake him into appreciating that the Gospel *had* to go to the Gentiles. And he had to break the news of this ever so delicately to the other believers. The idea of converting Gentiles was anathema to them: in the face of their Lord's clear commands and teaching about this, and despite the numerous Old Testament hints at it. They even hauled Peter up in front of them to explain whatever he'd been doing baptizing and (horror of horrors) *breaking bread* with a Gentile. Even Paul was told to go "far hence" and be a light to the Gentiles; but it seems that it was only his bad experience of preaching to the Jews that made him truly turn all his powers to the fulfilment of this commission.

- It was quite obvious that the Mosaic Law couldn't save men. The Spirit spoke expressly about this; through Paul and Peter, the early church was told that the Mosaic food laws were finished once for all. Yet the Jewish Christians just couldn't accept this. They held on to the keeping of the laws, the feasts and the Sabbath; and God was willing to tolerate their spiritual blindness.

- Amaziah, a man not completely without faith and the knowledge of Yahweh, worshipped the gods of Edom whom he had just defeated (2 Chron. 25:19,20).

- Jonah knew the Psalms. His prayer from inside the fish is packed with allusion to them. And yet he thought he could flee from God's presence (Jonah 1:3)- even though Ps. 139:7-9 almost prophesies of Jonah, that nobody can flee from God's presence, and the sea itself, and geographical distance, won't hide enable such flight from God. Jonah knew this. But he simply acted in a way diametrically opposed to that knowledge. He didn't resist his own spiritual blindness.

Blind World

If this is how blind 'enlightened' believers can be, it's evident that the world in general (and those who leave the faith) are blind indeed. Biblically, spiritual blindness refers to not understanding God's ways; apostate Israel are therefore described as blind (Dt. 28:29; Is. 56:10; 59:10; Lam. 4:14; Zeph. 1:17; Mt. 15:14; 23:16-26). The world is alienated from God on account of their blindness (Eph. 4:18). There is no blindness in God (1 Jn. 1:5); He describes Himself as covered in eyes (Ez. 1:18; Rev. 4:8). God almost seems to poke fun at man's blindness, at our inability to perceive the most basic truths. The Lord's picture of a blind man feeling qualified to pull a splinter out of his brother's eye (with a superior, condescending air about him) is one such case (Mt. 7:3-5). Or the man whose uncontrolled

words become a self-made snare for himself (Prov. 18:7). Often the Spirit points out that the sinner is only harming himself by his actions- and yet he earnestly pursues his course, in the name of self-interest and self-benefit (Num. 16:38; Prov. 19:8; 20:2; Hab. 2:20; Lk. 7:30). Sin is therefore associated by God with utter and derisive foolishness (e.g. Num. 12:11; 2 Tim. 3:9); but this isn't how man in his unwisdom perceives it at all. Indeed, to him self-denial is inexplicable folly and blindness to the essentials of human existence. "This their way is their folly: yet their posterity approve their sayings. Selah (pause to meditate)" (Ps. 49:13). The *folly* of sin is only *fully* evident to God. Or consider Is. 44:14-18. Here God describes how a man cuts down a tree, cuts it in half, uses half to make an idol, and the other half of the trunk he burns to make fire for a sacrifice. He then falls down in worship to his idol. God says this is a result of the blindness of man: "they cannot see...they cannot understand. And none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge or understanding to say, I have burned part of it in the fire...a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?" (Is. 44:18-20).

Yet we live in a world where the wisdom of man is glorified, where the impression is given that ultimately science will solve our problems; that spiritual blindness doesn't exist ultimately. Many newly baptized brethren and sisters are either students or educators in worldly institutions. They particularly are prone to be deceived by the appearance of rationality and genuine intelligence which modern scientists present. Yet the blindness and utter stupidity of man has been recognized by some of the most intelligent and intellectually honest human beings. Whether you are studying arts or sciences, you will find evidence for this even within the materials you are required to study. So much modern thought and development is only re-tracing the paths already trodden, in principle, by earlier generations. History repeats itself; yet the very process of personal discovery and realization leads human beings to feel that they are discovering something essentially *new*. Arthur Koestler's book *The Sleepwalkers* sums up the Biblical picture of humanity and spiritual blindness in its title alone ⁽¹⁾. The whole human experience is analogous to sleepwalking; we go through the motions of reality, but actually (as a race) we are spiritually asleep. The world around us are sleepwalking, in God's eyes. And we too should share His perspective. The Lord said that Lot in his last days in Sodom was a type of the believers living in the world at the time of the end (Lk. 17:28-31). Lot in those last hours was walking around the streets of that city trying to save his family, walking amidst angry, blind people who hated him, drunk on their own lusts. Walking those streets must have been an uncanny experience. But that is God's picture of the world of our day, and our own uncanny, almost charmed life amongst the sleepwalkers ⁽²⁾.

Notes

(1) Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers* (London: Macmillan, 1952).

(2) Peter speaks of the people of this world as pigs rolling around on their backs in the slime of their own excrement. If we appreciate this, friendship with the world, loving them or marrying them, will be seen for what the Spirit says it is: hatred of God.

4-3-2 Spiritual Paradigm Shifts

I find the idea of paradigms helpful in appreciating our blindness ⁽¹⁾. A paradigm is best explained by an example. There was once a paradigm that the earth was flat. Evidence for this seemed to be all around; as you looked out to sea, it seemed more or less flat. No-one

among the average population seriously considered the possibility that the earth wasn't flat. There was no need to. Presumably, people thought, if you keep sailing on the sea, you will come to the edge and fall off. The Catholic church pushed the idea that at the end of the sea there was a big waterfall which went gushing down to a terrible abyss. But then there was a paradigm revolution. Some scientists figured that this really couldn't be the case. Everyone thought they were crazy. After all, all around us, it seemed, there was evidence that they were wrong. Columbus then set sail across the Atlantic, with his family and Catholic priests weeping at the dock as he left, pleading with him, mocking him. They sailed and sailed, until they sighted land. And then there was a crisis. The sailors wanted to turn back. They were sure that they were heading to certain and terrible death. They decided that probably they would get caught up in a strong current which would carry them over the edge, just as the Catholic priests had taught them. But, as Columbus pointed out, the land ahead didn't seem to be the gateway to a place of torture. And finally his reasoning prevailed. They sailed on, and landed- to be greeted by naked women and gifts of gold and silver. They found what to those sailors must have been a paradise: a society where gold was like stone, and where they were welcomed with open arms by friendly, exotic natives. They returned to Europe with their story. And very soon, a paradigm shift occurred. Everyone realized that *of course* the world was round, it had to be; after all, all around us (!) is the evidence. Now it's unthinkable that the earth is flat; just as it was unthinkable that the earth was round before the flat earth paradigm was toppled.

This idea of paradigm shifts is helpful with respect to the theory of evolution. It is presented as the obviously correct theory, most young people assume that the evidence for it is all around them. But it may well be toppled, even before the Lord's return, by the creationist paradigm; the evidence for which is also all around us, if we have eyes to see it. The thing about paradigms is that by their very nature, they seem to be so obviously and evidently correct. Understanding the idea of paradigms helps us to see that all human knowledge is largely a matter of perception. The only ultimately true knowledge is the knowledge we acquire from God's word.

In our preaching of the Gospel, we are in the business of paradigm shifting. It's a hard, hard job, because of the blindness, the stubbornness, the utter stupidity, the pathetic, small minded conservatism of human beings. The Lord pointed this out to His budding preachers in Lk. 5:37-39; he warned that men preferred the old wine rather than the new wine of His doctrine, because human beings prefer to stay with the old. Again, you will find this fact recognized and lamented by those truly at the frontiers of research. The famous Belarussian historian and scientist Immanuel Velikovsky came to the conclusion that major events have occurred in the history of Middle Eastern countries, especially Egypt, which have not been chronicled in orthodox history. He likewise presents evidence that the standard dating and chronology of much ancient history is hopelessly inaccurate; he demonstrates how there are whole centuries which have been wilfully forgotten by historians. Whether or not he is correct, he presents evidence which demands some kind of verdict which orthodox history can't supply. Some of his reasoning confirms the truth of the Biblical record in places where orthodox history contradicts it ⁽²⁾. Yet Velikovsky's ideas have not been accepted- yet. They require too big a paradigm shift, a rejection of too much and of too many respected historians. It was an agony of his soul that human beings prefer to live in a kind of wilful amnesia, forgetting the evidence for whole centuries of human experience, because they are unwilling to make the necessary paradigm shift. Velikovsky sums up his struggles in a posthumously published book, *Mankind In Amnesia* ⁽³⁾. There are many others like Velikovsky (especially in Communist Eastern Europe), who broke into new paradigms, but were unable to express their

discoveries because it would have meant toppling too much else. And for us too, the possession of the ultimate Truth of the basic Gospel means a lonely, sometimes despairing road when it comes to getting others to understand the matchless pearl which we have.

Drivers can see an accident coming, but not swerve; there is a lack of cognition somewhere in the human psyche. Pilots take off at times knowing that their wings are frozen, and crash. Amasa saw the sword and must have seen the possibility of death, but didn't take cognisance of it (2 Sam. 20:10). Samson must have known, on one level, what Delilah would do. It should have been obvious to the British and French that Germany would start a war in 1938. The smoker knows the habit is destructive. But mankind is in amnesia, somewhere, somehow, we fail to recognize the obvious. Likewise with the nearness of the Lord's return, with the urgency of our task in witness, with the evident need to follow God's word- this lack of cognisance so often comes into play. We really ought to pray, earnestly, for open hearts and eyes and obedient lives before our daily reading.

Toppling Paradigms

As I said, we're up against the same problem in the preaching of the Gospel. Take a Polish Catholic. To him, it's obvious that if you want to love God, you must go into the church on Sundays. You must respect the priest. If you're good, your soul will go to Heaven. He sees evidence for this all around him. Or take an atheist. Where is God? Why should he believe in such a being? There's no Euclidean proof He exists, those who do believe in God have to admit that ultimately it's all a matter of faith, they can't prove God's existence in any scientific way. The preaching of the true Gospel to the Catholic or the atheist is rather like Columbus reasoning with his sailors. There are many ex-Catholics, ex-atheists, ex-trinitarians etc. who will read these words and know exactly what I mean. Now you see all around you, both in the world and in the Bible, evidence that your old paradigm was so obviously wrong. I'm not suggesting that our beliefs are just another paradigm we're passing through. God's word is *the* Truth; there is a stability about the true Gospel which is unknown to those in the world. It is the Truth, and we know it's the Truth. If we carefully build on the rock of God's word, we are building on a rock and nothing, nothing whatever, will ever shake us. To me, this is just fantastic beyond words. Our conversion was not just another paradigm shift. Proof of this, to me at least, is found in the fact that those who leave the Faith normally go to the world, to the petty pleasures of the flesh, rather than to some new doctrinal understanding. The basic doctrines we have believed really are " the Truth " , we won't wake up one morning to find that we were totally mistaken about them.

At baptism, we passed from darkness to light; our blindness was taken away (Is. 42:7; Jn. 12:46; Acts 26:18; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Pet. 2:9). Paul's conversion was a pattern of ours (1 Tim. 1:16); and it involved blindness being lifted at baptism. The seven miracles (Gk. *semeion*, signs) recorded in John's Gospel are each intended to be read on a symbolic level. The " man born blind " in John 9 was an eloquent type of the believers: the unclean one had the spittle (word / spirit) of the Lord Jesus mixed with dust (flesh) and placed on his eyes. Then he had to go and baptize himself at Siloam, and then his blindness was lifted. It is stressed, really stressed (12 times in 32 verses) that the man was " blind " ; as if to emphasize how totally blind we are before our " washing " , and how blind the unsaved world is. The result was that the man was "put out of the synagogue" (Jn. 9:22)- and the very same phrase is used about all the other first century Jewish believers (Jn. 16:2). They were to go through exactly what he did. The Lord Jesus was well known for His many miracles of curing blind people (Lk. 7:21,22; Jn. 10:21; 11:37); it was as if he healed this affliction especially. All these miracles

were surely acted parables of His work in saving men from the spiritual blindness of their earlier life. The figure of blindness being lifted is truly a powerful picture of what happened at our conversion. From then on, we began to see (i.e. understand) for the first time. We began to understand something properly for the first time. We were *blind* beforehand. Previously, all our 'knowledge' was just perception, passing through paradigms. But our conversion wasn't just passing from one paradigm to another, just another intellectual adventure along a road to nowhere⁽⁴⁾. Significantly, the honest atheist or agnostic has to acknowledge that without the idea of conversion to that which is ultimately true, all our changes in life are meaningless. We personally are going nowhere, and therefore all the stages along the road are ultimately inconsequential. Again, Christians in higher education should be on the lookout for this kind of admission in the material they study⁽⁵⁾.

Notes

(1) This is not my idea. The idea of paradigm shifts and revolutions was popularized by T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

(2) Immanuel Velikovsky, *Ages In Chaos* and *Worlds In Collision* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1957 & 1959).

(3) Immanuel Velikovsky, *Mankind In Amnesia* (London: Gollancz, 1982).

(4) This, I suggest, is all that the 'conversion experiences' of some people amount to.

(5) George Orwell, *The Road To Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978 ed.) is an example of this.

4-3-3 Out Of Darkness

But the problem is that although we have been called out of darkness / blindness into the light of life, we are still blind in so many ways- even though blindness is a feature of the unsaved, and ignorance of God is the basis of His anger with men (2 Thess. 1:8). Crystal clear teaching of Jesus relating to wealth, brotherly love, personal forgiveness, the vital unity of His church, personal purity... these all go ignored in some way by each of us, and therefore by us as a community. The Lord gently warns us that we are *all* likely to be blind in some way- why, He asks, are we so keen to comment on our brother's blindness / darkness, when we too have such limited vision (Mt. 7:3)? We can read the same passages time and again, and fail to let them really register. For quite some time I have been reading Mt. 5:23,24, twice a year or more: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee...first be reconciled to thy brother". I read this as meaning 'If *you* have a problem with your brother, go and make it up with him'. But it doesn't say that. If you remember that your brother has a problem *with you*- i.e. when it's not your fault, but you know somehow he has something against you, although you don't have anything against him... Now this is an altogether higher and more difficult standard. And yet our tendency is simply to skim read and miss it all together.

We read the promises that we will always be provided with our basic needs, that we therefore should not anxiously worry about tomorrow...and yet we fail to believe them. On a community level as well as individually, there have been things we have been utterly blind to, although they were clearly stated in the word. We were amazingly slow to come out of darkness. Examples of this could be multiplied. The Christian hesitation to face up to their responsibility to go into all the world with the Gospel is one example of this blindness to

what we now see as obvious. The segregation of black and white believers in the early American and African ecclesias is another. If we have been blind as individuals and as a community in the past, it's quite likely that we still have our blind spots- serious ones, probably. Some things we did soon after our baptism we now see to be obviously wrong. How many more steps up the ladder must we go through?

4-3-4 The Blind Servant

We have mentioned at the start how blind the disciples were in some ways. There are many other examples of this among the faithful. Consider how David went ahead and planned for a temple, becoming obsessed with his plans, despite God telling him that He didn't want one. Our eyes have been enlightened, now we see (Eph. 1:18; 5:8; Col. 1:13; 1 Pet. 2:9). And yet in many ways we are blind spiritually. We see through a glass "darkly" (Gk. 'enigmatically'; 1 Cor. 13:12). The things of the Spirit are largely enigmas to us. Therefore Paul prays that his Ephesians would have "the eyes of their understanding" progressively enlightened, even though they had already been turned from darkness to light (Eph. 1:17,18). The disciples had been turned from darkness to light, but the Lord rebuked them for their blindness in not expecting His resurrection. So we must tackle the question: Are we blind, or not?

Of course we are blind and spiritually obtuse. And yet the New Testament speaks of us as if our blindness has been lifted. In the same way as our Lord sees us as if we are perfect, without blemish, as if we are already in the Kingdom, so he sees us as if we are without blindness. This is how he treated the disciples. He spoke of them as "seeing", i.e. understanding (Mt. 13:16; Lk. 10:23). But frequently he despaired at their lack of spiritual perception, i.e. their blindness. Yahweh describes His servant Israel, both natural and spiritual, as a blind servant: "Who is blind but my servant?...who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the Lord's servant?" (Is. 42:19). There is a real paradox here: a blind servant, or slave. What master would keep a blind servant? Only a master who truly loved him, and kept him on as his servant by pure grace. Yet this useless blind servant was God's servant and messenger- even though the blind were not acceptable as servants or sacrifices of God under the Law (Lev. 21:18,22)! God uses His spiritually blind servant people to proclaim His message to the world. The disciples, still blind to the call of the Gentiles, were sent out to preach to the whole world! And we too, blind as we are, are turning men from blindness to light. Paul points out the humility which we should therefore have in our preaching: there are none that truly understand, that really see; we are all blind. And yet we are "a guide of the blind, a light to them that sit in darkness" (Rom. 2:19). Therefore we ought to help the blind with an appropriate sense of our own blindness. The first century Jewish Christians failed utterly in this. And sadly much of our earlier Christian preaching was not accompanied by an awareness of our own limited spiritual horizons and vision.

Ultimately, we will only truly see in the Kingdom (Is. 29:18; 42:6; 1 Cor. 13:12). Then we will know (see) face to face. We will see God face to face, i.e. understand Him. It follows therefore that in some ways we are blind, or partially sighted, now. This is indicated by the Lord's symbolic healing of the blind man in two stages (Mk. 8:23-26). Firstly, the man saw men as if they were walking trees. Probably he scarcely knew what a tree or man looked like. Yet he is described as receiving his sight at this stage (8:24 Gk.). And then the Lord touched his eyes again, and again he is described (in the Greek) as receiving his sight (8:25- same phrase as in v.24). This time he saw all things (Gk.) clearly. This surely represents the full spiritual vision of the Kingdom. According to this type, we are at the stage of seeing men as if they are walking trees, perhaps wildly guessing about some things, lacking the most basic

sense of proportion. Perhaps when we speak so glibly about "eternal life" or being in the Kingdom, we are speaking as that partially healed blind man.

4-3-5 The Healed Blind Man

If we left it here, we might have the impression that our blindness is quite understood and accepted by God. Yet God reveals Himself as being so concerned with our blindness. Why? Surely it's because He knows that knowledge and understanding are the basis of our behaviour. We can so easily slip away from our understanding of God, and back into the blindness of the flesh. If we hate our brother, we are blind; we lack true sight, we lack true understanding of the word (1 Jn. 2:9-11), we have gone back to the blindness. A healed blind man who wilfully returns to his blindness is a tragic picture indeed. . The world's sinful behaviour is because it is blind, i.e. it lacks true understanding (Eph. 4:17-19). The blind man lacks an awareness of his sins, he lacks basic spiritual attributes and an appreciation of the Kingdom, because he lacks knowledge (1 Pet. 2:9). The Lord gave sight to His people and blinded those He will later condemn (Jn. 9:39-41). Blindness is associated with condemnation (2 Pet. 1:9). The fact that in some ways we are blind in spiritual terms should therefore be an unending source of concern to us. It should motivate us to search our souls, and truly come to the light of a true appreciation of God's word. Some parts of the Christian world around us seems to emphasize spiritual behaviour being achieved as an act of the will (e.g. "we should love one another"), rather than as the natural result of our knowledge of God from His word opening our eyes. Aspects of latter day Christianity are veering down the same road. Spiritual *understanding* is the basis of spiritual behaviour, not beating our weak nature with an iron will to be spiritual. The result of doing this will only be a surface spirituality, an outward appearance of righteousness.

In harmony with this, a read through the Gospels reveals the deep frustration and anger of the Lord Jesus because of the blindness of the disciples. Mark's record brings this out especially. The following comments by the Lord, almost under His breath, were all made within a matter of days of each other: "Peter said, Declare unto us this parable. And Jesus said, Are ye also *yet* without understanding? Do not ye *yet* understand?...do ye not *yet* understand, neither remember the five loaves of the five thousand? Perceive ye not *yet*...having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not?...how is it that ye do not understand?...O faithless generation, *how long* shall I be with you? *how long* shall I suffer you? (with reference to the disciples' faithlessness)...the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answereth (i.e. responded) *again*, and saith unto them, Children ...and they were astonished out of measure...Jesus went before them: and they were amazed...and he took *again* the twelve, and began to tell them what things should happen...Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask" (Mt. 15:17; 16:9; Mk. 8:18,21; 9:19; 10:1,24-32). Notice the stress on "how long" and "yet". The Lord clearly was disappointed at the slow rate of development. Their blindness was an agony to Him.

Especially does this come out in His attitude to the disciples after His resurrection. The exalted Son of God, *the Son of God*, poured out His anger on those eleven men. You get the sense of them cowering before the presence of a super-human intellect, beneath a force of personality that could concuss men when turned against them. He *upbraided* them for their lack of perception, their lack of understanding (Mk. 16:14; Lk. 24:25). As I read the record of this, there's part of me that feels so sorry for them. Thoughts of sympathy skate through my mind: *they weren't a bad crowd...only ordinary men...just poor little human beings down here on earth...only men...only human beings...limited by their own nature*. But this wasn't how the

Lord saw it at all. He was angry with them. The picture of the Son of God, the exalted Son of man with eyes as a flame of fire, upbraiding His friends, those he had died for... because they hadn't understood something which he knew and they knew had been within their power to. The picture is awesome.

Love The Word

The Lord Jesus hasn't changed. He still has the emotions of anger and frustration. He wants us to act as men who have had their eyes opened, rather than remain complacent at our blindness. He is the same Jesus who healed the blind man. Paul says the same: "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light... walk as children of the light...walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God by the...blindness of their hearts" (Eph. 5:8; 4:17,18). To be without spiritual vision, to sleepwalk through life as the world does, is deeply angering to God. A diet of telly, pop music and trashy newspapers can only induce the blindness of a vain mind. Of course this doesn't mean that academic appreciation of God's word is what commends us to God. But it is also true that correct understanding is important, and our blindness angers God. Blindness alienates men from Him. Yet we know we are blind. There's so much we don't perceive as we should, so much we are blind to. And this blindness separates us from God. It frustrates the Lord Jesus; he is angry when those who have eyes to see (i.e. have been converted) still don't see (Mk. 8:18).

The healed blind man is a pattern for us each one. It is our lack of knowledge of God which separates us from Him. When we fully 'see' Him intellectually, we will see Him physically. So this ought to fire us with a true zeal for understanding, a desire to lift up our voice for understanding, a crying out for it, that we might find the knowledge of God (Ps. 119:169; Prov. 2:3-5). As we sing, " Our weakness help / Our darkness chase" . Surely we ought to have an urge to speed up our development, to chase our blindness; because sins of ignorance are still sins. Our blindness is no excuse. In this sense, lack of spiritual understanding is not unrelated to sinfulness. One of the blind men Jesus cured summed up the feelings of all the others when he said that *the one thing* he wanted was to see (Mt. 20:33). Those healed blind men are types of us. True understanding (seeing) should be the one thing we want. " Wisdom is the *principal* thing; therefore get wisdom" Prov. 4:7). This doesn't amount to dashing through our readings in 15 mindless minutes a day. It's more than that. There should be a real fire within us for understanding, a burning desire not to be blind, to live in the real world.

POSTSCRIPT: The Blindness Of The Disciples To The Resurrection Of Jesus

Comment	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
John's record presents the resurrection through the eyes of Mary Magdalene. She went alone to the tomb while it was yet dark. This doesn't				Jn. 20:1 Now on the first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, while it was yet dark, unto the tomb,

contradict the other accounts, which pick up the story at sunrise, when all the women were together there.

	Mk. 16:1 And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, that they might come and anoint him.	
Mt. 28:1 Now late on the sabbath day, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.	Mk. 16:2 And very early on the first day of the week, they come to the tomb when the sun was risen.	Lk. 24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came unto the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared.

Here's an example of our prayers and needs being answered whilst we are yet speaking. They worried about what had already been sorted!

Mk. 16:3 And they were saying among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb?

The women went to the tomb in the immediate aftermath of a great earthquake; or perhaps it happened whilst they were on their way there. Their love of their Lord, purely as love for Him as a person, as they had little firm expectation of a resurrection, is	Mt. 28:2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled away the stone, and sat upon it. Mt. 28:3 His appearance
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amazing. The earthquake didn't phase them. Likewise we note that the disciples are described as "weeping" for the loss of Jesus, the Greek word meaning specifically to weep aloud (Mk. 16:10). And yet the Lord appears to them in that state and upbraids them for not believing His words and for having *hard* hearts (Mk. 16:14). Faith is *so* crucial- and for all their *love* of Him, they didn't have much *faith* in Jesus. Are there similarities with ourselves? Do we on one hand love Him, and yet remain hard hearted to His words?

The first appearance of the Angel to the women- outside the tomb

Mt. 28:5 And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye; for I know that ye seek Jesus, who hath been crucified.
Mt. 28:6 He is not here; for he is risen, even as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.
Mt. 28:7 And go quickly,

and tell his
disciples, He
is risen from
the dead; and
lo, he goeth
before you
into Galilee;
there shall ye
see him: lo, I
have told you.

Mk. 16:4 and
looking up, they
see that the
stone is rolled
back: for it was
exceeding
great.

Lk. 24:2 And they
found the stone
rolled away from
the tomb.

and seeth the
stone taken
away from the
tomb.

Mk. 16:5 And
entering into
the tomb, they
saw a young
man sitting on
the right side,
arrayed in a
white robe; and
they were
amazed.

Lk. 24:3 And they
entered in, and
found not the body
of the Lord Jesus.

Mk. 16:6 And
he saith unto
them, Be not
amazed: ye
seek Jesus, the
Nazarene, who
hath been
crucified: he is
risen; he is not
here: behold,
the place where
they laid him!

Mk. 16:7 But
go, tell his
disciples and
Peter, He goeth
before you into
Galilee: there
shall ye see
him, as he said
unto you.

Second Angelic
appearance

Meetings with two

Lk. 24:4 And it

separate Angels
didn't make the
women understand ;
now two Angels
appear together and
tell them the same
words as the other
Angels had said.

came to pass, while
they were perplexed
thereabout, behold,
two men stood by
them in dazzling
apparel:

Lk. 24:5 and as they
were affrighted and
bowed down their
faces to the earth,
they said unto them,
Why seek ye the
living among the
dead?

Lk. 24:6 He is not
here, but is risen:
remember how he
spake unto you
when he was yet in
Galilee,

Lk. 24:7 saying that
the Son of man must
be delivered up into
the hands of sinful
men, and be
crucified, and the
third day rise again.

Lk. 24:8 And they
remembered his
words,

Mt. 28:8 And
they departed
quickly from
the tomb with
fear and great
joy,
Mk. 16:8 And
they went out,
and fled from
the tomb; for
trembling and
astonishment
had come upon
them:

Lk. 24:9 and
returned from the
tomb,

After initially saying
nothing, they did
eventually tell the
disciples. Matthew
and Luke omit this
disobedience to the
Lord's command to
witness. The record
in a beautiful way
both covers their
weakness, and yet

and they said
nothing to any
one; for they
were afraid.

also brings it out. In fact resistance to the command to tell others, or being slow to fulfil it, is another theme of the resurrection accounts.

Peter and John went to the tomb after having first of all disbelieved Mary Magdalene.

and ran to bring his disciples word.

and told all these things to the eleven, and to all the rest.

Lk. 24:10 Now they were Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James: and the other women with them told these things unto the apostles.

Lk. 24:11 And these words appeared in their sight as idle talk; and they disbelieved them.

Lk. 24:12 But Peter arose, and ran unto the tomb; and stooping and looking in, he seeth the linen cloths by themselves; and he departed to his home, wondering at that which was come to pass.

Jn. 20:2 She runneth therefore, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we know not where they have laid him.
Jn. 20:3 Peter therefore went forth, and the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb.
Jn. 20:4 And they ran both together: and the other disciple outran Peter, and came first to the tomb;
Jn. 20:5 and stooping and looking in, he seeth the linen cloths lying; yet entered he not in.
Jn. 20:6 Simon Peter therefore also cometh,

Mk. 16:9 Now
when he was
risen early on
the first day of
the week, he
appeared first to
Mary
Magdalene,
from whom he
had cast out
seven demons.

following him,
and entered into
the tomb; and
he beholdeth
the linen cloths
lying,

Jn. 20:7 and the
napkin, that was
upon his head,
not lying with
the linen cloths,
but rolled up in
a place by itself.

Jn. 20:8 Then
entered in
therefore the
other disciple
also, who came
first to the
tomb, and he
saw, and
believed.

Jn. 20:9 For as
yet they knew
not the
scripture, that
he must rise
from the dead.

Jn. 20:10 So the
disciples went
away again unto
their own home.

Jn. 20:11 But
Mary was
standing
without at the
tomb weeping:
so, as she wept,
she stooped and
looked into the
tomb;

Jn. 20:12 and
she beholdeth
two angels in
white sitting,
one at the head,
and one at the
feet, where the
body of Jesus

had lain.

Jn. 20:13 And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.

Jn. 20:14 When she had thus said, she turned herself back, and beholdeth Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus.

Jn. 20:15 Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou hast borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.

Jn. 20:16 Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turneth herself, and saith unto him in Hebrew, Rabboni; which is to say, Teacher.

Jn. 20:17 Jesus saith to her, Touch me not;

for I am not yet
ascended unto
the Father: but
go unto my
brethren, and
say to them, I
ascend unto my
Father and your
Father, and my
God and your
God.

On the way to tell
the disciples , Jesus
appears a second
time to Mary
Magdalene. She still
fears.

Mt. 28:10 sounds as
if Jesus intended not
to reveal Himself to
the disciples until
they met in Galilee.
However, Jn. 21:1
stresses that He
revealed Himself to
them in Galilee
again; and Jn. 21:14
notes this was the
third time that the
disciples as a group
saw the risen Lord.
Perhaps the degree
of their unbelief was
unexpected even to
the risen Lord.

Mt. 28:9 And
behold, Jesus
met them,
saying, All
hail. And they
came and took
hold of his
feet, and
worshipped
him.
Mt. 28:10
Then saith
Jesus unto
them, Fear
not: go tell my
brethren that
they depart
into Galilee,
and there shall
they see me.

Mk. 16:10 She
went and told
them that had
been with him,
as they
mourned and
wept.

Jn. 20:18 Mary
Magdalene
cometh and
tellethe the
disciples, I have
seen the Lord;
and that he had
said these
things unto her.

Mk. 16:11 And
they, when they
heard that he
was alive, and
had been seen
of her,
disbelieved.

Mt. 28:11
Now while
they were
going, behold,
some of the
guard came

into the city,
and told unto
the chief
priests all the
things that
were come to
pass.

Mt. 28:12 And
when they
were
assembled
with the
elders, and had
taken counsel,
they gave
much money
unto the
soldiers,

Mt. 28:13
saying, Say
ye, His
disciples came
by night, and
stole him
away while we
slept.

Mt. 28:14 And
if this come to
the governor's
ears, we will
persuade him,
and rid you of
care.

Mt. 28:15 So
they took the
money, and
did as they
were taught:
and this saying
was spread
abroad among
the Jews, and
continueth
until this day.

The Jewish public
looked for Jesus to
release them from
Roman bondage; but
He patiently and

Mk. 16:12 And after these things he was manifested in	Lk. 24:13 And behold, two of them were going that very day to a village named Emmaus,
--	---

repeatedly explained that His Kingdom was not of this world, rather would it come in a political sense at His second coming; and the essence of the Kingdom and liberation He preached was spiritual and internal, rather than physical and external. Yet the disciples didn't get it- they thought Jesus would've redeemed Israel there and then (Lk. 24:21). Their total lack of attention to the Lord's words is brought out by their lament that now was "the third day" after His death- when this ought to have been the very day they were looking for His resurrection!

The disciples were "astonished" (Lk. 24:22) and "marveled" (Lk. 24:12,41). The same two Greek words recur together in Acts 2:7,12, describing how the crowd to whom the disciples preached soon afterwards were likewise "amazed and marveled". Perhaps this was how and why the disciples (and Peter especially) could achieve such a

another form unto two of them, as they walked, on their way into the country.

which was threescore furlongs from Jerusalem.

Lk. 24:14 And they communed with each other of all these things which had happened.

Lk. 24:15 And it came to pass, while they communed and questioned together, that Jesus himself drew near, and went with them.

Lk. 24:16 But their eyes were holden that they should not know him.

Lk. 24:17 And he said unto them,

What communications are these that ye have one with another, as ye walk? And they stood still, looking sad.

Lk. 24:18 And one of them, named Cleopas, answering said unto him, Dost thou alone sojourn in Jerusalem and not know the things which are come to pass there in these days?

Lk. 24:19 And he said unto them,

What things? And they said unto him, The things concerning Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people:

Lk. 24:20 and how

rapport with that crowd- because they had experienced those very same feelings when their faith and understanding was so weak.

The women said they had seen "a vision of Angels" rather than actual Angels (Lk. 24:23). They like the disciples later (Lk. 24:37) wished to spiritualize everything rather than face the fact that the real Christ had risen in concrete and actual reality.

the chief priests and our rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him.

Lk. 24:21 But we hoped that it was he who should redeem Israel. Yea and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things came to pass.

Lk. 24:22 Moreover certain women of our company amazed us, having been early at the tomb;

Lk. 24:23 and when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive.

Lk. 24:24 And certain of them that were with us went to the tomb, and found it even so as the women had said: but him they saw not.

Lk. 24:25 And he said unto them, O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!

Lk. 24:26 Behooved it not the Christ to suffer these things, and to enter into his glory?

Lk. 24:27 And beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them

in all the scriptures
the things
concerning himself.
Lk. 24:28 And they
drew nigh unto the
village, whither they
were going: and he
made as though he
would go further.
Lk. 24:29 And they
constrained him,
saying, Abide with
us; for it is toward
evening, and the day
is now far spent.
And he went in to
abide with them.
Lk. 24:30 And it
came to pass, when
he had sat down
with them to meat,
he took the bread
and blessed; and
breaking it he gave
to them.
Lk. 24:31 And their
eyes were opened,
and they knew him;
and he vanished out
of their sight.
Lk. 24:32 And they
said one to another,
Was not our heart
burning within us,
while he spake to us
in the way, while he
opened to us the
scriptures?
Lk. 24:33 And they
rose up that very
hour, and returned
to Jerusalem, and
found the eleven
gathered together,
and them that were
with them, Lk.
24:34 saying, The
Lord is risen indeed,
and hath appeared to
Simon.

Although the disciples accepted that Jesus had appeared to Simon, they didn't believe the account of Cleopas and his friend. The record emphasizes their refusal to believe.

Mk. 16:13 And they went away and told it unto the rest:

Lk. 24:35 And they rehearsed the things that happened in the way, and how he was known of them in the breaking of the bread.

neither believed they them.

Mk. 16:14 And afterward he was manifested unto the eleven themselves as they sat at meat;

Lk. 24:36 And as they spake these things, he himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.

Jn. 20:19 When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.

and he upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them that had seen him after he was risen.

Lk. 24:37 But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they beheld a spirit.

Lk. 24:38 And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and wherefore do questionings arise in your heart?

Joy isn't really a cause for disbelief. It's the grace in the inspired record

Lk. 24:39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see;

Jn. 20:20 And when he had said this, he showed unto

which makes that excuse for them. They preferred to spiritualize everything, as many do today, rather than face the actual implications of a Lord who is for real. They accepted it was Jesus, and yet they still disbelieved. Note in this context how the women said they had seen "a vision of Angels" rather than actual Angels (Lk. 24:23)

The resurrection narratives emphasize how Angels said the same words; how in the face of repeated disbelief, Jesus tried repeatedly to reassure them. This theme of repetition continues with Jesus saying twice "Peace be unto you!".

This incident of eating was to yet again reassure them that He was for real. Note how later on, by the sea of Tiberias, Jesus again

for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye behold me having. Lk. 24:40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. Lk. 24:41 And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered

them his hands and his side. The disciples therefore were glad, when they saw the Lord.

Jn. 20:21 Jesus therefore said to them again, Peace be unto you: as the Father hath sent me, even so send I you. Jn. 20:22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit: Jn. 20:23 whose soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them; whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

, he said unto them, Have ye here anything to eat? Lk. 24:42 And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish. Lk. 24:43 And he

ate before them- He had to keep repeating Himself to get it home to them, that He was for real. If those men, who had heard the many predictions of resurrection from the lips of the Lord Himself, found it hard to believe He was for real when He stood before them- how understandable it is for us to grasp that He is for real.

Acts 1:3 says that the Lord showed Himself to be alive to the disciples "by many infallible proofs". The suggestion is that they simply didn't accept Him as He stood there before Him; they failed to grasp that He was for real. They gave Him food to eat to check Him out; and He again ate before them in Galilee on His initiative.

There's meaning in the fact that Thomas' other name, Didymus, is given (Jn. 20:24). 'Didymus' means literally 'the double', presumably implying he was a twin. But 'Didymus' is a form of the same Greek

took it, and ate before them.
Lk. 24:44 And he said unto them, These are my words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me.

Jn. 20:24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.
Jn. 20:25 The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he

word we find in Mt. 28:17, describing the 'doubt', literally the doubleness, i.e. the double mindedness, which there was in the disciples. Again, the element of doubt and lack of faith is being emphasized.

They still weren't obedient to their risen Lord- they didn't go immediately into Galilee. They remained at least eight days in Jerusalem, until Jesus appeared to Thomas there.

said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.

Jn. 20:26 And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them. Jesus cometh, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.

Jn. 20:27 Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and see my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and put it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

Jn. 20:28 Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

Jn. 20:29 Jesus saith unto him, Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.

Jn. 20:30 Many

other signs
therefore did
Jesus in the
presence of the
disciples, which
are not written
in this book:
Jn. 20:31 but
these are
written, that ye
may believe
that Jesus is the
Christ, the Son
of God; and that
believing ye
may have life in
his name.

Mt. 28:16 But
the eleven
disciples went
into Galilee,
unto the
mountain
where Jesus
had appointed
them.
Mt. 28:17 And
when they saw
him, they
worshipped
him; but some
doubted.

Despite having seen
Him before, they *still*
doubted

This incident
occurred after the
disciples had already
met Jesus in a
mountain in Galilee
(Mt. 28:16). Their
going fishing might
imply that they just
returned to their old
business. Meeting
the risen Christ still
didn't have a
permanent effect
upon them.

The reference in Jn.
21:14 to "the third

Jn. 21:1 After
these things
Jesus
manifested
himself again to
the disciples at
the sea of
Tiberias; and he
manifested
himself on this
wise.
Jn. 21:2 There
was together
Simon Peter,
and Thomas
called Didymus,
and Nathanael

time that Jesus was manifested to the disciples" must mean that this was the third time recorded in John that Jesus revealed Himself to them all together as a group at one and the same time.

of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples.

Jn. 21:3 Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also come with thee. They went forth, and entered into the boat; and that night they took nothing.

Jn. 21:4 But when day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach: yet the disciples knew not that it was Jesus.

Jn. 21:5 Jesus therefore saith unto them, Children, have ye aught to eat? They answered him, No.

Jn. 21:6 And he said unto them, Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and ye shall find. They cast therefore, and now they were not able to draw it for the multitude of fishes.

Jn. 21:7 That disciple therefore whom Jesus loved saith unto Peter,

It is the Lord.
So when Simon
Peter heard that
it was the Lord,
he girt his coat
about him (for
he was naked),
and cast himself
into the sea.

Jn. 21:8 But the
other disciples
came in the
little boat (for
they were not
far from the
land, but about
two hundred
cubits off),
dragging the net
full of fishes.

Jn. 21:9 So
when they got
out upon the
land, they see a
fire of coals
there, and fish
laid thereon,
and bread.

Jn. 21:10 Jesus
saith unto them,
Bring of the fish
which ye have
now taken.

Jn. 21:11 Simon
Peter therefore
went up, and
drew the net to
land, full of
great fishes, a
hundred and
fifty and three:
and for all there
were so many,
the net was not
rent.

Jn. 21:12 Jesus
saith unto them,
Come and break
your fast. And
none of the

disciples durst
inquire of him,
Who art thou?
knowing that it
was the Lord.

Jn. 21:13 Jesus
cometh, and
taketh the
bread, and
giveth them,
and the fish
likewise.

Jn. 21:14 This
is now the third
time that Jesus
was manifested
to the disciples,
after that he was
risen from the
dead.

Jn. 21:15 So
when they had
broken their
fast, Jesus saith
to Simon Peter,
Simon, son of
John, lovest
thou me more
than these? He
saith unto him,
Yea, Lord; thou
knowest that I
love thee. He
saith unto him,
Feed my lambs.

Jn. 21:16 He
saith to him
again a second
time, Simon,
son of John,
lovest thou me?
He saith unto
him, Yea, Lord;
thou knowest
that I love thee.
He saith unto
him, Tend my
sheep.

Jn. 21:17 He
saith unto him

the third time,
Simon, son of
John, lovest
thou me? Peter
was grieved
because he said
unto him the
third time,
Lovest thou
me? And he
said unto him,
Lord, thou
knowest all
things; thou
knowest that I
love thee. Jesus
saith unto him,
Feed my sheep.

Jn. 21:18

Verily, verily, I
say unto thee,
When thou wast
young, thou
girdedst thyself,
and walkedst
whither thou
wouldest: but
when thou shalt
be old, thou
shalt stretch
forth thy hands,
and another
shall gird thee,
and carry thee
whither thou
wouldest not.

Jn. 21:19 Now
this he spake,
signifying by
what manner of
death he should
glorify God.

And when he
had spoken this,
he saith unto
him, Follow
me.

Jn. 21:20 Peter,
turning about,
seeth the

disciple whom
Jesus loved
following; who
also leaned
back on his
breast at the
supper, and
said, Lord, who
is he that
betrayeth thee?
Jn. 21:21 Peter
therefore seeing
him saith to
Jesus, Lord, and
what shall this
man do?
Jn. 21:22 Jesus
saith unto him,
If I will that he
tarry till I come,
what is that to
thee? Follow
thou me.
Jn. 21:23 This
saying therefore
went forth
among the
brethren, that
that disciple
should not die:
yet Jesus said
not unto him,
that he should
not die; but, If I
will that he
tarry till I come,
what is that to
thee?
Jn. 21:24 This
is the disciple
that beareth
witness of these
things, and
wrote these
things: and we
know that his
witness is true.
Jn. 21:25 And
there are also
many other

things which
Jesus did, the
which if they
should be
written every
one, I suppose
that even the
world itself
would not
contain the
books that
should be
written.

Lk. 24:45 Then
opened he their
mind, that they
might understand
the scriptures;
Lk. 24:46 and he
said unto them,
Thus it is written,
that the Christ
should suffer, and
rise again from the
dead the third day;
Lk. 24:47 and that
repentance and
remission of sins
should be preached
in his name unto all
the nations,
beginning from
Jerusalem.
Lk. 24:48 Ye are
witnesses of these
things.
Lk. 24:49 And
behold, I send forth
the promise of my
Father upon you:
but tarry ye in the
city, until ye be
clothed with power
from on high.

The disciples
returned from
Galilee to Jerusalem
[unrecorded]

Mt. 28:18 And Jesus came to them and spake unto them, saying,	Mk. 16:15 And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and	Lk. 24:50 And he led them out until they were over against Bethany: and he lifted up his
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<p>All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Mt. 28:19 Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: Mt. 28:20 teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.</p>	<p>preach the gospel to the whole creation. Mk. 16:16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned. Mk. 16:17 And these signs shall accompany them that believe: in my name shall they cast out demons; they shall speak with new tongues; Mk. 16:18 they shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall in no wise hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. Mk. 16:19 So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken unto them, was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. Mk. 16:20 And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by the</p>	<p>hands, and blessed them. Lk. 24:51 And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. Lk. 24:52 And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: Lk. 24:53 and were continually in the temple, blessing God.</p>
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signs that
followed.
Amen.

4.4 Are Christians Too Academic?

To a non-believer, parts of our community can appear far too academic. We spend whole days at our Bible Schools, whole chapters in our writings, intensively studying just a few Bible chapters, analyzing verses and phrases in great detail, striving to really understand what God is saying. And the question arises with most of us at some stage: are Christians too academic?

To be academic and intellectual for its own sake is evidently wrong. There are whole theological libraries full of dry, dusty commentaries on Scripture; reading those books will make little practical impact upon our lives. Theology can become, for those with the time, opportunity and intellectual bent, an endlessly fascinating hobby. And it must be said that our own writers and speakers, especially in the eyes of the newly baptized, can sometimes appear academic to no end. We talk about the exact meaning of Hebrew and Greek words, we seek to follow through the nuances of Paul's arguments, pick up possible allusions...but at the end of it all we are the same weak, spiritually struggling creatures as when we began.

But- and it is a big 'but'- the Proverbs encourage us to lift up our voice for understanding of God, to cry aloud for it more than for anything else in this mortal life. The Bible is a book of doctrine, a book of God's words to us. God is His word (Jn. 1:1-3); if we are to know God, we must study His word. And because His ways are infinitely above ours, this won't be so straightforward. And likewise with our Lord Jesus Christ; to know Him is to understand the doctrines about Him. To falsely understand them is to be ignorant of Christ (1 Jn. 2:22,23 cp. 2 Jn. 9). Conversion is a receiving "the knowledge of the truth" (Heb. 10:26). These verses teach that there can be no relationship with Christ unless there is some kind of correct doctrinal understanding of Him. He Himself told us that we show our love for Him by both *having* and obeying His teaching (Jn. 14:21). It is easy to overlook this; to *have* His teaching is a sign of our love for Him. To study and truly *know* His word is therefore vital; and those who hold the doctrines of a false Christ cannot love the real Christ, according to John.

Knowledge is proportionate to works (Tit. 1:16); true understanding is the basis for behaviour. Otherwise works are just the result of our natural inclinations, not a desire to glorify God. God's people are described as "them of understanding" (Dan. 11:35). Evidently knowledge and appreciation *is* related to our having covenant relationship with God. Those who do not understand will ultimately be condemned by God (Rev. 1:16-18 cp. 14:10). Understanding and perceiving the meaning of the parables would result in conversion, repentance and forgiveness (Mk. 4:12). Moses persevered because he *understood*. "Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law" (Ps. 119:35) is one of many links in David's thought between understanding and obedience. "For this saying go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter" (Mk. 7:29) shows the value which the Lord placed on correct understanding. The Gentile woman had seen the feeding of the 5,000 and *understood* the implications of the

lesson which the Lord was teaching. We get the feeling that the Lord was *overjoyed* at her perception and therefore made an exception to His rule of not being sent at that time to the Gentiles, but to the house of Israel.

The Importance Of Doctrine

We are sanctified by the presence of God's word within us, as well as by the blood of Christ (Jn. 17:17). But God's 'word' clearly refers to that word understood, as it is in Christ. Thus Paul breathes a sigh of relief at the end of his life when he says that he has "fought a good fight...finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). To keep believing true doctrine ("the faith") is likened to a lifelong struggle, a gruelling race. It hardly appears like this when we first learn the basic doctrines and are baptized. That it will be a struggle to continue believing them properly hardly seems possible in those innocent days. But holding on to true doctrine is a pre-requisite for acceptance into the Kingdom: "Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truths (AV mg.) may enter in" (Is. 26:2). Watching our doctrinal beliefs is as important as watching our own life: "Take heed unto thyself (i.e. lifestyle), and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16). Even the salvation of others can be partly dependent upon our own correct understanding.

A correct *understanding* of the Law and the sacrifices meant that a man was near the Kingdom (Mk. 12:34). Cornelius was told "*words*, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved" (Acts 11:14). Belief is essential for salvation, and yet belief must have some intellectual basis; there must be some knowledge to be believed before faith can exist. Therefore it is utterly impossible to divorce understanding from ultimate acceptability. This is because the vital virtue of faith is rooted in understanding. With the heart (mind / brain) man believes unto salvation (Rom. 10:10); the early believers clung to the Lord they had believed "with purpose of *heart*" (Acts 11:23). They that had not heard of the cross of Christ were made to see, understand and therefore believe by Paul's preaching (Rom. 15:21). Our appeals likewise must be to the understanding. Abraham 'accounted' that God was able to raise Isaac (Heb. 11:19); his faith involved an intellectual process. Israel were to hear / understand "the statutes and judgments...that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them" (Dt. 5:1). Understanding is related to obedience.

This said, we must be careful to avoid the feeling that if we cling on to the basic doctrines we understood at baptism, this alone will somehow tide us into the Kingdom. The man who hung on to his talent but did nothing profitable with it made this mistake. We must come to know the Father and Son and develop a dynamic relationship with them. This doesn't mean that we must ever be on the lookout for new, fascinating interpretations of Bible passages; for this can become an obsession in itself. Our appreciation of the essential being of God is what should be ever increasing. By rightly dividing (i.e. 'correctly expounding', Dr. Thomas' translation) the word of truth in our study of it, we show ourselves "approved unto God" (2 Tim. 3:15). We are *all* professional students of the word- producing our workmanship of study, and presenting it to the Master. Now it depends what we mean by the word 'academic', but from this viewpoint it's not possible that Christians can be too academic. Our acceptability with God partly depends upon our correct understanding of His word. And true understanding leads to true practice. Thus Dan. 12:10 says that the wicked cannot understand the prophetic word, but the righteous will- in other words, true understanding is related to practical righteousness. God's word makes us *wise*, it gives us wisdom, unto salvation. Wisdom is therefore necessary for salvation. Not wisdom in a worldly sense; but spiritual

knowledge and appreciation (intellectual things, in the pure sense of the word) are essential in the salvation process.

“Search the scriptures”

The Lord told the Jews to “search the scriptures” so that they would have the word of God and the love of God abiding in them (Jn. 5:38-42). They academically knew “the scriptures”, but the voice of God, the presence of God, and the love of God this reveals, was simply hidden from them. They weren’t *really* studying. These ‘Christians’ weren’t academic enough. But the Saviour also upbraided His very own men for their lack of true Biblical perception: “O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Lk. 24:25). Note that He did not upbraid them for not understanding His own clear prophecies concerning His passion; instead He rebukes them for not grasping the OT teaching about His death and resurrection. Yet if we try to prove from the OT alone that Messiah would die and resurrect, we are largely forced to reason from types. Even Isaiah 53 is only a prophecy of Christ insofar as Hezekiah (to whom it primarily refers) was a type of Christ. Stephen in Acts 7 resorts to typology to prove his points about the Messiahship of Jesus. The point is, the Lord expected those simple fishermen to have worked these things out, to have heard the voice of God in those OT types. And He upbraided them because they failed to do so.

God Expects...

God expects us to understand much more than we think He does. Thus He condemned Israel in Jeremiah’s time because He had spoken to them but they had not understood, and therefore they had not responded (Jer. 35:17). They heard the word, as we read it, but they didn’t really hear His voice. They thought that getting to grips with Bible study was just for those who were into that kind of thing; with the result that God rejected them. Elisha told Joash that his arrows represented “the arrow of the Lord’s deliverance from Syria: for thou shalt smite the Syrians” (2 Kings 13:17). He then told Joash to smite with the arrows upon the ground. Joash did so, three times- and Elisha was angry with him, because the number of times he smote the ground with them would be the number of times he defeated Syria. We might think that Elisha was being rather unreasonable with Joash; how was he to know what was in Elisha’s mind? But the point is, Elisha expected the king to be more spiritually perceptive, to understand that they were enacting a parable of deliverance, to have grasped that those arrows were symbolic of victory over Syria. And so the lesson comes to us: we may be expected to have a greater understanding than we think reasonable of God to expect of us.

All this ought to impart a sense of urgency to us. God expects us to search His word if we love Him. Because of the evil of the world around us, we should “redeem the time” by coming to understand God’s will, buying up the opportunities to understand as we see the Lord’s coming approaching- so Paul reasons in Eph. 5:16. Study of the word isn’t easy, and doesn’t always yield immediate results. Paul likens it to the ox treading out the corn, tramping monotonously up and down (cp. in a concordance or between passages), only slowly producing the bread of life (1 Cor. 9:10 cp. 1 Tim. 5:18). we will not see flashing lights all the time, wonderful things don’t just come jumping out of every page. To the onlooker upon our Bible study, the whole procedure can look boring and pointless. But what do we expect as mortals, seeking to understand the infinite God, searching the pages of His word to do so? Of course there will be some dead ends, whole passages will remain closed to us. But we are oxen, trampling out the corn. And slowly, it comes.

“With all the understanding”

Our thoughts are brought together by a consideration of Mk. 12:33,34. The Scribe said that the most important commandment to love God “with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly (Gk. ‘in an intellect-having way’), He said unto him, Thou art not far from the Kingdom”. Notice how ‘understanding’ with the intellect is put higher in the list than loving one’s neighbour. The fundamental thing is to correctly understand, and this will naturally lead to a life of practical love. Our surrounding ‘Christian’ world has inverted this order; love of neighbour has been placed above correct understanding of God. Because the Scribe answered in an intellect-having way, the Saviour said that He was near to the Kingdom. To reach the Kingdom therefore involves correct understanding.

The words of Mk. 12:33 allude to a number of OT passages which likewise show the superiority of knowledge and practical service over sacrifices (1 Sam. 15:22; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6-8). Putting them together we find the following parallels:

To obey God’s word	is better than sacrifice
To listen to God’s word	is better than sacrifice
To show mercy	is better than sacrifice
To know God	is better than sacrifice
To be humble and just	is better than sacrifice
To understand God	is better than sacrifice

Understanding God, hearing His word, knowing God (all acts of the intellect) are therefore paralleled with practical things like loving out neighbour, showing mercy, justice etc. These practical things are an outcome of our correct knowledge of God. The works of a doctrinally apostate ‘Christian’ world must be considered in this light.

So we return to our question. Are Christians too academic? If by ‘academic’ we mean ‘applying the intellect to God’s word’, the answer has to be: ‘Not nearly enough!’. But if we mean simply ‘academic for the sake of it’, my response is ‘Yes, probably a bit too much, with a fair bit of pseudo-science and pseudo-learning thrown in too’. Our love of God should kindle a real burning fire inside our minds, to know Him and His Son the more. This thirst for knowledge will not be constrained by our brainpower, linguistic ability, education, powers of analysis etc. This earnest desire to know the love of Christ which passes such human knowledge can (and does!) wonderfully bind together all true believers, from the illiterate farmer to the professor of nuclear physics.

4-5 God’s Use Of Language

For many readers, the arguments presented so far will be adequate. Others will require more proof. And still others may be fascinated by the wider issues our discussion has opened up. We have given many examples of how the Bible is written from a human perspective; but it is also from God's perspective. This apparent paradox is surely a powerful proof of the Bible's total inspiration. A father speaks to a child from his perspective, and yet also from that of the child; and it is this masterful mixture which we see in the way the Bible is written. The way God's word mixes the Divine and the human perspective is what makes it hard to understand for the superficial reader, and yet at the same time open up wonderfully to the truly child-like reader.

Sometimes God indicates from what perspective the record is written; at other times He doesn't. Thus Matthew 3:16 makes it clear that Christ saw Heaven opened at his baptism, and the Spirit descending like a dove. But Luke 3:21-22 just says that "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended". Luke doesn't say that this is only what happened from Christ's perspective. This problem of perspective is at the root of the misunderstanding of the demon language in the Gospels.

As the perfect Father and Teacher, God uses language in a manner which will intellectually stretch His children; stretch us to rise up to His way of perceiving things. Thus sometimes God appears to use language with no regard as to whether the people who first heard it could understand it. God spoke to Job about snow (Job 37:6), to Abraham about sand on the sea shore (Gen. 22:17), to Noah about rain (Gen. 7:4) – things which they had never seen. And the New Testament concepts of grace, agape love, humility etc. were outside the ability of first century Greek to properly express; new words had to enter the language in order to express these ideas [\[1\]](#). Yet God is also capable of speaking in the language of the day, bringing Himself right down to our human level of language use. It is vital to appreciate that God uses language in different ways in different parts of the Bible – otherwise our interpretation of it will be inconsistent and contradictory.

The wonder of inspiration is that God both accommodates Himself to the understanding of His readership and yet also uses language in His own way. The issue of demons is a classic example of this. We can clearly demonstrate that demons refer to idols and do not exist. Yet the New Testament describes Christ's miracles using the language of demon possession. It is careless Bible study that seizes upon these New Testament verses and makes them prove the existence of demons. Rather must we analyze the way in which God uses language and reconcile these verses with the 'mega-principles' of the Bible concerning the supremacy of God and the true origin of trials and sin.

God And Language

Language is an expression of the mind; our words express our thoughts (Matt. 12:34). In this sense, God is His word (Jn. 1:1). We know that God's mind works on an entirely different level to our own (Isa. 55:9). Therefore the expression of His mind in the form of words is going to use language in a very different way to how we do. If this fact is firmly recognized by us, we should not be surprised that we face some apparent paradoxes when we examine the Bible text.

It is for this reason that the Bible is not written as we would write a book designed to reveal God to men. It is therefore not a straightforward statement of beliefs with a series of clear commands to obey. To understand a doctrine we must search the entire Scriptures, learning to

appreciate God's way of thinking and speaking. This means that a degree of thought and reflection is necessary before the system of truth which comprises the Gospel becomes clear. Faith in God comes from hearing or reading His words (Rom. 10:17).

It is evident that God does not passively ignore this faithless world; He is actively angry with them, and He actively seeks to confuse all who do not have a truly humble attitude to His word (Matt. 13:10-12; 2 Thess. 2:11; Isa. 66:4; Ez. 20:25). His word is therefore written in a manner which confuses some and yet clearly teaches others, no matter how intellectually limited they may be. It has often been objected that if in fact demons don't exist, then the language of demons in the New Testament is confusing people. But seeing that God does confuse people, this is not really an objection. God holds back many people from knowing His truth; e.g. they may die as babies, or live in a time and place where there is no knowledge of the Bible. He may also hold others back from seeing His true message through the way in which He has written His word. It is God's prerogative to call or not call people to the true Gospel, and we should not find anything objectionable about the ways in which He chooses to do this.

The following are all examples of how the language of the Bible is confusing:

- Revelation 12:7-9 if read alone and out of context would teach the superficial reader that the devil is a dragon with rebellious Angels following him in heaven.
- Matthew 25:41 speaks of the devil and his Angels being thrown into eternal fire in hell. Only a careful consideration of what the words 'hell' (Gehenna) and 'Angels' mean can lead to a correct understanding of this passage.
- The parable of Luke 16:19-28 quickly leads the superficial reader to find support for the pagan ideas of 'immortal souls' and going to heaven on death; neither of which find Biblical support.
- The account of the thief on the cross needs careful pondering or else the reader will get the wrong impression that the believer goes to heaven on death.
- Christ is spoken of in language which can easily be misunderstood to teach that he was the creator of the world; only once we understand the concepts of the new creation and God manifestation can we make sense of these passages.
- The well known words of John 14:1-3 superficially appear to teach something about going to Heaven; until the reader analyses what the Bible means by the house of God, and then takes those verses apart clause by clause [\[2\]](#).

It is clear from this that true interpretation of the Bible takes some thoughtful pondering of it. Have you ever considered the fact that most of Christ's words were totally misunderstood by those who heard him? Nicodemus thinks he must re-enter the womb of his mother in order to be born again (Jn. 3:4); when Jesus said "Where I am going, you cannot come", people thought he was going to commit suicide (Jn. 8:21-22); when he spoke of his flesh as "bread for the life of the world", they honestly thought he was suggesting some kind of cannibalism. And his disciples were no better. They totally missed the point about his death and resurrection; when he warned them of the leaven of the Pharisees, they thought he meant they shouldn't buy yeast from them (Mk. 8:14-21 cp. Matt. 16:5); when he says Lazarus has fallen

asleep in death, they think he means that Lazarus is having a good nap (Jn. 11:12); and when he speaks about having food to eat which they don't know about, they think someone has been sneaking him a packed lunch (Jn. 4:33). The difference between the disciples and the Jews generally was that they thought on his words, they remembered them afterwards, they stayed around after his confusing parables and asked what on earth he was talking about, whilst the rest of the listeners went away confused (Matt. 13:10-12), although no doubt they thought they'd understood everything. So the fact that people today misunderstand the language of the Bible, especially of the Lord Jesus concerning demons, should not come as much of a surprise.

God's doctrines are described as a secret, a mystery; the Hebrew word used in this connection means 'A confidential plan revealed to intimate friends'; and yet they are revealed to the true believers (Am. 3:7-8; Jer. 23: 18,22 AV mg.; Ps. 25:14; Eph. 3:3-6). Therefore the congregation of true believers is called "the secret assembly of the saints" (Ps. 89:7 Heb.). There are many Bibles around, but God's doctrines are to some extent a secret, and not understood by many of those who possess and read the Bible. It therefore follows that the Bible must be written in such a way as to conceal Truth from the majority of readers.

Typology

Much vital doctrine is taught by typology, which is hardly employing the means of straightforward statements to teach us. God intensely values typology; it is what Scripture is largely comprised of. It is therefore intended as a teaching medium, to be taken seriously as explicit commandments. God uses typology so much in order to indicate to us that He does not just see the lives of His servants at face value; He is working out a master-plan with them (perhaps on several levels) in the circumstances of their lives. The extensive use of typology is an indication that God wants men to love His word and search it out, to think deeply about it; and it is such people that He will reveal His Truth in its glorious simplicity.

A number of vital principles are taught to us by typology:

- The place of women in the church and in married life (Eph. 5)
- Gehenna as a place of destruction (rather than orthodox hell fire)
- many of the Kingdom passages speak of situations which were typical of the future Kingdom (e.g. the time of restoration, Solomon's kingdom, or Hezekiah's latter reign).

Indeed, the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth is hard to explicitly prove from the Old Testament, without recourse to typology. Even Isaiah 53 describes the sufferings of Hezekiah, who was typical of Jesus. Thus Stephen's defence of his belief in the Messiahship of Jesus rests largely on typology – e.g. the fact that Joseph/Jesus was rejected by his brethren at first (Acts 7:13).

Without doubt God frames the Biblical record in order to highlight certain facts. Thus there is a marked lack of information concerning the father and mother of Melchizedek in Genesis. The Spirit in Hebrews comments that he was "Without father, without mother...having neither beginning of days, nor end of life" (Heb. 7:3). Now this is not literally true. God is providing us with an interpretation of how He worded the account in Genesis, making the point that Melchizedek typified Christ. But although we are not to read Hebrews 7:3 at face value, there is no explicit indication to this effect. The objection that the New Testament does not warn us against reading the 'casting out of demons' language literally is therefore not

valid. Hebrews 7:3 is one of many examples of where it is imperative to understand the way in which God is using language if we are to correctly understand His word, but there is no explicit warning about this in Hebrews 7:3!

Metonymy

If we may speak in human terms, the speed and power of God's intellect is such that He does not need words as we do in order to reason and reach conclusions. This begins to be reflected by the way in which the Bible is full (fuller than many realize) of the device of metonymy, whereby the cause is put for the effect. The piercing analysis of God is reflected by the way in which He uses this linguistic device so frequently. Much misunderstanding of the atonement has arisen through failing to appreciate God's use of metonymy. Other examples include James 3:6, where "the tongue" means the words the tongue speaks; and 1 John 5:15, where God hearing our prayers means (see context) that He answers them. Unless we appreciate metonymy, we will come to the conclusion that God's word is making incorrect statements; for example, that mere possession of a tongue means that our whole body is defiled (James 3:6).

God's Language: Shockingly Different

It should be apparent from the above that God does not use language in a straightforward, literal way. Those who have been reading the Bible all their lives may be so used to God's language that they do not appreciate the extent to which this is true. There are times, however, when God uses language in a very different way to how we normally do. Perhaps we need to drive this home with the following perhaps 'shocking' examples.

God sometimes uses language in a way which we may find embarrassing or inappropriate. Thus when creating a mini-parable to explain the gathering of the responsible to him at the second coming, Jesus likens himself to a rotting carcass which will instinctively attract the eagles, representing the responsible (Lk. 17:37). Within the human use of language, it seems inappropriate to liken the Lord Jesus Christ to a decaying carcass. It seems similarly inappropriate to liken God's response to our prayers to an unjust judge who grudgingly answers requests (Lk. 18:1-7), or to repeatedly compare Jesus to a thief (Mt. 24:43; Lk. 12:39,33; 1 Thess. 5:2-4; Rev. 3:3; 16:15). It seems out of place to liken believers struggling to enter the Kingdom to violent people trying to storm a city by force (Matt. 11:12). The absentee landlords of Galilee were despised by all; and yet the Lord uses one of them as a figure for Himself (Lk. 20:9). Most stunning of all is Psalm 78:36,65,66: "They (Israel) did flatter Him (God) with their mouth....then the Lord awaked...like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine. And he smote his enemies in the hinder parts". Now hold on, this just isn't what we expect; to read about God being flattered by foolish men, and for Him to be likened to a drunken soldier who goes on the rampage kicking others in their private parts (this is alluding back to 1 Sam. 5:9). And the Lord likens His final appeal to Israel to casting dung around them (Lk. 13:8).

Likewise, Galatians 5:12 contains a play on words which again seems quite inappropriate to us; so much so that many a Bible translator and expositor has had problems with it. The idea is that Paul wishes that the circumcision party would go further and fully emasculate themselves. This just isn't the way men would use language if they wrote the Bible uninspired by God.

Neither would Bible forgers attribute sarcastic language to God, but there are a number of examples of God using sarcasm (Ps. 2:4; 37:13; Isa. 44:14-20; Ex. 10:2 RV mg. "I have mocked the Egyptians"). In our use of language, "sarcasm is the lowest form of wit"; but not in God's. His utter omnipotence means He can use language in a different way to us. Even the briefest comparison of the Bible with an uninspired religious book will indicate that the very way the Bible uses language is itself a proof that God is the author. The artless way in which God describes the death and resurrection of His own Son is one of the clearest examples. The way Mary meets the risen Lord and thinks He is the gardener is a supreme example of how artless and wondrous is God's use of language.

John begins his first letter with an elaborate prologue. Raymond Brown comments: "Many commentators observe that a Prologue is an extraordinary beginning for an epistle since it violates all the standards of letter format". This 'violation' appears typical of how Scripture so often appears to 'violate' contemporary usages of language. [Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982) p. 176].

And just one more. We'd sooner skip over the words of Deuteronomy 23:12-13 than analyze them closely: "Thou shalt have a place also without the camp, whither thou shalt go forth abroad: and thou shalt have a paddle upon thy weapon; and it shall be, when thou wilt ease thyself abroad, thou shalt dig therewith". Yet there can be no doubt that this is one of the source passages for the words of Hebrews 13:13: "Let us go forth therefore unto him (Jesus) without the camp, bearing his reproach". When the Israelite soldier had a call of nature, he went forth "without the camp", doubtless with a sense of sheepishness as he carried his spear-cum-spade with him. Everyone knew what he was doing. This commonplace incident is picked up by the Spirit and made relevant to the Jewish Christians going forth from the camp of Israel, carrying with them the obvious reproach of the cross of Christ. Again, we labour the point: this just isn't the way we use language.

Why Is God's Language Different?

So, we return to the question of why God uses language in a different way to how we normally do:

- Because God is not limited by time, He speaks of things which do not now exist as if they do, because He knows that ultimately they will exist (Rom. 4:17). This explains why the Bible speaks as if Abraham is still alive although he is now dead; as if the believers are now saved in God's kingdom, although "he that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Matt. 10:22); as if Israel were obedient to God's word (Psalm 132:4 cp. Ex. 19:5-6), when they will only be so in the future; as if Christ existed before His birth, although he evidently only existed physically after his birth of Mary. The majority of so-called 'Christian' churches go wrong in these major doctrinal areas because they fail to appreciate that the Bible is written from God's perspective, not man's. The more we appreciate God's way of using language, the more difficulties disappear.

- When God wishes to emphasize something, He speaks as if nothing else needs to be taken into account in the language He uses. This is why salvation is often spoken of without mentioning the fact that it is conditional on certain things. The critic might respond: 'So the Bible says things that aren't correct!'. In a sense, yes it does, if that's how you want to put it. Remember the examples we gave about the sun 'rising', Abraham being alive when he was

dead etc. You can make anyone's words contradict themselves until you appreciate how they use language.

- God has inspired His word in order to interpret certain facts to us. This is further proof that we are not intended to insist on a strictly literal meaning to everything we read (for example, that the sun literally rises). Thus Matthew records that the people cried 'Hosanna' at Christ's entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:9). Seeing that first century Israel spoke Aramaic, this is doubtless what did actually come out of their lips. But Luke says that the same group of people shouted "Glory" (Lk. 19:38). Luke's Gospel seems to be designed for the Greek speaking world, and so he uses the Greek equivalent of 'Hosanna', even though they did not actually say that word. The way the New Testament quotes the Old with slight changes without pointing this out is another example of how God's word mixes interpretation with direct transmission of facts (e.g. Ps. 32:1-2 cp. Rom. 4:6-7). This fact is not irrelevant to the issue of demons. We have seen that the accounts of demons being cast out are framed in such a way as to show the supremacy of God's power over the vain traditions of the first century world.

- Another reason why God uses language differently to how we do is because He can read motives. Thus Galatians 5:3 says that "I testify to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law". Paul and many other Jewish Christians were circumcised, but Paul is reasoning in the letter to the Galatians that the true Jewish believer was not under an obligation to keep the Law: "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision" (Gal. 5:6). Therefore "every man that is circumcised" in Galatians 5:3 must mean 'every man who trusts in circumcision or wants to undergo it'. Some modern paraphrases support this, but the point is that what God actually said was that "every man that is circumcised...is a debtor to do the whole law" (see Greek text). Those words are just not true if taken out of context; we need to appreciate that God is speaking from the perspective of knowing men's motives.

God: Believer-centric

It must also be born in mind that because of the extreme importance of His people to Him, God uses language in a way which focuses very much upon them to the relative exclusion of all others. Frequently, New Testament references to "all men" really means "all true believers" or those who have become responsible to God. Hebrews 2:14 states that Christ killed the devil (the power of sin) on the cross; but this is only true for those in Christ. Those who are ignorant of the saving power of God's Truth are under the active control of sin- the Biblical devil. Revelation 20:5 speaks of "the dead" as those responsible to judgment, whereas many other Bible passages show that not all the dead will be raised. Only those who have heard the Gospel will be resurrected to judgment. Thus "the dead" in God's usage does not refer to everyone who has ever died. 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 speaks of "the dead" as those in Christ. Matthew 25:32 describes "all nations" coming before Christ for judgment. This indicates that to God, the world He sees is comprised of those who are responsible to Him; not literally "all nations" will come before Christ, only those people from them who are responsible to Him.

This was prefigured in the Old Testament by the way in which God saw the world as just Israel, those responsible to Him. This is reflected in His use of language; thus the Hebrew word *eretz* means both the whole earth and also the land of Israel. To God, the whole planet was just His people Israel. The Hebrew word for "South" is *negev*, which is the name of the

Southern region of Israel. 'The South' primarily refers to the South of Israel. Similarly, the Hebrew word for 'West' is the same word translated "Sea", often with the reference to the Mediterranean Sea which was the Western border of Israel. So the Bible is written from a Jewish perspective; the Gentile reader is 'expected' to understand that Gehenna and the concept of "eternal fire" are Jewish idioms for total destruction (Jer. 17:27; Jude 7). Again, the point has to be made that much misunderstanding has arisen in 'Christian' circles on the issue of hell through failing to appreciate that God is writing in Jewish terms. The New Testament is literally packed with phrases and other language which depend on an appreciation of Old Testament theology to make sense of (e.g. Christ calling himself "the bread of life"). Nowhere, however, are we explicitly told that we must understand the New Testament's language by reference to the Old. We need to keep all these points in mind when considering the language of demons.

Another example of the Bible being written from a Jewish perspective includes the way Daniel 2 prophesies a series of empires which would "bear rule over all the earth". Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome did this from the perspective of the land of Israel. The prophecy is simply not true unless we appreciate this. When Israel entered Canaan, the fear of them fell on all the nations "under the whole heavens" (Deut. 2:25). Doubtless the Aborigines in Australia didn't bat an eyelid; and 'Israel' could have been a racehorse as far as the South American peoples were concerned. But the world around Israel was the land "under the whole heavens" from God's perspective; that was the area which He beheld from Heaven.

Some have presented good reason to think that the flood did not cover the whole earth^[3]; yet the Genesis record speaks as if it did. This must have been true from the stand-point of an observer in the land of Israel. Robert Roberts has some very observant comments concerning God's use of language in this case: "The language of the narrative is intended only to represent things as they appeared to the Noachic survivors. The whole Bible narrative was written for the inhabitants of the earth, and therefore adopts their point of view throughout...when you describe a matter to children, you instinctively adopt the form of your discourse to their modes of looking at things...men are children: they can only take in the aspects of these works as they appear to mortal sense, and consequently, the Divine presentation of them in narrative has to deal with aspects, not with the modus in esse. This is not to present an error instead of a truth..."^[4].

In the same way as God's use of language tends to focus only upon those responsible to Him, it also has the feature of concentrating on a particular individual or perspective, to the exclusion of other things. This may be in order to highlight something, or in order to reflect God's concentration on one individual rather than upon others. For example, Daniel 5 describes how the Babylonian king Belshazzar was rebuked by God, and his kingdom overthrown by the Persians. The record stresses his pride, and how God was punishing him for this. We read of "Belshazzar the king...thy kingdom is...given to the Medes and Persians...in that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain" (Dan. 5:1,28,30). This appears to studiously avoid the fact that Belshazzar was only co-regent with Nabonidus at this time; yet the record speaks as if he was the king and the kingdom solely his. Robert Roberts says, "This is not to present an error instead of a truth"; it is emphasizing one aspect of truth, perhaps more intensely than human historians would, in order to reflect God's outlook on the rulership of Babylon at that time.

Relative Language

Following on from this we come to the conclusion that in some cases God uses language in a relative sense in order to emphasize something. Thus we read of many being saved (Gen. 22:17), yet in another sense few will be saved (Matt. 7:14; 20:16; Lk. 13:23). Relative to the wonder of salvation, many will be saved; but numerically, the figure will be small, from the perspective of this world. The way to the Kingdom is easy relative to the wonder of what is in store for the faithful (Matt. 11:30; 2 Cor. 4:17); and yet from our human perspective it is hard indeed, a life of self-crucifixion (Acts 14:22; Rev. 7:14). Our sufferings now are only for a moment compared to the glorious eternity of the Kingdom (Ps. 37:10; 2 Cor. 4:17), and yet the language of the Bible also expresses God's appreciation that from our perspective, our time of probation is "a long time" (Matt. 25:19). "Many" – relatively – would be converted to the true ways of God by the work of John the Baptist (Lk. 1:16), whilst numerically the majority of those who heard John's message eventually turned away from it, culminating in their crucifixion of the Messiah.

Consider Hosea 1:6-7: "I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel...but I will have mercy upon the house of Judah". Yet we learn that Judah actually sinned more than Israel (Ez. 23:4-11; Jer. 3:11); and only a few verses later we are assured that God will ultimately have mercy upon Israel: "Yet (i.e. despite this) the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea...and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God...and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou are my God" (Hos. 1:10; 2:23) [5]. This is proof enough that when God told Israel they would no longer have mercy, He was speaking in relative terms. God's angry rejection of Israel as His people is spoken of in permanent terms, and some have wrongly concluded from this that Israel will never again be restored to Divine favour. Again, they failed to appreciate how God uses language.

Orthodox Jews and some 'Christian' sects firmly believe that they must keep the Sabbath, because the Sabbath is described as a perpetual, eternal ordinance between God and His people (Ex. 31:17). Yet in the New Testament we read that the Old Covenant has been done away; and the Old Covenant clearly included the ten commandments (Deut. 4:13), one of which was concerning the Sabbath. For this reason the New Testament is at pains to explain that Sabbath keeping is not now required of God's people (Col. 2:14-17; Rom. 14:1-3). Indeed, the whole Law of Moses is described as an everlasting covenant (Isa. 24:5; Deut. 29:29), but it has now been done away (Heb. 8:13). The feasts of Passover and Atonement were to be "an everlasting statute unto you" (Lev. 16:34; Ex. 12:14); but now the Mosaic feasts have been done away in Christ (Col. 2:14-17; 1 Cor. 5:7). The Levitical priesthood was "the covenant of an everlasting priesthood" (Ex. 40:15; Num. 25:13), but "the priesthood being changed (by Christ's work), there is made of necessity a change also of the law" (Heb. 7:12). There was an "everlasting covenant" between God and Israel to display the shewbread in the Holy Place (Lev. 24:8). This "everlasting covenant" evidently ended when the Mosaic Law was dismantled. But the same phrase "everlasting covenant" is used in 2 Samuel 23:5 concerning how Christ will reign on David's throne for literal eternity in the Kingdom.

In what sense, then, is God using the word *olahm*, which is translated "eternal", "perpetual", "everlasting" in the Old Testament? James Strong defines *olahm* as literally meaning "the finishing point, time out of mind, i.e. practically eternity". It was God's purpose that the Law of Moses and the associated Sabbath law were to continue for many centuries. To the early Israelite, this meant a finishing point so far ahead that he couldn't grapple with it; therefore he was told that the Law would last for ever in the sense of "practically eternity". For all of

us, the spectre of ultimate infinity is impossible to intellectually grapple with. We may glibly talk about God's eternity and timelessness, about the wonder of eternal life. But when we pause to really come to terms with these things, we lack the intellectual tools and linguistic paradigms to cope with it. Therefore there is no Hebrew or Greek word used in the Bible text to speak of absolute infinity. We know that death has been conquered for those in Christ, therefore we have the hope of immortal life in his Kingdom. But God speaks about eternity very much from a human viewpoint.

How God Wishes Us To Conceive Things

God is often portrayed as changing His mind in accordance with circumstances which the record implies He did not expect. Thus the inspired words of the New Testament apostles suggest they expected the second coming in their lifetimes. But God knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10). He does not make decisions as we do in our uncertain zig zagging through life. His purpose was firmly established from the beginning of the world. The only conclusion we can come to is that this is how God wishes us to conceive of Him in His self-revelation to us. He wanted the first century apostles to perceive the second coming of Christ as just around the corner. He wants us to see Him as if He is a loving Father figure, as if He dwells just above the clouds (Deut. 4:39; 5:8 and 4:36 cp. 5:22; and consider the record of Christ's ascension to the Father in Acts 1:9-11). He is not our literal father, nor does He live in the atmosphere just above the clouds; He dwells "far above all heavens" (Eph. 4:10), both literal and symbolic. David so often speaks of God dwelling above the Heavens (Ps. 8:1; 50:4; 57:5; 108:5; 113:4). All we can say is that God is willing for earth-bound mortals to conceive of Him as being just above the clouds. It is evident from this that God is quite able to use the 'incorrect' language of demons in the New Testament without being inconsistent with the way in which He has used language in the past.

God is also portrayed in His word as making decisions according to the circumstance He 'finds' Himself in. Thus in the parable of the marriage supper, God is represented by the King who invites guests to the supper. According to the parable, God was surprised that Israel rejected His offer, and therefore frantically called the Gentiles to the supper (Lk. 14:21-24).

In the parable of the wicked husbandman, the owner of the vineyard (representing God) appears to be in frustrated desperation: "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son... They will reverence my son" (Lk. 20:13; Matt. 21:37). He was proved wrong; they killed him. Of course God knew this right from the beginning of the world (Rev. 13:8); but He wishes us to perceive His sending of Christ to Israel in this way.

The judgment seat is described as if literal books are written each day we live, and these will be opened and considered by God at the last day, in order to decide whether to give us the reward of the Kingdom or not. When we survey the total of God's revelation, it is evident that this is not to be taken literally. There will be a judgment, the result of which will be proportionate to the way we have lived our daily lives. But God (through the Lord Jesus) will not need to weigh up evidence. The books were written before the world began in the sense that God knew then who would be in His Kingdom. It is almost impossible to suggest that there will be literal scrolls unrolled. The idea of scrolls was no doubt used because it would have been understandable by those who were first inspired with God's word. Yet this is how God reveals the judgment to us; in human terms which we are capable of understanding. We are not explicitly told that there will not be literal scrolls, or that God will not need to weigh up evidence to decide whether we will be in the Kingdom. Moses (Ex. 32:32) and Nehemiah

(Neh.13:14) perhaps saw the judgment in this literal sense, but this does not mean that there will be actual scrolls unrolled.

So it should be clear that God quite commonly speaks of things in a way which may not be strictly true, because this is how He wants us to conceive of things. The record of Christ's miracles was therefore written in the way in which God wanted men to conceive of them: as proofs that demons do not exist. God's other 'options' (if we too may speak in human terms) would have been to explain medically that mental illness is not caused by demons, or to explicitly decry the folly of believing in pagan superstitions. It is doubtful whether this would have been successful in allowing Christ's miracles to show forth God's glory. For this was their purpose (Lk. 17:18; Jn. 11:4; 2:11 cp. 17:22). In any case, the King of the universe does not need to argue with men about whether He is omnipotent. The fact that the miracles are spoken of in terms of demons is a far greater proof that God is so far greater than demons that there is no room left for their existence.

Conclusions

- God is the source of all power; no negative experience can occur without Him allowing it to.
- Demons as they are widely believed in cannot exist because God is ultimately powerful, and is the ultimate creator of disaster.
- Demons are the same as idols.
- Therefore belief in demons is a denial of Yahweh's supremacy.
- The Bible is full of language which alludes to contemporary religious beliefs without explicitly correcting them.
- It does this in order to demonstrate Yahweh's supremacy and the non-existence of demons.
- Many Old Testament miracles were explicitly designed to allude to surrounding beliefs, and demonstrated their fallacy.
- The Bible records events and beliefs as they appear to men without explicitly correcting them. This sometimes makes the Bible hard to understand for the superficial reader. Thus the speeches of Job's friends make false statements about Job which are not explicitly corrected. Solomon in Ecclesiastes makes false statements about enjoying this life rather than hoping for the coming of the Kingdom; yet these are not explicitly corrected. That there is not explicit correction of the false notion of demons is not surprising.
- Because first century Israel believed that mental illnesses were caused by demons and that their cure was a result of demon exorcism, this is how many of Christ's miracles are recorded.
- The fact that there is no warning that only the language of the day is being used is in perfect harmony with how God uses language in the Old Testament.

- As with many other major miracles, those of Christ demonstrated the non-existence of demons and the irrelevance of demonology through their allusion to the language of the day concerning them.

- The principles we must employ in order to understand the language of demons in the New Testament are valid in other areas of basic doctrine. Because 'Christians' fail to understand how God uses language in His word, they have come to false conclusions regarding many other doctrinal areas, e.g. the nature of death, the Holy Spirit, the nature of God and the Lord Jesus, etc. We have pointed these out during the course of this study. We are not, therefore, just using linguistic arguments when it suits them, in order to show that the New Testament language of demons does not mean what it appears to superficially. We believe that the principles of understanding God's word outlined in this study are the key to coming to a true understanding of the whole system of correct doctrine which comprises the true Gospel.

Notes

[1] See "Newness of life", Gospel News Vol. 7 No. 5, May 1994.

[2] All of these apparent 'problem' passages are clearly examined in harmony with the rest of Bible teaching in Ron Abel, Wrested Scriptures (Northridge, Ca.: CMPA).

[3] See Robert Roberts, The Visible Hand Of God p. 41-50 (London: The Dawn Book Supply, 1969 ed.); Alan Hayward, God's Truth p. 206-208 (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1973).

[4] Robert Roberts, *ibid* p. 48. A similar approach is adopted throughout P.J. Wiseman, Creation Revealed In Six Days (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1948).

[5] This will come about through Israel's acceptance of the New Covenant; through Gentiles doing so today, these words become true of them too (Romans 9:25).

4.6 Why Is The Bible Confusing To So Many?

You could almost forgive someone for thinking that the Bible is written in a way which almost invites us to misinterpret it. Take what the Bible says about the devil as an example. The casual Bible reader may open Matthew 4 and conclude that the devil is a person who lives in deserts and tries to stop people being obedient to God. And if he flicks over to Rev. 12, he will think that the devil is a dragon who was thrown down from Heaven: because that's what the Bible says. And Job 1 says satan was an Angel who talked to God, presumably (to the careless reader) in Heaven, and then zapped Job with problems. But we know that all this is actually not the case, if you read the records carefully. Many times I can recall doctrinal conversations with the likes of J.W.s where I want to say: 'Yes, I know that's what it seems, I agree; but the general teaching of the Bible, *under the surface*, is quite the opposite. But until you give your *heart* to wanting to find God's truth, that's how you'll always see it'. Thus the superficial Bible reader will be deceived by God's word into believing things which are a false Gospel; a system of understanding which has an *appearance* of the Gospel, but which is actually an anti-Gospel (cp. 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6). The fact that so many apparently sincere Bible readers are so wrong shows that there is a power of delusion at work greater than those people just making a few mistakes in their Bible exposition. After all, how *can* we believe in a 'trinity'? The Bible is so clearly against this idea. But millions read their Bibles (after a fashion) and believe in the 'trinity' idea. The super-human power of deceit which is at work is

from God. The hobbyists, the part-timers, those who *in their hearts* are not wholeheartedly committed to God's Truth, are deceived.

And this leads me on to a serious issue. If we continue to treat our spiritual lives on the 'hobby' level, God isn't indifferent. The Bible then becomes confusing. When you or I meet a brother or sister who clearly show little interest in daily studying the word or in making the Truth the central thing in their lives, we may be sad, we may gently plead with them, but at the end we can't do anything else. " At the end of the day" , we say, " it's their problem, I can't do any more" . And it's tempting to think that God sees things likewise. But He doesn't. He isn't passive to such indifference. He actively does something to those who treat their relationship with Him as a hobby: He *actively deceives them*. The idea of " the God of Truth" deceiving people may seem strange at first. But consider the following evidence:

- God deceived prophets to speak things in His Name which were actually false (1 Kings 22:20-22; Ez. 14:9). He chose Israel's delusions by making their idols answer them (Is. 66:3,4). Jeremiah feared God had deceived *him* (Jer. 20:7)- showing he knew such a thing was possible. Dt. 13:1-3 warns Israel not to believe prophets whose prophecies came true although they taught false doctrines, because they may have been raised up to test their obedience. God deceived Israel by telling them about the peace which would come on Jerusalem in the future Kingdom; they didn't consider the other prophecies *which were given at the same time* concerning their imminent judgment, and therefore they thought that God was pleased with them and was about to establish the Messianic Kingdom; when actually the very opposite was about to happen (Jer. 4:10). This is why the Bible is confusing.

- God gave Israel bad laws (referring to the Halachas?) so that they would go further away from Him (Ez. 20:25). He must have done this by inspiring men to say things which were genuinely communicated by God, but which were false.

- The foolish heart of Israel was darkened by somebody, the Greek implies (Rom. 1:21)- and because there is no devil, that person was God. God gave them a mind which wanted to practice sexual immorality (v.28), and therefore they received a recompense appropriate to the delusion which they had been given (v. 27 Gk.). Note that their punishment was to be given and encouraged in sinful tendencies (diseases like AIDS are the result of upsetting nature's balance rather than the recompense spoken of in Romans 1).

- The Lord spoke in parables so that Israel would be deceived (unless they made specific search of the meaning of the parable) and therefore would not come to salvation. This fact is hard to get round for those who feel God *isn't* responsible for deception. Isaiah spoke likewise (Is. 6:9,10; 29:10,11). The Angels will work in such a way as to allow the world to be deceived at the end of the Millennium (Rev. 20:3,8).

- The apostate members of the ecclesia, both in Old and New Testaments, sunk to the most unbelievable levels, but sincerely felt that they were doing God's will. These things included killing righteous prophets, turning the breaking of bread into a drunken orgy, and turning prostitution within the ecclesia into a spiritual act. For brethren to come to the conclusion that such things were the will of God surely they were not just misinterpreting Scripture. There was an extra-human power of delusion at work. And seeing there is no devil, it must have been God.

- 2 Thess. 2:9-11 is the classic proof of this. This passage explains clearly why the Bible is so confusing. God plagued the first century ecclesia with false brethren who could work impressive miracles; because " they received not the love of the truth (they treated it as a hobby)...God shall send them strong delusion, that they might believe a lie" . God deceived brethren in the run up to AD70- it's that plain. And the events of AD70 are typical of our last days.

- 2 Thess. 2 has many connections with the Olivet Prophecy. The idea of brethren being deceived at the time of Christ's " coming" connects with Mt. 24:5,11,24 describing 'the majority' (Gk.) of the latter day ecclesia being " deceived" . 2 Thess. 2:11 says that this deception is sent by God because they refuse to love the Truth. The conclusion is hard to avoid: in our last days, the majority of us will be deceived because we don't " love the truth" - it's no more than a hobby. Whether we have yet reached that situation must remain an open question.

- God worked false miracles at the time of AD70, according to 2 Thess. 2:9-11. This means that the 'miracles' claimed by some false religions may be actual miracles; God allows them to be done because He wishes to deceive such people.

Practical Implications

If we accept the above thesis, we can better understand why God has allowed His word to be translated in such a way as seems almost intended to mislead. We must all have pondered why exactly God allowed " Gehenna" to be interpreted rather than transferred as a proper noun; why *nephesh* was so misleadingly translated " soul" in the AV; why " satan" wasn't translated " adversary" as it should have been, etc. There are whole verses whose translation in nearly all versions which might seem to hopelessly confuse the seeker for truth (e.g. " Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" , or " When he cometh into the world, he saith...a body hast thou prepared me" , Lk. 23:46; Heb. 10:5). Amazingly, these bad translations have never been a serious impediment to even the most simple person who *genuinely wants to find the Truth*. I find this nigh on a miracle. From this alone it seems clear that the genuine seeker of Truth will always find it, but the Bible is written in such a way, and its translation has been over-ruled in such a way, as to deceive the insincere or uncalled reader into thinking that they have found the Truth when actually they haven't. Why is the Bible so confusing? Here surely we have an answer.

Occasionally one meets the attitude amongst us that although other religions do not have all the doctrinal truths which we have, they are still sincere believers and we should treat them as such. The impression is given that we should count ourselves as lucky that we have greater doctrinal truths than them, but not think that such differences affect their standing before God. But the fact is, if you agree with the thesis presented above, the members of these religions have been deceived by God into the doctrinal positions they are in, and their deception is a sign of His displeasure with their 'hobbyist' approach to Him.

It isn't only the apostate members of the world's false religions who are deceived by God. Such deception can be frequently seen operating in the weak Christian. Daily Bible reading is skipped, the breaking of bread forgotten about (for those in isolation), prayer pushed into the background, meals gulped down with no further thought for the Father who provides, self-examination never tackled... and yet the brother or sister feels they have come to a higher spiritual level, whereby as they understand it *even from the Bible* (e.g.) God quite understands

if we marry out of the faith, or (e.g.) they come to the 'realization' that actually friendship with the world, or total commitment to our careers, is really serving God, or that really, doctrine doesn't matter... And so their real fellowship with God slips away, but they are *convinced* that actually they are spiritually growing into a higher relationship with God. God, working through their deceitful natures, has deceived them. For this reason the Truth is in one sense the most dangerous thing in the world. It can destroy us, blow us apart; God can terribly, terribly deceive us, until at judgment day we gnash our teeth in white hot rage against Him and ourselves (Is. 45:24). God has written the Bible in such a way, whereby the majority of readers are deceived by His way of writing into thinking that they have the Truth when they don't. Once we appreciate this, the *wonder* of the fact that we do have, in basic terms "the truth of the Gospel" should really touch our hearts. The Truth is precious, *very* precious, we must hold it like diamonds, study it, meditate upon it, make it our life. For it will gloriously save us, or miserably destroy us if we neglect it, and the Bible will become confusing to us.

Why Are There "Difficult passages" In The Bible?

Why is the Bible at times, in places, so hard to understand? How can it be that a message understandable by the illiterate, can seem so hard to piece together by those who study the Bible in depth? What follows is just one of a number of perspectives to bear in mind.

The basic message of God to humanity has to be simple enough to be understood and believed by the simple and the uneducated- for not many mighty, smart in this world, are called to understand, but God chooses the weak things of this world to confound those who think they are wise. Two areas which are hotly debated are the nature of God, and the nature of Satan. The basic, commonly repeated message of the Bible in these areas is clear enough. There is one God [not three], who promised that He would have a Son. The Lord Jesus was born of an ordinary woman, and was clearly human. He died [and God obviously can't die] and rose again. That one God is all powerful, and has no rival being in Heaven somehow at war with Him. Sin comes from within, and we are to take total responsibility for our sins. Whilst our own humanity can be termed our adversary ['satan'], we can't blame our sin on some cosmic being. These teachings are throughout the Bible, and are clear enough to the illiterate, the poorly educated, or those with no religious background who come to the Bible with an open mind. Yet there are a minority of Bible passages which are difficult to understand in these areas. It's usually easy enough to understand what they *don't* mean. I can recall many conversations with fairly simple folk, or those from an atheistic background who are coming to the Bible for the first time, where I've asked: "Well, what do you think *this* difficult passage means?". And they have assured me that it obviously *can't* mean that, e.g., Jesus is God Himself, because that would contradict so much of the general picture the Bible gives. And, they're not too phased by the fact they don't understand what the particular passage means, but, they're clear enough what it *doesn't* mean. Sadly, a lack of fundamental respect for the overall, obvious teaching of the Bible is what leads people into difficulties in handling those "difficult passages". Or, for reasons of personal upbringing and socialization, they prefer to base their beliefs on the *possible implications* of say five "difficult passages", than on the clear teaching of a few hundred Bible passages.

But all the same, why exactly are those "difficult passages" there?

The books of the Bible were all written within their immediate context, using ideas current at the time, alluding to live issues at the time which have long since become unimportant to us

personally. My experience is that the closer we study the historical, literary and cultural background of the various books of the Bible, the more we see similarities between those "difficult passages" and contemporary issues and ideas which were floating around at the time. I've found that very often, those passages are alluding to those ideas in order to deconstruct them- to show they were wrong and to present the truth about those matters. Or, those passages are using language which was common at the time, picking up terms and phrases which were in usage then, in order to be "all things to all men", to reason with people within the terms they were accustomed to. I remember the first time I read how the Genesis account of creation has so many similarities with the creation myths of other peoples, e.g. the Gilgamesh Epic. Initially, it worried me. The simplistic answer has always been: "Well, those other myths must've been written *after* the Biblical record, and they just copy parts of it". But as literary and archaeological research increases, as we come to know more about ancient history, it becomes apparent that this argument is just an assumption. It's not true, in many cases. The correspondence between, e.g., the Genesis record of creation and the myths of Gilgamesh is that the Genesis record is alluding to them in order to correct them- so as to show to Israel that all the stuff they were hearing about creation was a mixture of truth and error, and now God through Moses was giving them the correct version. I've exemplified this in much detail at <http://www.realdevil.info/dig3.htm> and http://www.aletheiacollege.net/pb/2-3-1Genesis_And_Creation_Myths.htm .

But as we read through the Bible, we find this kind of thing going on very often. When we come to the New Testament, we find Paul writing, as a Jew, to both Jews and Gentiles who had converted to Christ, and yet were phased by the huge amount of apostate Jewish literature and ideas which was then floating around. For example, the book of Romans is full of allusions to the "Wisdom of Solomon", alluding and quoting from it, and showing what was right and what was wrong in it. Wisdom 2:24 claimed: "Through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it". And Paul alludes to this, and corrects it, by saying in Rom. 5:12: "'By one man [Adam- not 'the devil'] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned". This is one of many such examples- see <http://www.realdevil.info/dig2.htm>. Jude does the same thing, quoting and alluding to the apostate Book of Enoch, correcting the wrong ideas, and at times quoting the ideas back against those who used them- see <http://www.realdevil.info/dig1.htm>. In Chapter 5 of *The Real Devil*, I catalogue all the Bible verses which are misunderstood in connection with Satan and the Devil. And often I suggest that the reason for *our* difficulty in understanding those passages is because we're missing the fact that they're alluding to contemporary wrong ideas, and correcting them, even quoting some of the ideas back against themselves as it were (see <http://www.realdevil.info/5-1.htm>).

And the same is true of those passages misinterpreted to prove the 'trinity' fallacy. The incorrect Jewish understandings of "the logos", of Messiah being a pre-existent being who would be the re-incarnation of one of the prophets, their wrong understanding of a being they called "the son of man"... all these are alluded to at times in the New Testament writings, and corrected. Passages like Phil. 2:9-11 can be shown to be full of allusions to a Jewish hymn or poem about Messiah, with Paul changing key words and phrases in order to show the correct understanding of the true Messiah. I've given the hard evidence for these suggestions in great length at http://www.aletheiacollege.net/dbb/1-4trinity_in_europe.htm.

Recognizing that the inspired writers often allude to current ideas in order to correct them enables us to better relate to many "difficult" Bible verses. And it also helps us understand the book of Revelation. The book has so many similarities to the various 'apocalypses' of the

Jewish writings which were current just before and after the time of Christ. There's no point in simplistically saying that these Jewish writings must have been written *after* the Biblical book of Revelation. Quite evidently, many of them were around well before it. What are we to make of the similarities, and differences? That there *are* many points of contact between them can't be denied- e.g. at the beginning of Revelation 4 there is a vision of a door 'having been opened' in heaven. The figure of an open door is also used as the introduction to the uninspired Apocalypse of Enoch and the Testament of Levi. And many other similarities are listed in the various higher critical expositions of Revelation. These uninspired 'apocalypses' presented negative visions of some final cosmic meltdown and the destruction of the planet, sometimes with the Jews emerging as the sole survivors, sometimes with Israel also being destroyed. The message was negative, terrifying, and at best taught that Jews would be saved just because they were Jews and noble warriors. These apocalypses are at times crude nationalism, at times terrifyingly negative science-fiction type fantasies about the destruction of our planet. The book of Revelation- the one truly inspired 'apocalypse'- alludes to these ideas, but shows that Israel will be punished for their sins, needs to repent, but that God's purpose to establish His Kingdom on earth will be achieved, even if terrible things must happen *on this earth* before that time finally comes. The message is ultimately *positive* and not negative, and requires us to witness to that wonderful good news whatever it costs us. And that is in fact the essence behind all the allusions of the "difficult passages" to then-current ideas and issues. We simply have to accept that we read the books of the Bible from a great distance in time, language, culture and perception of history from those who first read or heard them. And quite naturally, this is going to cause problems for us when we come to interpret those "difficult passages". But so far as our understanding the barest essence of the Gospel- God's love, grace, purpose of saving us in His perfected Kingdom on earth through His Son- those "difficult passages" need be no barrier. The basic golden thread of the Gospel is clear. To those who give this its true weight and value, the presence of a minority of puzzling texts in the Bible won't phase us one bit.

It has been observed that the academic disciplines of theology and Biblical studies are characterized by more academic disagreement than any other discipline. About every academic paper is in vital disagreement with others and rarely is there resolution or advancement towards synthesis; whereas in other academic disciplines there is a dialectic which leads to ultimate progress. I'd like to place this observation together with another one: the Bible is evidently easier and in the ultimate sense "better" understood by the peasants of the poorer world, than it is by first world people analyzing with their computers and lexicons. The Gospel is for the poor and oppressed- literally or spiritually. For them, the agony is not to understand; it is to apply. For many who struggle to academically understand, they seem to have not even begun the agony of applying the most basic elements of Christianity. Take these observations and make what you will of them; but it seems to me that the chronic lack of praxis in so many Bible readers is somehow related to their intellectual quandries of understanding.

4.7 How To Study The Bible

4-7 How To Study The Bible

The best Bible students don't really need study helps, apart, perhaps, from a concordance. Read the word, love the word, study the word, make it personal to yourself. But we're all different. Some are naturally studious; others aren't. But my sense is that the vast majority of newly baptized brothers and sisters have learnt the Gospel through a course of study: either a correspondence course, or a series of lectures or structured discussions. *Don't let that studious spirit slip!* Don't let the fact that you know the basic elements of the true Gospel make you feel that you don't need to do any more serious study. The Lord Jesus spoke a parable about a man who buried his talent (the Truth he had received at baptism) in the earth, and then when he was condemned at the judgment, this man thinks he's being treated unfairly. This story was quarried from Jer. 13:5-10, where God tells Jeremiah to take a belt and bury it. It becomes spoilt and useless. This buried belt, according to God's own interpretation, represents those of His people " which refuse to hear my words, which walk in the imagination of their heart" . It was this which destroyed them, making them spiritually rot and decay until they were of no use. The Lord Jesus seems to foresee in His parable those who would accept His Truth, but bury it in the ground, effectively forgetting the love of His word, and yet assuming that simply because they possess the Truth they ought therefore to be in the Kingdom.

So, you need to study the word. But how to study the Bible? In the same way as you become a better writer or public speaker by reading and listening to people who know what they're doing, so, it seems to me, we become better Bible students by reading and listening to good Bible study. We need to do this, especially in our early years in Christ. But the thing is, no gem shines so brightly as the one you find yourself. You can read some of the finest Bible study ever, but it won't have the impact in your mind and living which discovering something for yourself gives. But then, you'll find it easier to discover your own gems if you listen to or read the writings of one who has found gem after gem in his (or her) own life.

Reading According To A Plan

Most importantly, read the Bible daily and systematically. There are several plans available to help this; I've always used the *Bible Companion*, a copy of which is available from Carelinks Ministries. Pray briefly before you read, as you would for daily food, thanking God for the power and grace of His word, and asking for your eyes to be opened to the real meaning, and that you will have God's gracious help to apply it in everyday life (cp. Ps. 119:18). Tragically, the practice of daily Bible reading seems to be decreasing amongst us; this shouldn't be so. I mention this because newly baptized brethren and sisters sometimes get terribly discouraged when they come to realize that in fact many of their new found brethren don't read the word daily. It's better to be open about this glaring weakness amongst us at the start. But all the same, it is absolutely evident that daily Bible study is our daily food. To neglect it is to commit spiritual suicide, to starve ourselves to death- even though of course it's the blood of Christ and not a book that saves us. If we are going to read daily, the *Bible Companion* system has the advantage that thousands of other believers who read daily, read according to this system. The things we read and study ought to be the basis of our correspondence and conversation with each other; Bible reading together ought to be an accepted part of every social visit or get-together amongst us. The disadvantage of reading by a plan is that reading disjointed chapters each day means that we may miss themes which are developed throughout a book. Paul's letters particularly are very thematic; and each Gospel record emphasizes different themes in the Lord's character and teaching. So try to read books through in one or two sittings, in addition to reading according to a plan.

Christian Books

Whether or not you feel you're getting a lot out of it or not, reading a spiritual book keeps the mind churning. It's rather like doing your daily Bible readings when you're tired; things go in which you don't realize. We need to buy up the opportunities to use time wisely (Eph. 5:16). Read something as you travel, perhaps in your lunch hour at work. It's surprising how much you can get through. Think of the mental energy of Paul, who bids us follow him as he followed Christ. He brought every thought (and this isn't figurative language) into captivity to Christ his Lord (2 Cor. 10:5). There are some fine passages in Proverbs concerning the urgency of our need to be consumed with the quest for Biblical wisdom: "Get wisdom, get understanding...wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom, and with all thy getting, get understanding...take fast hold of instruction...for she is thy life" (Prov. 4:5,7,13). Wisdom cries out loud to be heard (Prov. 8:1), and yet the righteous man "cries after wisdom, and lift(s) up (his) voice for understanding" (Prov. 2:3); there is thus a sense of mutuality here between God's wisdom and the sincere seeker. Every genuine believer will have felt this; we urgently cry for wisdom, and yet God's word is crying out to teach us. If this is our attitude, the things of the word will be our life (Prov. 4:13). As Israel were to talk about the word as they went out and came in and as they walked along the way, so should the new Israel (Prov. 7:2,3).

These passages all speak of an urgent need to learn God's wisdom, to seek and find His way. It surprises me that our probations are so short; we have perhaps 50 brief years at the most for God to achieve the necessary spiritual growth in us, so that we might be prepared for the glory of His eternal Kingdom. It follows that He is working very intensely in our lives; He tries us every moment, would we but realize it (Job 7:18). As we watch the clouds lazily drift across the sky, we lose sight of the fact that our planet is hurtling through space, with us thrown against the surface by the sheer speed of travel. And yet we are blissfully ignorant of that speed. And even more so in the path of our spiritual growth, we simply don't realize the speed and intensity with which God is working with us to make us His own. Our choice of careers, our effort to attain the peripheral things of the human experience, our seeking of our own human fulfilment, all these things must be minimized, subjected to the urgent necessity of spiritual growth.

I'd recommend that straight after baptism, you read or re-read a thorough statement of the basic doctrines of the Gospel, and make a list somewhere in your Bible of all the basic doctrines with verses to support them. These can be your first steps in how to study the Bible. You can add verses to this list as you come across them in your daily reading. *Bible Basics* was basically the write-up of ten years of jotting down such references in the front pages of my Bible. The headings I used were: 1. The Nature Of God; 2. The Nature Of Christ; 3. The Promises; 4. The Kingdom; 5. Death (Soul / Spirit / Hell); 6. The Devil / Satan; 7. Practical Living. These basic doctrines of the Gospel are the basis of all subsequent spiritual growth and understanding.

Spiritual Books That Contain False Doctrine

It's evident to me, from the very way the Bible is written, that an understanding of it's deeper parts depends upon a correct understanding of the basic doctrines. The milk of the word leads on to the meat; Heb. 5:13,14 implies you can only understand the meat if for some time you have been properly feeding on the milk. This means that those who don't understand the basic doctrines of the true Gospel can't really understand the meat of the word. For this reason, I'd

recommend you keep away from books written by those who don't understand the basic doctrines. Spend your valuable time instead on studying the word for yourself or reading material written by those who have already progressed from milk to meat. What I observe with the studies written by non-Christians is that often they make very fascinating points which are quite out of context; e.g. some years ago, I read quite a compelling newspaper article which argued that a nuclear accident in the Ukraine fulfilled Rev. 8:11. This sounds interesting. But when you study Rev. 8, it's clear that the rest of the chapter has nothing to do with nuclear accidents in the Ukraine in 1986. The writer of the article was seizing upon a Bible verse and giving it some superficial application to a current event. This isn't Bible study.

Personalize Scripture

Meditate upon it as you go around daily life. Israel were told: " Ye (plural) shall not tempt the Lord" . The Lord Jesus personalized this to Himself, and quoted it as: " Thou (singular) shalt not tempt the Lord" (Dt. 6:16 cp. Mt. 4:7). He told the Jews that when it is written " I am the God of Abraham" , this was God speaking unto *them personally* (" ...which was spoken unto you by God, saying..."), teaching them personally that there would be a resurrection (Mt. 22:31). And yet the crowd were astonished at this way of reading Scripture (:33). David invites us to come and see the works God did at the Red Sea, commenting: "there did *we* rejoice in him" (Ps. 66:5,6). He praises God for saving him in the language of Israel's Red Sea deliverance, speaking of it as "the day of *my* trouble" (Ps. 86:7,8 = Ex. 15:11). He saw how their circumstances and his were in principle the same; he personalized the Scripture he had read. When Israel kept the Passover, they were to say that this was the deliverance God had wrought "for *me*" (Ex. 13:8). "Turn thou to *thy* God" as Jacob did in the struggles of *his* life (Hos. 11:4). Often the Bible addresses the reader in the second person, as if he is actually present in the mind of the writer (e.g. Rom. 11:19; 14:15; 1 Cor. 7:16; 15:35). Such personalizing of Scripture is essentially how to study the Bible.

The Psalms so often encourage Israelites to feel as if they personally had been through the Red Sea experience. Generation would tell to generation the Passover story, and would also sing of God's greatness as Israel did in Ex. 15 (Ps. 145:5-7). Hence: "He turned the sea into dry land...there *let us* (AV: did we) rejoice in him" (Ps. 66:6 RVmg.). We too are enabled by Scripture to feel as if we were there, and to rejoice in what God did for *us* there. This of course depends upon our sense of solidarity with God's people over time, as well as over space.

All Scripture is recorded for *our* learning and comfort (Rom. 15:4). The exhortation of Prov. 3:11 "speaketh unto *you* as unto children..." (Heb. 12:5). Hebrews 3 quotes Psalm 95 as relevant to all readers. The warnings there for its " today" were also be a warning for the first century " today" , and yet likewise we can still take hold of the past word of God and relate it to the needs of our " today" . We can fail to personalize God's word, in the sense of realizing that it speaks to us personally. Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar what would happen to him unless he repented; and he wouldn't listen. When his judgment came, God told him: "O King Nebuchadnezzar, *to thee it is spoken*: The kingdom is departed from thee" (Dan. 4:31). We have a way of reading and hearing, and yet not making the crucial connection with ourselves. Paul pleads with Corinth to see the similarities between them and the ecclesia in the wilderness; he wants them to personalize it all. He sees their gathering and redistribution of wealth as exactly analogous to Israel's gathering of manna (2 Cor. 8:15)- and he so wishes his Corinthians to think themselves into Israel's shoes. For then they would realize that as

Israel had to have a willing heart to give back to God the wealth of Egypt which He had given them, so they were to have a willing heart in being generous to their poorer brethren (Ex. 35:5 = 2 Cor. 8:12). And they would have realized that as “last year” they had made this offer (2 Cor. 8:10 Gk.), so the year before, Israel had received Egypt’s wealth with a similar undertaking to use it for the Lord’s cause. As Moses had to remind them a second time of their obligations in Ex. 35, so Paul had to bring it again before Corinth. And if they had seen these similarities, they would have got the sense of Paul’s lament that there was not one wise hearted man amongst them- for the “wise hearted” were to convert Israel’s gold and silver into tools for Yahweh’s service (Ex. 35:10 = 1 Cor. 6:5; 2 Cor. 10:12).

Jude speaks about the false teachers of the first century. He recalls how Enoch had spoken of how the wicked of his day were destroyed in the flood: “Behold the Lord came with ten thousands of his holy ones to execute judgment” (Jude 14,15 RV). And yet Jude says that “To these also [i.e. the first century false teachers] Enoch...prophesied” (Jude 14 RV). Enoch’s words were primarily addressed to his own generation, but his words ought to be taken as speaking directly to the first century apostates. In similar vein, the Lord said that Isaiah’s words to his generation were prophesy “of you” in the first century. “This people...” were not to be understood as only Isaiah’s hearers, but all who read this living word (Mt. 15:7,8). And so this is in the end how to study the Bible- to let it speak to *you*.

Discuss With Others

Discussing Scripture with others has been invaluable in my own experience of Bible study and theological work. Particularly is it valuable to discuss with Christians and even non-believers who come from a totally different culture from your own. Thus discussion of the parables of the lost in Lk. 15 with Middle Eastern peasants raises a number of issues which few Western expositors have hit on- e.g. the ways in which the elder son's refusal to attend the banquet was such an insult to the father, the way an older man never runs in public and humiliates himself by doing so. The problem is, we come to Scripture through the lenses of our own culture and background. Leslie Newbigin, a lifetime missionary in India, commented: "We do not see the lenses of our spectacles; we see through them, and it is another who has to say to us, "Friend, you need a new pair of spectacles""(1). Newbigin had something of my own experience of the value of discussing Scripture with people from other backgrounds; he speaks of the need of "the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures"(2). This is not only true in a world-culture sense; but it is helpful to discuss with all manner of folk. Even though we may not agree with them, an hour spent in discussing Revelation with a JW or Paul with a radical Christian feminist who thinks Jesus is a woman... all this sows stimulation in our subsequent reflections.

Notes

(1) Leslie Newbigin, *A Word In Season* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) p. 192

(2) Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel In A Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) pp. 196,197.

4-7-A How To Interpret The Bible?

Much has been written about this, but essentially I believe that prayerful Bible reading of itself will open up the meaning to us. The following are just a few practical hints how to interpret the Bible:

- Make notes in your Bible. Don't worry about using fancy colours or only writing when you have the right kind of pen or pencil. The actual process of note taking is what is important. Look at a man's Bible, and it will probably tell you something about his attitude to God's word. Our Bible becomes a kind of personal document of our faith, a statement of our relationship between us and our God. Always read or listen to the word with a pen or pencil in hand; set out to be a Bible student, not just someone who goes through the motion of daily Bible reading or attending a Bible study in a ritualistic sense. God speaks to us in a personal way through His word, He will open our eyes to see things there in response to our prayers, and thereby He will personally guide us in our walk to His Kingdom. This is why I recommend marking your Bible for yourself, in your own way (and for this reason alone I can't very strongly recommend the systems of organized Bible marking which are available). The Kings of Israel (types of us) were to copy out the Law for themselves, and read *that copy* all their lives (Dt. 17:18,19). That book was a statement of the covenant relationship between them and their God; and it seems to me there was good psychological reason to insist that they made their own personal copy of it, and read from it for themselves.

- Harry Whittaker coined the term 'Bible television'; and it is indeed a help in how to interpret the Bible. The idea is that we imagine that the scene we have read is being presented on television; we try to re-live the scene and see it from a birds-eye perspective. This often enlarges our appreciation of the narrative, and livens up our Bible reading. For example, play Bible television with Exodus 7; the magicians of Egypt tried to replicate the miracles of Moses, and apparently succeeded first of all. But when you imagine it, the whole thing must have been almost comical. For example, Moses made all the water in Egypt into blood, and then, after this, while all the water was blood, the magicians claimed to do the same (Ex. 7:22). We can imagine them running round, desperately looking for water which hadn't turned to blood, perhaps dyeing some of it white, and then turning it red and saying 'There you are, my Lord, *we* can do just the same, there's nothing this Moses can do which we can't'. We are left to imagine Pharaoh's courtiers almost smiling, knowing that Moses' God was no match for their religious nonsenses (cp. Ex. 10:7; 11:3). Dt. 7:19 even has God addressing those who had not been present at the Red Sea and who hadn't seen the plagues on Egypt as if they had personally been there. He speaks of these things "which thine eyes saw". The people were to so feel themselves into God's word, into Biblical history, into their membership in the people of God, that it was as if they had seen these things with their own eyes. And in the context, God uses this as the basis to appeal for their trust that He will likewise give them the victory over the Egyptians and crises in *their* lives.

- Be aware that there are some things in Scripture which are recorded in such a way as to promote meditation, and therefore they will always be ambiguous in terms of the actual interpretation which is sustainable. We can't *always* say "This word means X, this phrase means Y, therefore this verse means interpretation Z; and if you don't agree with that, you don't really accept the Bible". Because it is possible to say that about the interpretation of basic doctrine doesn't mean that we can adopt this attitude to the interpretation of every Bible passage. The record of the crucifixion is a good example of this. Or consider how it is recorded that some of those healed by the Lord *didn't* afterwards do what He said: one preached to his whole city rather than to his family (Lk. 8:39); another didn't obey the Lord's plea to not tell anyone else (Mk. 1:45). How are we to read these responses? Rank

disobedience? Misguided zeal? Zeal in doing over and above what they were asked? You may have your ideas, and it is right that we should meditate upon these things and discuss them. But I suggest that ultimately they are left 'hanging' for the very purpose of promoting meditation and personal application, rather than being statements which shout for an obvious interpretation, like an equation ' $A + 2 = 5$, so what is A ?'. Latter day prophecies are, it seems to me (although not to all brethren!) in the same category, of statements and types which cannot have an *exact* interpretation dogmatically attached to them (although we may grasp the general picture), but rather are presented to us to promote meditation. Any who have tried to construct a sequence of events for the last days will have been forced to this conclusion.

- Look up the references in your margin. Generally, these are a reflection of good Biblical scholarship.

- Use a concordance to guide you to other places where a theme or personality occurs. But avoid one temptation: don't place too much stress on the meanings of Hebrew and Greek words, unless you absolutely have to. There is a type of Bible study which is simply a list of alternative translations, placing great importance on the root meanings of words (often questionably derived by Gesenius). I am wary of expositions which depend on twisting the meaning of the original. We don't know those languages, and the lexicon is a crude way of analyzing them. Under inspiration (mind), the New Testament writers *did* construct expositions which hinged around the meaning or alternative meaning of a Hebrew word. But this doesn't mean that we are wise to seek to do this as our main method of Bible study. The best expositions are those which rest on a clear, evident connection, either linguistically or semantically, with other parts of Scripture. Such links are evident in any translation, in any language. Most generations of the body of Christ haven't been able to read, yet alone have access to the concordances and lexicons which we have. These things enhance our exposition, but they are only icing on the cake. Davidson rightly observes: "Usage is the only safe guide; the concordance is always a safer guide than the lexicon" (1). Online concordances and various translations are all widely available on the internet as freeware- e-sword would be a good example. Each word in Scripture is given a number. You can then see what that word strictly means in the Hebrew or Greek by looking up that number. Most usefully, you can run searches for where such words occur together- e.g. if you search for "lamb" and "God", you will find all references to the idea of God's lamb, with all the meaning it has for Bible students eagerly searching for information about the Lord Jesus as that lamb. And so beware of what has been called the 'root fallacy'. Easy access to Hebrew lexicons lead many Bible students to look up a word, then look at its root, and decide that the root is therefore the meaning- especially if it fits in to their idea of what the passage under study should mean! But this isn't a true way of analyzing language. Words with different meanings can have the same root. Take the words 'unity' and 'uniformity'. Sadly, these two words are confused all too often in Christian churches- e.g., 'To create unity in the church, everyone must come to the breaking of bread meeting uniformly dressed, all wearing a certain kind of clothing'. No, 'unity' and 'uniformity' are two quite different things; and yet they come from the same root word, 'uno'. The wider problems of the 'root fallacy' have been discussed at great length elsewhere (2). But one noteworthy issue is that the root meaning fallacy arises from the false assumption that a word has a "proper meaning", which can be reached by tracing it to its source. But seeing that words change their meaning, the 'root' of a word isn't really much of a guide to its meaning. Take the English word 'nice', i.e. pleasant. In the eighteenth century this word meant 'precise' rather than 'pleasant'; and it actually derives from the Latin *nescius*, meaning 'ignorant'. It's obviously wrong to read the word 'nice' in a contemporary book and think that the word therefore means 'precise', or, even

more accurately, 'ignorant'. Context and usage is obviously the key. I'm constantly amazed at how respectable lexicons like Liddell & Scott use the term "prop.", i.e. 'proper meaning', with the evident understanding that the earliest use of a word is somehow its real, 'proper' meaning. This is an utter fallacy. The meaning of the names of Jacob's children are parade examples. Reuben means 'behold a son', but the inspired narrator suggests a meaning of 'affliction' because the consonants with that word are vaguely similar to 'Reuben' (Gen. 29:31-35).

- One problem with the use of lexicons and concordances is that too much meaning can be attached to one word, whereas language and communication doesn't always function by isolating one word and analyzing its meaning. Take the Hebrew expression *tohu v'bohu*, "formless and empty" in early Genesis. The very rhyme of the two Hebrew words suggests we are to read them as a single expression. In English we use phrases like "vim and vigour" and "rough and tumble", but to get to the meaning of the phrase we will not be helped too much by isolating each word and analyzing it, dissecting it for meaning as a standalone word. We must take the phrase as a whole.

- Any serious study of a Bible passage requires us to look at it in different translations and make some effort to understand the real meaning of the original- for sometimes the sense of a passage can completely change, depending on translation (especially in Job). Thus in the AV of 2 Cor. 10:7, Paul is made to ask a question: "Do ye look on things after the outward appearance?" . In the RV, this becomes an affirmation: "Ye look at the things that are before your face" . But in other versions, it becomes a blunt demand from Paul that the Corinthians should open their eyes to the true facts: "Look at things which stare you in the face!" (J.B. Phillips).

- Watch out for quotations and allusions within Scripture; there are connections not only between New and Old Testaments, but also (e.g.) between Paul's letters; Peter alludes to Paul's writings, Paul frequently alludes to the words of John the Baptist; Jeremiah often refers to Job's words and experiences. Note the context of the source quotation, because this often sheds light on the passage in which it is quoted. Be aware that many NT passages mix a number of OT passages in one 'quotation'; e.g. "The deliverer will come from Zion" (Rom. 11:26) is a conflated quotation of Ps. 14:7; 53:6 and Is. 59:20. And Heb. 13:5 combines quotes from Gen. 28:15; Josh. 1:5 and Dt. 31:16. Heb. 13:5 doesn't quote any of them exactly, but mixes them together.

- When you look up one of these quotations, note the context. Often (but not always) when the New Testament quotes the Old, there is something in the context which is relevant, and which explains why the NT writer quoted the verse he did. Beware of the temptation to just use Bible passages on a surface level; i.e., because the words as they stand in your translation seem to suit what you want to prove, don't just use them, but check if the context fits. It has been truly observed that the NT writers "quoted not texts but contexts" ; and therefore we should be wary of using Bible verses just as clichés.

- But although context is indeed important, it isn't *always* so. The New Testament writers so often quote the Old Testament *without* (apparently) attention to the context of the words they are quoting. And this is indeed the approach of the Rabbis, who tend to expound each Bible verse as a separate entity. But all the same, in seeking to understand a verse, attention should be paid to the context. Because a word or phrase means something in one context doesn't mean it *always* means this in *any* context. Thus "leaven" can be a symbol of both the Gospel and also sin. And the eagle is a symbol of several quite different enemies of Israel, as well as

of God Himself. Another simple example is in Dt. 3:20; the land "beyond Jordan" refers to land on the West of the river; but in Josh. 9:10 the same phrase refers to land on the East. That same phrase "beyond Jordan" means something different in different contexts. We can't always assume, therefore, that the same phrase *must* refer to the same thing wherever it occurs. Read the Gospels in the context of other Gospels; read the prophets in the context of the historical records; read the NT epistles in the context of Acts. Again, a quick example: Paul said that he was going to Jerusalem, "Saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome" (Acts 19:21). But actually he had written to the Romans that he would drop in to see them on his way to Spain (Rom. 15:23). Spain was his real ambition, to preach the Gospel in "the regions beyond" (2 Cor. 10:16 and context)- not Rome. But Acts 19:21 gives the impression that Rome was the end of his vision.

- But be aware that when it comes to *prophecy*, in the sense of foretelling future events, the New Testament sometimes seems to quote the Old Testament *without* attention to the context- at least, so far as human Bible scholarship can discern. The early chapters of Matthew contain at least three examples of quotations whose context just cannot fit the application given: Mt. 2:14,15 cp. Hos. 11:1; Mt. 2:17,18 cp. Jer. 31:15; Mt. 1:23 cp. Is. 7:14. Much Christian material about Israel shows how they have returned to the land, rebuilt the ruined cities, made the desert blossom etc., as fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies in Jeremiah etc. The context of these prophecies often doesn't fit a return to the land by Jews in the 20th century; but on the other hand, the correspondence between these prophecies and recent history is so remarkable that it can't be just coincidence. So again we are led to conclude that a few words here and there within a prophecy can sometimes have a fulfilment outside that which the context seems to require.

- If you have (or can make) time, try to make a concentrated study of a Bible book. James is a good one to begin with. Note down what the verses are actually telling *you* in practice.

- Compare the parallel records when studying the Gospels. Be aware that often the records are summarized and highly condensed. Thus sometimes what is recorded as being actually said may be only a summary of the real words (consider what the Canaanite woman actually said: Mt. 15:27 cp. Mk. 7:28). Some wonderful things come out of comparing the records. Thus the Luke record has the Lord saying that two sparrows are sold for one farthing; Mark records that He said that five sparrows were sold for two farthings. So what did the Lord really say? I suggest something like this: 'As you know, two sparrows are sold for one farthing, they cost half a farthing each; but often, as you know, *five* sparrows are sold for *two* farthings, they'll throw one extra in for free, they're worth so little'.

- Every word of God is inspired. Be aware of the huge impact of brief, basic statements. Whoever isn't for me is against me. You can't serve two masters. Love the Lord God with all your heart. These basic statements should form our whole attitude to the world, to our life decisions, to our very essential being. Whilst basic doctrine is provable by many passages, don't be afraid of accepting something from 'just' one passage that clearly speaks to you. And, in this context, don't let anyone tell you that (e.g.) sisters shouldn't wear head coverings 'Because the Bible only says it once'. How many times does God have to tell us something before we take Him and His words seriously?

- Be aware that the original writers didn't have quotation marks or brackets (consider where Paul might have used them in 1 Cor. 15:45-47!). For example, throughout Corinthians Paul is quoting phrases from their allegations and questions, but it is not always exactly apparent.

Consider 2 Cor. 12:16. Perhaps using quotation marks we could translate: " Nevertheless, " being crafty" , I " caught you with guile" " . The New Testament so often seems to mix interpretation with Old Testament quotation; here especially we need to imagine the use of quotation marks. According to the Western text of Acts 18:4, Paul " inserted the name of the Lord Jesus" at the appropriate points in his public reading of the Old Testament prophecies. This was after the pattern of some of the Jewish targums (commentaries) on the prophets, which inserted the word " Messiah" at appropriate points in Isaiah's prophecies of the suffering servant (e.g. the Targum of Jonathan on the Prophets).

- Often a parenthesis is used to develop a digression, and then the writer returns to the main theme. Perceiving this is a key to how to interpret the Bible. Consider these examples:

1) Gal. 3:9-14. Verses 10-13 are a parenthesis concerning the curse of the Law. If read without the parenthesis, the flow of thought goes straight on: " They which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham (v.9)...that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles" (v.14).

2) Sometimes the artificial chapter breaks (which were added by man) break up the parenthesis. Is. 24:23 speaks of how " the Lord of Hosts shall reign in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem" ; the following first five verses of Is. 25 are a parenthesis; and then Is. 25:6 continues: " in this mountain...he will destroy..." . If we fail to realize the parenthesis, and if we only started reading at chapter 25:1, we would be thinking: " Which mountain?" . But if we realize the parenthesis, and if we disregard the chapter division, all is plain: " ...in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem (24:23)...in this mountain... (25:6)" . Whilst I strongly recommend the use of Bible reading planners such as the *Bible Companion*, this is one of the drawbacks of any system of reading a chapter per day. Reading through a book, especially in just two or three sittings, enables us to grasp the theme much better.

3) One of the most telling uses of parenthesis (and the most misunderstood) is in the Olivet prophecy. We frequently struggle to understand which verses apply to AD70 and which to the last days. But if Mt. 24:8-22 are read as a parenthesis specifically concerning the events of AD70, all becomes clear: the first seven verses and Mt. 24:23 ff. refer to events of both the last days and AD70. Try doing the same in Lk. 21. But I'll leave you to work through this for yourself!

4) " We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed (as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise) in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19). We must take heed to the word *in our hearts*- this is the idea, rather than any suggestion of a mystical coming of Christ in our hearts.

5) " Now the sojourning of the children of Israel (who dwelt in Egypt) was four hundred and thirty years" (Ex. 12:40). This solves the chronological problem which this verse otherwise creates.

- Not only are paragraph and chapter breaks sometimes misleading, verse breaks can be too. Inserting punctuation into translation of Hebrew and Greek texts is very difficult. Thus Eph. 1:4,5 in the AV reads: "...that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: having predestinated us". Shift the colon and another emphasis is apparent: "...that we should be holy and without blame before him: in love having predestinated us". When stuck with a

‘difficult’ verse (and they all are in some ways!), don’t be afraid to try re-jigging the punctuation a bit.

- Be aware that we are reading translations of the Bible, and that even within the New Testament we have examples of Hebrew words being translated into Greek. Yet hardly ever does a word in one language have an absolutely exact equivalent in another. Take the English word 'spirit'. French *esprit* and German *geist* convey the meaning, but neither of those words has any overlap with the idea of alcohol, which is a shade of meaning carried by the English 'spirit'. And yet neither the English, French nor German words for 'spirit' can really convey the ideas behind the Hebrew *ruach*, which can mean spirit, breath and wind.

- Watch out for the use of figures of speech. How we interpret the Bible accurately depends upon grasping these. Ellipsis and metaphor are the most common. Ellipsis is where as it were a gap is left in the sentence, and we have to fill in the intended sense. Thus: "For as many as have sinned without law, shall perish also without [*being judged by*] law" (Rom. 2:12). Often we need to read into the text in a more lengthy ellipsis - especially the idea of "not so much *this*, as *that*". Thus "Christ sent me not [so much as] to baptize, but to preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 1:17). Paul of course *did* baptize people, as he goes on to say in that very context (1 Cor. 1:14). Or take Jer. 7:22,23: "I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them... concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: but this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God". God *did* command sacrifices; but He *not so much* commanded them *as* required Israel's spirit of obedience and acceptance of Him.

- The Spirit often uses hyperbole, i.e. exaggerated language to make a point. Thus the shepherd left the 99 to seek the one; but the Lord never leaves us. The point is that His concern for the lost is *so* great. Or consider Jer. 7:22,23: "I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: but this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice..." . God *did* command them to offer sacrifices. But compared to His overwhelming desire for them to love His word rather than feel obligated by specific, concrete commands, effectively He *didn't* command them concerning sacrifices. Another example would be when Ez. 16:51,52 says that the sin of Jerusalem justified Samaria's sin. Sin doesn't justify sin; it's a shocking, arresting hyperbole.

- Sometimes, what appears to be hyperbole may in fact be irony. Thus when Paul says that the least respected member should settle disputes, he was not necessarily saying that this in fact was what he was advocating (the NT teaching about eldership would contradict this); he was surely using irony. Likewise in his teaching about head coverings, Paul is surely using irony: 'If you throw away your head covering, you may as well throw away your hair!' is how I read 1 Cor. 11:5. " ...Seeing ye yourselves are wise" is one of several more evident uses of irony in Corinthians.

- Appreciate that the Bible uses this device of irony quite extensively. Realizing the use of irony and appreciating the point behind it is directly related to our familiarity with Scripture. The more we love it and are truly familiar with it, the more we will grasp the use of irony. This is one example of how God has written the Bible to progressively open itself up to those who truly love it. The events associated with the trial and death of the Lord Jesus seem to be more densely packed with irony than anywhere else. This may be because the Lord's perception of the irony was a strength to Him. Thus, and this is only one simply example, He

would have seen the irony of sinners crowning Him. He knew that one day they really would, in their hearts.

- Try to see the historical events which occurred to Israel as relevant to you personally. They were "types of us". Note how 1 Cor. 10:1 speaks of "*our* fathers"- even when Paul is writing to Gentiles. He intended them to see in the Jewish fathers a type of themselves. Israel's keeping of the Passover implied that each subsequent Israelite had personally been redeemed that night. All down the years, they were to treat the stranger fairly: "for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 23:9). The body of believers, the body of Christ, is not only world-wide geographically at this point in time; it stretches back over time as well as distance, to include all those who have truly believed. This is why David found such inspiration from the history of Israel in his own crises (e.g. Ps. 77).

- Try to memorize Scripture, run through verses as you go about life, play tapes of Bible studies or Bible reading in the background (instead of the mindless radio). Much of Scripture was probably memorized by various contemporary believers. "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth" (Josh. 1:8) presumably means that Joshua was commanded to keep reciting it to himself in daily life, so that he would be obedient to it. The way Jeremiah consciously and unconsciously quotes and alludes to Job would suggest that he had memorized that book. And many of the Psalms are written in such a way (in Hebrew) as to be easily memorized. David memorized God's law and meditated upon it (hardly the easiest part of Scripture to memorize, at least to Western eyes; Ps. 119:16). He recited it to himself in the night seasons.

- We need to try to come to Scripture with what's been called "a second naivety", approaching passages as if for the first time. Rather like the idea of a 'born again virgin', it's not literally possible; but if we are to become children before God, then it's something we can surely achieve in spirit.

- Watch out for the danger of over interpretation. George Orwell, better known for his novels *Animal Farm* and *1984*, was a literary critic of great perception. He observed that all sorts of literature, "from Dickens to seaside postcards", can be analyzed in order to yield information and conclusions which it was never intended to provide (3). The Bible is more than literature, as it's inspired by God; but it is also literature, and in this sense it is just as prone to this kind of mistreatment as any other literature. And because human beings so want God to as it were be on their side, there's no book like it which has been so forced into giving support for human ideas. We have to be careful we don't do the same. We must be led to truth by the Bible, and not over interpret it. And I would suggest, as a rule of thumb, that over-interpretation occurs when someone comes to the Bible seeking support for their preconceived ideas.

The Real Study

Prov. 2:4,5 exhorts us to seek for wisdom as men seek for wealth in secular life. And yet how many blame their lack of Bible study on having no time, due to the pursuit of wealth! Long hours, demanding jobs that demand our very soul, the worries that come with wealth... these are the very things which sap our ability to seek the wisdom of God's word. Yet it is only if we seek for that wisdom above those things, with the same constant insistency with which the worldling seeks wealth, that "*then* shalt thou understand...". Understanding of God's word doesn't therefore come from academic application, from sitting down once in the week to do

some quick Bible study... it comes above all from an attitude. That desire to know God is what will lead us to correct understanding. Time and again we are taught that it is our attitude to God's word which is so crucial. The parable of the sower can be interpreted as fulfilling every time we hear the word sown in us. Thus some seed is "choked with cares" (Lk. 8:14)- exactly the same words used about Martha being "cumbered" with her domestic duties so that she didn't hear the Lord's word at that time (Lk. 10:40). We bring various attitudes of mind- stony, receptive, cumbered etc.- to the word each time we hear it. And it is our attitude to it which determines our response to it.

Bible study is vital for every believer. How to interpret the Bible is indeed an essential skill to grasp. God is His word. Our attitude to His word is our attitude to Him. If we love Him, we will love His word. We will meditate upon it, we will catch the spirit of the faithful Israelite, who wrote the word upon his doorposts, talked about it over his meals... Yet we must live in this world. We can't have our nose in a Bible all day (although we could all snatch a verse or so for meditation during the daily round). I can only suggest the 'umbrella' answer: If we know our mother has cancer and will receive the outcome of tests in a week; if we are in love; somehow we will do our daily tasks, but with a sense of something else hanging over us, permeating the atmosphere in which we live. And so it can be with God's word. One can sense how much Paul *loved* the word, and how much he had meditated upon it. Thus he speaks of how "Esaia is very bold, and saith...Esaia also *crieth* concerning Israel..." (Rom. 9:27; 10:20). Paul had meditated deeply upon Isaiah's words, even to the point of considering the tone of voice in which he first spoke them. It was because the rulers of Israel "knew not...the *voices* of the prophets which are read every sabbath day" (Acts 13:27) that they crucified the Lord. He speaks of their "voices" rather than merely their words. They had heard the words, but not felt and perceived that these were the actual voices of men who being dead yet speak. They didn't *feel* the wonder of inspiration in their attitude to Bible study- even though they would have devoutly upheld the position that the Bible texts were inspired. And here we have a lesson for ourselves.

Paul spoke of *holding fast* the faithful word (Tit. 1:9) with allusion to *holding to* our Master (Mt. 6:24). But- and this is an important caveat- don't deceive yourself that time spent in expounding Scripture is *necessarily* Bible study as *God* wants it- although it may make an impressive impact on a group of assembled Christians. True Bible study and understanding was what led the Lord to the death of the cross. To *truly* love God with all our heart and understanding, not just for the intellectual fascination of it, is more than a burnt sacrifice. True hearkening to the word is a chastening experience (Ps. 94:12). It isn't easy; not as easy as looking up words and going through the process of exposition. The Lord endured the cross which the word led Him to; and subsequently He 'prolonged his days' and saw His seed (Is. 53:10)- phrases taken straight out of Dt. 17:18-20, concerning how the King of Israel would read in the book of the law all the days of his life, "to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children (seed) in the midst of Israel". It was Christ's love of the word which made Him endure the cross and obtain that great salvation, both for Himself and for us. His crucifixion was likened to His ear (His hearing of the word) being nailed to an upright piece of wood (cp. the cross; Ex. 21:6 = Ps. 40:6-8 = Heb. 10:5-12).

The Lord in one Gospel record tells us to "take heed *how* you hear...". In another, He tells us: "take heed *what* you hear". *How we hear is what we hear*. How to interpret the Bible is a crucial issue. Quite simply, we must examine carefully our attitudes to Bible reading, and our methodology. We must clear our minds for even up to a minute before we start serious daily reading. We must give our quality time to it. For five minutes Bible reading with a truly open,

perceptive mind is worth 40 minutes of skim reading that gives nothing but a partly salved conscience at the end. True hearing of God's word will convict us of our sin, and "do good to him that walketh uprightly" (Mic. 2:6,7). "Instruction" is paralleled with "reproof" in Prov. 12:1. If we really hear the word, we are both reproofed and comforted. But this raises the question, as to whether we are only surface level, skim reading God's word day by day, if that....?

Notes

(1) A.B. Davidson, *The Theology Of The Old Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1906).

(2) See, e.g., Arthur Gibson, *Biblical Semantic Logic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981) pp. 176-206; James Barr, *The Semantics Of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961) pp. 100-106.

(3) George Orwell, *Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1974 ed.).

4-7-1 Bible Study By Questions

Some Suggested Prompts For Bible Study By Questions

The things of the spirit of God are spiritually "discerned" says Paul in 1 Cor. 2:14. But the Greek word means literally to question; asking questions as we read God's word is therefore an appropriate thing for us to be doing.

Bible Study Questions For Any Scripture Passage

- Who wrote/ said it?
- When was it written?
- What does it mean?
- Why was it written / preserved for us?
- How does this scripture relate to its context?
- How does this Scripture compare with others?
 - Is it of similar kind or a parallel account?
 - Are there paradoxes involved?
 - Is there use of the same word?
 - Is there use of the same idea?

- Are there allusions or quotations?

Bible Study Questions For Use In Special Contexts

Historical Record

- Does it contain types of shadows? If so, what is the antitype?
- Were the events of this record prophesied earlier?
- What lessons does it teach about:

God's power

God's care and mercy

Human nature

How we should conduct ourselves.

A Psalm

- What are the background events which led to its composition?
- How best could it be applied in our worship now?
- Will there be future occasions when it will be fulfilled or become specially relevant to the thoughts or worship of the faithful?

Parable / metaphor / symbol

- Is it a general or detailed metaphor?
- What connection does it have to other parables / symbols?
- What is the meaning of the symbol?

Prophecy / vision

- Has the prophecy been fulfilled yet?
- If so, How? And was it fulfilled completely or partially?
- If not, How does it relate to other unfulfilled prophecy and the purpose of God?

Miracle

- What was the purpose of this miracle?
- What does it teach?

Letter

- To whom and to what categories of people was it written?
- What were the circumstances and purpose of writing?
- How are the principles being taught applicable today?

Another form of Bible study by questions is to ask questions like 'What should Jacob have replied to Rebekah in Gen. 27?', 'What should Eve have said to the serpent'?

Of all the Bible study tips presented in the previous chapter, the idea of Bible study by questions is perhaps the most useful when it comes to organizing a Bible study amongst a group of believers who have only recently been baptized. Decide what chapter or character you are going to analyze, draw up a list of questions, and then between yourselves try to find the answers. This avoids the embarrassment of someone having to lead the study when he may feel unqualified to do so. It is also often the case that there is one mature brother in a group of newly baptized brethren and sisters. Because he may have been studying the word more years than they have been born, ecclesial meetings tend to become sessions of listening to his expositions. Whilst there may be no harm in this in some ways, the end result can easily be that the new converts do not study the word for themselves. A way out can be that the mature brother or pastor prepares a list of Bible study questions which are studied in advance by the group, and discussion of them forms the basis for the Bible study. There are some examples of Bible study by questions in the next section.

4-7-1-2 Examples Of Bible Study By Questions

1. DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

Please read: 2 Sam. 11 & 12; Psalms 38 (after the sin, before confession), 51 (confession) & 32 (joy of forgiveness).

1. Ps. 32:1,2 cp. Rom. 4:6,7. Why the change in pronouns (" he..the man" cp. " they")?
2. Where are the NT allusions to the following Bathsheba language, and what does all this teach us:

Ps. 32:4,6 (" An heavy burden...too heavy...bowed down")

2 Sam. 11:2 (" very beautiful to look upon")

Ps. 32:2 " Imputeth not iniquity"

Ps. 32:2 " No guile"

Ps. 32:6 " A time when thou mayest be found"

What are the NT connections with 'finding God'? What does it mean, to find God? When do we find Him?

The sin was "in thy (God's) sight" (Ps. 51:4)

3. Interpret the parable of 2 Sam. 12:1-4; the two men; the city; the many flocks; the one lamb; nourished up; lay in his bosom; unto him as a daughter; a traveller (cp. Lk. 11:6). What was the relationship between Uriah and Bathsheba? Do you think Bathsheba was satisfied with her marriage to Uriah bearing this in mind?

4. Was the sin a one-off slip up or part of a longer term relationship? David watched her from the roof top; what are the Biblical associations of the roof top? (cp. 2 Sam. 16:22). Is it significant that they got married afterwards? Is this how most oriental kings would have got round the problem? Consider: How well did David & Bathsheba know each other? How near did they live to each other? (So how are we to understand 2 Sam. 12:3?) Was Bathsheba spiritual? Or just a dumb blond? Was David spiritual at this time (cp. Ps. 30:6)? Would he have fallen so deeply just at the sight of a beautiful woman? David lay with her "for (because) she was purified..." after washing, in obedience to the law (2 Sam. 12:4); what does this imply? The sin occurred at "eveningtide"; what connection between washing, purification and the evening? What part of the Law does 2 Sam. 12:9 refer to (cp. Ps. 51:16)? What other connections are there between sexuality and spirituality? Gen. 39:6,7 Hebrew text is one.

5. Was Bathsheba guilty or innocent? Are we helped to an answer by Ps. 51:4; 1 Kings 15:5; and 2 Sam. 11:4 is an odd way of putting it (it's usually the other way round).

6. Why wouldn't Uriah sleep with Bathsheba? What can we imply from the emphasis on messengers in 2 Sam. 11:3,4,5,6,19,23,27? Could Bathsheba read or write?

7. Did David spiritually crash after the sin? What evidence is there within Ps. 32 and 51? "My sin is ever before me...I *will* declare mine iniquity; I *will* be sorry for my sin" (Ps. 38:17,18,22) implies what?

8. Ps. 51:13 implies David's experience of forgiveness motivated his preaching. Ps. 32 is a 'Maschil' psalm ('for instruction'). What other examples are there of preaching being preceded by experience of sin and forgiveness (there are at least 5 others!). Should we preach on the basis of our own personal experience ('Let me tell you what the Lord did for me, my friend...')?

If you're still keen:

9. Ps. 51:11,12 means ?

10. What allusions to David, Nathan & Bathsheba in 2 Cor. 7:7-11?

11. Ps. 38:17,18; 51:3; 32:10; what other connections between sin & sorrow? What does this teach us?

12. Sometimes the Bathsheba Psalms speak of David's "sin", other times "sins" in the plural (Ps. 51:4,9; 51:3; 32:5 cp. 38:3,4,18). What might this mean?

13. What was the state of David's health after repentance? (Ps. 32:4,10; 38:6,7,11). It has been observed that there are many connections between Psalms prophetic of the crucifixion, and those which allude to the Bathsheba incident and David's subsequent health problems. What does this teach us about the nature of Christ's sufferings?

14. Ps. 38:11 = ? Was there a falling out of love with Bathsheba? Is "lovers" an intensive plural?

15. What connection Ps. 51:6 & 32:7?

16. What connections David's sin and Adam's? There are at least 11 clear links between Gen. 2,3 and 2 Sam. 11,12,16.

2. ANGELS

1. What is / who are the *elohim* in Gen. 1:26? Is this definition true for the other times *elohim* is used in the early chapters of Genesis?

2. Read Ex. 33:11-23 and 34:4-6. Did Moses see *God Himself* or an Angel?

3. We know that Angels are limited in power compared to God. What do the following passages imply about the abilities of the Angels, and the way in which they work:

- Their power: Gen. 32:24-29; Dan. 10:13; 9:21 AVmg.
- Their knowledge: Gen. 22:12; Dt. 8:2; Zech. 1:12; Mt. 13:27,39;
- Their liability to emotion: Ezek. 8:5,6
- Their decision making process: Gen. 18:17, 22

4. How are we to understand the 'Language of limitation' which Scripture abounds with- e.g. Gen. 2:2; Ex. 31:17; Dt. 32:20,27? God is almighty, knowing the end from the beginning. As such, he does not "repent" (change His mind). Yet there are ample examples of where God *does* do just this. 1 Sam. 15:28,29,35 is a classic. What is the explanation?

5. Consider the following examples of God 'repenting'. For each, try to explain it away in terms of *God Himself* changing His mind, and then think how an understanding of Angels could do better: Ex. 4:24; Num. 14:34 AVmg.; Ex. 32:11 mg.; Hos. 12:4; Jud. 2:1 cp. Zech. 11:10,11. If you like this line of approach, consider the following examples, of where 'God' says He won't do something; and then does: Ex. 33:3 cp. 34:9; Dt. 4:31; 31:6,8 cp. 31:17.

6. What does 1 Kings 22:19-23 imply about how the Angels are organized? What other verses / Biblical ideas can you bring to bear on this idea of a Court scene in Heaven? [Ps. 89:7,8 is interesting]. Where else do we read about things running to and fro from God?

7. Compare Ex. 12:23 and 1 Cor. 10:10. Who was "the destroyer"? Do we have Angels *in conflict* here? And if not here, what about in Ez. 9:1-6? And who is the "Prince" of Dan. 10:13?

Guardian Angels?

8. What evidence is there to support the idea that we each have one specific 'guardian Angel'? Square that evidence with Heb. 1:14; Lk. 11:7,8; 15; 15:6-10?
9. What is the connection between: Ex. 23:21,27,18 - Dt. 31:3,6,17 - Heb. 13:5?
10. Who are the "Angels" of Rev. 1:20. The church elders? Or...? How can the "Angels" of these ecclesias be rebuked and repent?
11. *Who* is singing in Rev. 5:9,10? Note the context.
12. List / name as many passages which directly or indirectly associate Angels with the judgment seat. My list is: *Directly*: Mt. 13:41; Rev. 14:10. And *indirectly*: Lk. 12:8,48; 1 Cor. 10:10; Ps. 35:5,6. And in Lk. 19:24,25 who are "them that stood by"? Perhaps put the ideas / verses on cards, and juggle them around to make a possible picture of the judgment seat - from an Angelic perspective.

Angels in the first century

13. Why do you think the Holy Spirit is personified in the N.T.?
14. What does the "holy Spirit" refer to in Is. 63:7-11? What similarities are there between the Comforter passages (Jn. 14 and 16) and the wilderness Angel?
15. Use the answer to no. 10 to get more insight into: Jn. 16:13; 15:26; Jude 5; Heb. 3:7-11; Acts 7:51; and Acts 2:3 recalls which O.T. passage about Angels?
16. Who does Rev. 1:1 refer to? Christ? Angel? Saints?
17. Who's speaking in Rev. 3:5?

3. DAVID AND GOLIATH

Please read 1 Samuel 17

1. A big man falling to the earth, hit by a stone; reminds you of what?
2. Goliath died from a wound in the *head* = ?
3. It is stressed four times that Goliath was covered with brass (17:5,6)...
4. What were the two things that the men of Israel spoke about (17:24,25)? What does this point forward to?
5. How does Rev. 5:3-5 fit in?
6. Consider 17:54. What might 'Golgotha' mean? And note "Ephes-dammim" = 'border of blood', cp. Acaldema.

7. What were Israel supposed to do every morning and evening? How does this connect with 17:16?
8. What was David's occupation at the time? What is the typology of the following: 17:55; 17:28-30; 17:32; 17:46,47; 17:49.
9. How does 17:8,9 enable us to enter into the tension in the mind of Christ as He faced the cross? Is Rom. 6:17,18 a conscious allusion to this scenario?
10. Do you see the connection 17:51 and Col. 2:15 NIV?
11. David *ran* (17:22) = ?
12. 17:52 = ? And "Sharaim" = ?
13. Saul was the physical giant of Israel. What's the significance of the fact *he* didn't go and fight Goliath?
14. David was told to go by his father (17:28). What passages about Christ does this connect with? [If you really can't think of anything: Gen. 37:13; Lk. 20:14; Jn. 4:31].
15. David left the sheep to go and kill Goliath. Compare this with Lk. 15:4-6. So what does the shepherd going out into the night, up into the mountains (cp. Abraham & Isaac) refer to? (Cp. 1 Pet. 2:25 with Is. 53:5,6).
16. David seemed surprised no one else would take up the challenge. What evidence Christ felt the same?
17. David took his strength from the fact that "the armies of God...Yahweh of hosts" were with him (17:26,36,45). What do these titles refer to?
18. Why did he take 5 stones? Did he think the first one would miss? And the second...the third....?
19. Consider the relationship between Jonathan and David immediately after the victory against Goliath. What does this represent? What NT concept does 2 Sam. 1:26 look forward to?

The Political Aspect

Goliath = image of Dan. 2; therefore there must be some latter day reference here.

20. Lion, bear, brass, iron are all mentioned in the record (17:5-7, 34). What connections with Daniel?
21. 17:1,2 gathering together = ? 17:47 "with sword and spear" = ? What else happened at Azekah (17:1)? What other invaders were destroyed by (sling) stones?
22. Goliath was the champion (Heb *gibbor*) of Israel's invaders.... last days = ?

23. 'Goliath' = 'to lead and go into captivity'. He was a great blasphemer.... what connections with Rev. 13:5-10?

24. What difference between the Philistines and Israel in terms of military hardware? But Goliath was killed with his own weapons...

25. 17:46 = what famous latter day invasion passage?

26. The carcasses of the Philistine invaders were given to the fowls and beasts to eat. What other Biblical references to this, and what do they suggest this typifies? (NB Rev. 19:17-21; Ps. 79:2,10,12).

For the enthusiast: What connections 1 Sam. 17 with Psalms 8 and 144, and between them and the NT?

4. THE ASSYRIAN INVASION: TYPE OF THE LAST DAYS

1. The first Assyrian invasion is found in 2 Kings 15:19,20. What does this imply about the material prosperity of Israel at the time of the invasions (cp. 16:8; 17:4)? And therefore in our last days...?

2. Compare this with Jud. 14:14 (Heb.) and 15:11,12. What present Israeli policies might this refer to? Does it imply any *change* in Israel's way of dealing with the Arabs / Assyrians?

3. What was going on in Israel politically in 2 Kings 15, at the time of the invasion? Are there *Biblical* reasons for thinking the new Israel will be going through something similar?

4. How did Assyria (and Babylon and Egypt and the Philistines and all the other typical latter day invaders) compare to Israel in terms of military hardware? How do you imagine the Israelites felt when faced with some of those new fangled weapons? Is that how they now feel? What changes might we expect in the light of this?

5. How many Assyrian invasions were there? Relevance for the last days? Which part of Israel did they go for first (2 Kings 15:29)? Any indicators, Biblical or otherwise, that this might be replicated in the last days?

6. What did the Assyrians do to the Israelite population first of all? Last days relevance? (What did Hitler do to them first of all?). How does this tie up with Is. 11:11,16; 27:13 and a 'second Exodus' scenario?

7. Before the main Assyrian onslaught, there was a softening up period of raids by local Arab tribes (2 Kings 17:20). Significant?

8. Complete the following table:

Ezekiel 38

:4

:7

:8

Assyria (spoken of in Isaiah)

:9
:11
:12
:19
:22
:19,20
39:10

9. What else was Assyria up to while planning to invade Israel? Stuck? See 2 Kings 19:11; Is. 8:4. What sort of modern countries is that talking about?

10. A few years before the Assyrian invasion, Israel had recaptured Elath (2 Kings 14:22), Damascus and Hamath (2 Kings 14:28). What do we read about these places in 2 Kings 16:6; 18:34; Is. 7:8? What does this point forward to?

11. 2 Kings 16:7. Who was Israel's father and master? So what is Ahaz really saying here (cp. 2 Kings 16:10,11)? Other proof of this? But how about Ez. 23:7? Last days?

12. Israel ransacked, mass deportations and murder, then Jerusalem surrounded. Within her walls were a few faithful, and many faithless " sinners in Zion" (Is. 33:14). What famous last days passage does this ring bells with?

13. Isaiah then arises, inspiring faith through speaking forth God's word. Who does he typify? Note his partnership with Hezekiah (= ?).

14. The final onslaught lasted 3 years (2 Kings 17:5). Significant?

15. There is a difference between Israel and Judah in the Assyrian invasion. Is this significant in the typology? Some from Israel came to take shelter in Jerusalem (cp. Lot's wife and Mt. 25:8, see the connection?).

16. The Assyrian army was split into 3 groups, under Tartan, Rabсарis and Rabshakeh. Where else do we read about Israel's invaders attacking in 3 groups?

17. 2 Chron. 32:18 implies a propaganda war and a mental wearing down of Israel. Any other typical or direct evidence for this in the last days?

18. Who is the King of South who Israel trusted in, as per 2 Kings 17:4? Last days? How did Israel feel at 2 Kings 19:9?

19. What connections Dan. 11:40-44 and the Assyrian invasion?

20. Hezekiah's prayer brought about salvation from the Assyrians. Indicating? " Thou art the God" (2 Kings 19:15), he said, alluding to 1 Kings 18:39. Significant? He also alludes to 2 Chron. 20:6. Why?

21. The rage of Sennacherib is stressed (2 Kings 19:27,28). What other passages speak of rage against God's people? Who does Sennacherib typify? Note the great emphasis of his personality and charisma. What was he offering in 2 Kings 18:31,32?

22. Zech. 13:8-14:4 shows that this type breaks down (especially cp. v.2 with 2 Kings 19:32). What does this passage mean?

23. What do you make of comparing 2 Kings 19:31 with Is. 9:7?

Questions on the parables of Matthew 25

25:1 *Then*- When?

25:1 Who is the groom? Who are the virgins? What's the significance of virginity in the parable?

25:2 Are we intended to see significance in the proportion 5 : 5 ? Will only half of us be saved? Can we over interpret parables?

25:2 What is the wisdom which the wise showed?

25:5 *Tarried*- same Greek word in 24:48 delayed. What does this mean for the coming of Christ? 2 Pet. 3:9,15

25:5 *They slumbered and slept* What does this mean? 1 Thess. 5:6 ?

25:6 *Midnight*- Surely a strange time? What does this mean? *A cry*- What does this represent? The actual coming of Christ? 1 Thess. 4:16

25:6 *Comes / is coming*- What does that imply?

25:7 *Arose* = ? *Trimmed*= ?

25:9 What does the oil represent? Why can't it be shared? Who are "those who sell"?

25:10 *Door was shut* = ? *Open to us* = ?

25:12 *I never knew you* =?

The Parable of the Talents

25:14 Who is "the man"? The distant country? His servants? His goods?

25:14 What is the significance of Jesus being called "a man"?

25:14 What is the significance of "*His* goods"? They were His. Was it usual for a master to give His goods to His slaves?

25:15 "According to his own personal ability"- ? "To *every* man"- ?

25:16 What are the talents?

25:16 Five, two, one- who is a five talent person and who is a one talent person?

25:16 How can we trade talents?

25:17 How can we "gain" talents? How else is the word "gain" used in the New Testament?

25:18 "Hid"- Greek word means "to conceal". What might this mean? See Matthew 5:15.

25:19 Do one talent people have greater tendency to spiritual failure than five talent people?

25:19 What are your talents? How can you trade them? What can you gain with them?
 25:19 The Lord comes and reckons [to take an account] with them. What does this mean?
 25:21 What will we rule over? (Luke 19:17; Revelation 5:10).
 25:21 "A few things". What does imply about having even five talents?
 25:23 Enter into your Lord's joy. What does this mean? Is the servant joyful before he hears this? How will we feel as we stand at the day of judgment? And afterwards? See Malachi 4:2.
 25:25 "I was afraid"- what of?
 25:26 Was his Lord really like this? What was the man's real problem? Why didn't he do anything?
 25:27 Why does the Lord bother explaining what the man might have done to be acceptable?
 25:27 What did the Law of Moses say about lending money for interest? What is the Lord suggesting the man ought to have done?
 25:29 How can something be taken away from someone if they have nothing? What does Jesus mean here?
 25:30 Weeping= ? Banging teeth= ?
 Does the next parable explain how we ought to be trading our talents?

Questions on the parables of Luke 15

The lost sheep

15:4 *What man of you?* Is this what shepherds usually do?
 15:4 Is 1 % loss rate reasonable or not?
 15:4 Leaving the 99 in the wilderness- what does this mean? Is that realistic?
 15:4 *Until he finds it...* What does this imply about the shepherd's attitude?
 15:5 *Lays it on his shoulders* . What would the sheep be doing on his shoulders? What posture would the shepherd have as he carried the sheep on his shoulders? When did Jesus have such a posture?
 15:5 *Rejoicing*. Was the sheep rejoicing too?
 15:6 Where does he take the sheep? Where are the other sheep? Was it usual to invite friends and neighbours to a party for such an event as finding a lost sheep? What do you think their reaction would've been to the invitation? Who might the friends and neighbours represent?
 15:7 *Need no repentance*- Who doesn't need to repent? How are we to understand this? The 99 sheep and the one lost sheep represent two categories of people- what are they? Are they the same two categories we meet in the parable of the two sons later in Luke 15?

The lost coin

15:8 What did poor village women in first century Palestine own? What were her 10 coins? Who does the poor woman represent?
 15:8 *Light a candle*- What does this represent? How does Matthew 5:14,15 help us understand the interpretation?

15:8 *Until she find it*- What does this mean?

15:9 Who are the friends and neighbours, according to v. 10?

The lost sons

15:12 When do sons usually receive their inheritance? So what was the younger son effectively saying to his father?

15:12 *He divided*- Was it usual that the younger son received *half* of the inheritance?

Was the father weak minded? Why did he agree to this request? Do you think he knew what the son was likely to do?

15:13 *Gathered all together*- He had been given the "goods", the things, the property- but very quickly ["not many days after"] he turned them into cash. Do you think he got a good price for those things? How do you think his father felt about it?

15:13 *A far country*. Jesus was a Jew, living in Israel, talking to Jews. So they assumed the father and his sons were also Jews. Was the "far country" Israel?

15:15 How do you think a Jew felt having to work with pigs? Why did the owner give him such a job?

15:17 *Came to himself*- What does this represent?

15:19 What does this represent?

15:20 How come the father noticed him from such a long way off? Why does he run to meet him? Was it normal that an older man ran through the streets of his village? How would the village people have reacted as they saw the younger son walking home? What would he have looked like?

15:21 Why doesn't the son repeat all of the speech he had prepared in v. 19?

15:22 Why doesn't the father discuss more with the son before throwing a party?

15:28 Who does the older brother represent? What's the context of these parables (v. 2)? Why was he so angry?

15:29 *Neither transgressed I*- Do you think this was true?

15:30 *With prostitutes*- How did he know that?

15:31 *All that I have is yours*- compare v. 12- the father had divided "unto *them* his living". How much did the father himself now own?

15:32 Do you think the older son went in to the party? Who, in the end, was the lost son?

4.8 The 'Boring Bits'

4.8.1 Lessons From Leviticus

As I write this, we've been reading Leviticus and other parts of the Mosaic Law in our daily readings. "I just can't cope with Leviticus!" was the comment from a sister, as we pulled out the *Bible Companion* to 'do the readings'. It seems impossible to extract any spiritual lessons from Leviticus. I guess we've all had that feeling as we read through the Law, and indeed other parts of Scripture which just seem so remote from our twentieth century lives. When we're relatively new to Bible reading, this kind of thing can be a real turn off. So following are a few thoughts to help us cope with Leviticus- and other Scripture.

- There are a number of references in Scripture to books like the book of Jasher (e.g. Josh. 10:13) which we no longer have available to us. Whether they were inspired or not, we don't know; but the point is, they are no longer available to us because God knows that we do not need them. By contrast, the elaborate rituals of the Mosaic Law *have* been preserved for us; God would not have inspired and preserved books like Leviticus unless they were important for us.

- The Law constantly emphasized the sinfulness of man. Thus a woman had to offer a sin offering after menstruation, even though she hadn't sinned. The idea of being 'unclean' when you hadn't personally done anything wrong would have taught the Israelites that having done all, they were still unprofitable servants. Therefore God wishes us to go through life, not with personal self-doubt, but with a *constant* awareness that so many things can defile us, and knowing our total inability to be saved by our own efforts. The Israelite was being taught to have a real faith in God's grace- hour by hour in their daily experience of life. Would that we had something or somebody to nudge our conscience in this spiritually dead world of ours.

- It might help if we try to visualize the practical benefits of keeping the laws. "In keeping of them is great reward", David commented (Ps. 19:11). Moses likewise: "The Lord commanded us to do all these statutes...*for our good always*" (Dt. 6:24)- not for their irritation, or as a pointless test of obedience. Perhaps this is why the giving of the Law is described as an expression of God's *love* for Israel (Dt. 33:2-4). Have you ever thought of the Law like that? It was the loving marriage contract between God and Israel. We must see the keeping of the law by the faithful Israelite as being done within a certain spiritual atmosphere. It would have been impossible to keep all those laws from a series of deliberate acts of the will. The truly obedient Israelite would have developed a way of life and thinking, a culture of kindness to others, which achieved obedience to them. This was surely how Jesus was able to perfectly fulfil the Law. "If a man do (the commands) he shall even live in them" (Lev. 18:5) seems to refer to this atmosphere of obedience. Indeed, Dt. 4:2 suggests that God had given them just the right commands "that ye may keep" them. In other words, obedience to one command would lead to obedience to another, so that a whole way of life could be developed which was in accord with God's laws. Successful keeping of the commandments of Christ is similar. Viewed one by one, they can seem just too much to cope with. David found that keeping God's laws made it even easier to keep them; there was an upward spiral of conformity to God's mind. Thus he asks God to give him any other commandments which God desired; rather than thinking 'I can't cope with all these, so no more, *please!*'.

- The whole of the Law points forward to Christ in some way. This is the greatest of the lessons from Leviticus. We desperately seek to understand Him more closely, to appreciate the intricate beauty of His character. The Gospels give us the cold facts about the man Jesus of Nazareth. There is little interpretation or insight given into the inner man of Jesus (except possibly in John's Gospel). Yet the New Testament speaks as if we ought to know Jesus as a person, a real close friend. How are we to do this? The answer lies in learning from books like Leviticus. So, don't be frightened to see *echoes* of the spirit of Jesus throughout the Old Testament. For example, a woman was unclean for 33 days after the birth of a son (Lev. 12:4). It can be no accident that the Lord lived for 33 years- in such close association with unclean humanity that He was identified with our uncleanness. The exalted Lord therefore knows what it feels like to be 'unclean', even though He didn't sin. So when we sin, and feel Christ doesn't know what it feels like: well, Leviticus teaches us that He *does* appreciate it! Nowhere in the Gospels do you get such depth of insight into the relationship we really *can* have with our Lord. Hebrews is really an exposition of the Law with reference to the Lord. The writer uses phrases like " seeing then....let us...." - the argument, and the positive encouragement, is built upon an assumed familiarity with the Law.

- Talking of women getting unclean, it's easy to mutter to yourself: 'Unclean if you did this, unclean if you did that! Just touch a bed and you were unclean, had to go and wash in water, sometimes wash all your clothes...when you hadn't really done anything wrong. Enough to send me up the wall! What a bind, what a pain in the neck! What sort of lessons from Leviticus are these?'. But this was exactly the attitude of unfaithful Israel: " Ye said also, What a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it" (Mal. 1:13). The book of Malachi is full of words like this. What a contrast with David! The whole of Ps. 119 describes how he rejoiced at God's law, staying up late at night, straining his eyes into the candlelight to read it, getting up first thing in the morning to read some more (Ps. 119:147,148). He obviously saw something in it that perhaps we don't. Perhaps he appreciated more keenly the prophecies of Messiah than we do. Peter makes the point that David knew so much about Jesus, although he wasn't even born then, that David could say: " I foresaw the Lord (Jesus) always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved" (Acts 2:25). David " foresaw" the coming of Jesus at all times; the only source of knowledge he had was the Law of Moses (remember David lived before the time of the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah). Jesus was ever present in David's thinking; thanks to his meditation upon the Law of Moses. The key to his deep insight is found in Ps. 119:18: " Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" . He prayed before he unrolled those scrolls, recognizing that if he read those words in his own intellectual strength, they would just be black print on white paper. Perhaps *this* is why we find the Law hard to cope with; we don't pray enough before 'doing our readings'. In my own study, sometimes I find a chapter of the Law opens up beautifully, at others I find it hard to get anywhere with. The fault is in my attitude of mind, not in the Law itself, which is totally perfect (Rom. 7:12), and a superb expression of the ways and mind of God (Is. 42:24).

4.8.2 Lessons From Chronicles

It would make an interesting exercise to find out exactly how many believers actually read the Chronicles genealogies every year. They must be amongst the most difficult to get any practical lessons from. And yet " *whatsoever* things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Any words inspired by God's Spirit must reveal His Spirit, His mind, to us. As with all the Bible, these chapters seem to yield little at first reading. Yet prayerful reading surely *must*

open them up to us. I have used my present Bible for the last 14 years, and each year I've ploughed through 1 Chronicles 1-9, writing a few comments in the margin each time. So here are my lessons from Chronicles:

- Occasionally we learn background information which sheds new light on the historical records. For example, David several times laments the hardness of heart to be seen in " the sons of Zeruiah" . I assumed that Zeruiah was a man- until considering 1 Chron.2:16, which says that Zeruiah was a sister of David. The fact that the hardness of those three men seems to be associated with their mother would lead us to conclude that David's sister Zeruiah was an extremely hard woman. Inevitably there must have been strands of hardness in David too (consider his treatment of Uriah, his intended massacre of Nabal's encampment, torturing the Ammonites etc.); and yet more often than not, we get the impression that David was a real softy. His experience of life made him progressively more soft, whilst his sister and nephews went the other way. Truly could he comment towards the end of it all: " Thy gentleness hath made me great" . By way of exhortation we need to soberly consider the fact that we are either getting harder, or softer. There is no in between status. The softness and gentleness of the Lord Jesus, the great antitype of David, mixed as it was with that firmness of resolve and purpose (remember how He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem!) is surely something to really appreciate about Him, something to rise up to, to be truly inspired by.

- Another example of this is the background to 'Gog' given in 1 Chron. 5- he was an apostate Jew who went away from the God of Israel, attracted by the grazing grounds to the north east of Israel, and who eventually ended up living permanently in the land of Israel's enemies, the land of the Hagarenes (sons of Hagar, i.e. the Arabs) and Assyria. The Gog of Ez. 38 may well be an apostate Jew (after the pattern of Rabshakeh) who leads an invasion of his ancient homeland. He attacks because he loves cattle (Ez. 38:11,12)- which was a characteristic of the Gog of 1 Chron. 5. Is it significant that most Russian leaders have been Jews?

- The people recorded here lived many centuries ago. And yet God has preserved His record of them for us to see in such detail- surely proof enough that He is truly sensitive to each one of His children, His memory does not become dimmed by time. God's sensitivity to us is something to marvel at. When the Lord Jesus died, amidst all the pain God felt, there were no flashing lights up in the sky for people in say England or Russia or China. People went on with their daily affairs, their petty arguments, their petty excitements. And God's joy at His Son's glorious resurrection was not directly reflected to this planet either. And this is what deceives us all; God does not show His feelings, His sensitivity, directly, and therefore we are tempted to think that our righteousness does not really make His heart jump for joy; and to feel that our secret failings really cause Him very little pain. It was the mission of Israel's prophets, chapter after chapter, to show God's people the error of this way of thinking.

- These records seem to stress the weakness and occasional strength of these children of God. This is one of the major lessons from Chronicles. Every now and then, the list of names is interrupted by a piece of information which indicates God's awareness of their spirituality. For example, the fact some men had more than one wife or a wife from a nation other than Israel is often recorded (1 Chron. 1:32; 2:3,26,35,48; 4:18; 5:1; 7:14; 8:8). The way these interruptions occur in the lists of names stands out. This is surely to indicate two things: that many faithful men (e.g. Abraham and Caleb, 1 Chron. 1:32; 2:46) made mistakes in this area of life, and secondly that all down the centuries God has not forgotten that they married out of the faith, or that they allowed the pressures of their surrounding world to influence them to break away from the ideal one man: one woman standard of Eden. These two facts provide us

with both warning and comfort, in that although God is sensitive to failure, He is still able to justify men, to count them as if they are righteous for the sake of their covenant relationship with Him, even though (e.g.) their married life was not completely in order.

- Israel's sinfulness seems to be emphasized in other 'interruptions' in the flowing list of names. Thus it is sometimes stressed that a man did not have many children (e.g. 2:4,6,16), as if to indicate that God's blessing was not with him (there seems an undoubted connection in Old Testament times between blessing and number of sons). Thus statements like "Jether died without children...Sheshan had no sons but daughters...Shimei had sixteen sons and six daughters; but his brethren had not many children, neither did all their family multiply" (2:32,34; 4:27) would have been read as highly significant in spiritual terms. Some outstanding weaknesses amongst the patriarchs are recorded (e.g. 5:1), and the fact that the duty of the priests was to "make an atonement for the Israel" (6:49) appears to be an obvious detail added in passing- until it is appreciated that these records are highlighting the weakness of Israel. This is one of the major lessons from Chronicles.

- Some of the names given to children seem to hint at a weakness in the parents. One wonders why Caleb called his illegitimate son "Haran" (2:46), after the city which Abraham left behind in order to attain God's promises. When a passage is repeated twice, surely God wishes us to perceive something. 1 Chron. 8:30-34 is repeated in 9:36-40. The reason seems to be that the name 'Baal' was used by the leaders of Israel. Gibeon's children included Kish and *Baal*, Kish's son was king Saul, Saul had a son called *Eshbaal* as well as Jonathan, David's beloved friend; and Jonathan had a son called *Meribbaal*. These are not the names as recorded elsewhere; evidently the Chronicles record is highlighting the fact that there was a strand of weakness for idols in the family of Saul, including in Jonathan- who was a type of us in his friendship of David / Jesus. Surely this helps us to better relate to him; his love of David, his appreciation of David's righteousness, his belief that David would have the future Kingdom, struggled against the fact that the worldly influence of his father and great-grandfather still rubbed off upon him.

- "These are the kings that reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the children of Israel...." (1:43) seems a rather irrelevant statement- until it is appreciated that the point is being made that Israel's desire for a king was influenced by the fact the surrounding peoples had them.

- The repeated reference to the possession of concubines can be read as an indication of Israel's weakness in abandoning the ideal standards of God regarding marriage. Yet we read that even David had concubines (3:9)- as if to show the extent of Israel's weakness in the area of marriage.

- However, occasionally there are implications of spiritual strength in the records (e.g. 4:10). And more than this; several times the apparent weaknesses of men are covered over by God's imputed righteousness, and because God saw the ultimate end. Thus Boaz's marriage to a Gentile is not recorded; simply "Boaz begat Obed" (2:12), whereas others' marriage out of the faith is recorded in the same chapter (2:3,34). In harmony with this theme of imputed righteousness, there is no mention of Dan in these genealogies of the tribes of Israel- because the serpent was his symbol? (Dan is likewise omitted in Rev. 7:4). "The sons of Simeon were Nemuel and Jamin...and Shaul" (4:24); but Gen. 46:10 shows that Shaul was Simeon's son by a wrong, casual relationship. Yet this is not recorded in Chronicles, even though so many other weaknesses are. Surely this is to demonstrate how if God imputes righteousness for a

repented of sin, there really is no record of this kept by Him. This and other such lessons from Chronicles only come from digging under the surface.

- The genealogy of the sons of Korah, the gatekeepers of the temple, is recorded in 9:17-19. It can be shown from the genealogies that they were brought up by their second cousin, Phinehas. They obeyed the command to leave the tents of their father Korah when he was consumed in the earthquake. Num. 16:27 mentions Dathan and Abiram's children standing outside their tents at this time, but there is the pointed omission of Korah's children; they had left the tents. We can therefore build up a picture of Phinehas as a zealot for the purity of God's Truth (Num. 25), yet mixed with compassion, as shown by the way he took those children of Korah under his wing, and brought them up soundly in the Truth, with the result that wrote at least 11 of the Psalms and protected the purity of temple worship. It should be noted that Samuel was a Korahite (6:33-38).

- 1 Chron. 9:22 drops in the information that 'All these which were chosen to be porters in the gates were two hundred and twelve. These were reckoned by their genealogy in their villages, whom David and Samuel the seer did ordain in their set office'. This gives us an insight into David's mind when he was fleeing from Saul. The last time that Samuel and David are seen together is when David fled for his life from his own house – before Saul was dead and David on the throne.

- We have to ask why these genealogies were prepared. It is quite likely that they were first formalized in the time of Hezekiah, but I would suggest that they were completed at the time of the restoration, when there was a problem in finding a High Priest and priesthood because it was hard to prove who was descended from Aaron, presumably because the genealogies were destroyed when the temple was burnt [\(1\)](#). The genealogies give much emphasis to the descendants of Aaron, far more than to the other tribes. There are a number of references to faithless men being punished by invasions (e.g. 5:6). Ezra 8 contains a genealogy recorded in similar style and language to these in Chronicles. Nehemiah made a special study of the genealogies in order to find an acceptable priesthood (Neh. 7:5,64). So there were Israel returning from captivity, led by a faithful remnant of the priests, looking back through their history, right back to Abraham and beyond, and seeing that their history was shot through with failure. Such self-examination extended even to considering the names parents gave their children. Marriage out of the faith was a problem at the time of the restoration, and therefore the records of the genealogies stress how this had been a problem in the past- and had still not been forgotten by God (Ezra 9:1,2). The prophets foretold that Israel's restoration would only come once they achieved a suitable recognition of their sinfulness. And the Isaiah's prophecies of the restoration from Babylon are without doubt applicable to the establishment of the Kingdom at Christ's return; which means that Israel at the time of the restoration should represent us now, on the brink of the second coming and the full re-establishment of Israel's Kingdom. The coming of that blessed time may well be dependent upon our self-examination, to the point of really taking a breath when we realize the extent of our personal and collective shortcomings all down the years. The priests who wrote those records in Chronicles were writing down the result of their national self-examination. This was the record of their lessons from Chronicles. Each of the genealogies say something about the people they are concerned with; and thus 2 Chron. 12:15 RVmg. speaks of how the acts of Rehoboam are reflected in the reckoning of the genealogies.

Notes

(1) That Ezra 'wrote up' the Chronicles genealogies is also suggested by John M. Weir, *Bible Chronology* and several times in the NIV Study Bible notes on this section.

4.9 Bible Students

4.9.1 Peter: As A Bible Student

Peter was likely illiterate, and yet Peter was a Bible student. We can almost sense a rather rare exaltation of spirit in the mind of our Lord Jesus when Peter said those words: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16). In His humanity, the Lord Jesus must have suffered so much from feeling totally misunderstood, unrecognized, not appreciated for who He really was. The fact that Peter so artlessly expressed his true grasp of who Jesus was led Him to respond: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (:17). And then Jesus goes on to say that the nature of Peter's belief will be exactly copied by all members of His church; it was to be on the rock of a similar faith that Christ would build His church (v.18). So Peter's faith in Christ is being held up to us as an example which we should all follow. Closer analysis makes it evident that his attitude to God's word was the secret of Peter's faith. Unless he had made some kind of personal effort to achieve the faith which he did, the Lord would not have commended him for it. God did not just chose to reveal the true nature of Jesus to Peter as opposed to other people for no good reason. Faith is related to our own effort in responding to God's word (Rom. 10:17); Peter's faith in the Messiahship of Jesus must have therefore been related to his attention to the word. For this Christ praised him, mentally He enthused over that fisherman as they stood (or walked) on the road to Caesarea.

Later on, we see another cameo of the Lord's love for Peter. There was a crisis in the Lord's ministry, when "many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with Him. Then said Jesus (surely with a lump in His throat, a slight quiver in the voice) unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered Him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast *the words* of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (Jn. 6:66-69). Notice how again Peter's faith in Jesus' Messiahship is related to his attitude to Christ's words. His faith came by hearing the word. How Jesus must have loved him in that moment. Peter loved Christ because of His words; that was why he stuck to him, through the thick and thin of his own spiritual collapses, through persecution, desertion and humiliation at the hands of his own brethren. In other words, Peter realized that Christ was His words, He was the word made flesh (Jn. 1:14). Unless we too realize this in a practical rather than purely academic sense, we just will not have the motivation to hold on like Peter did. We can love the Bible, but not love the Christ it breathes. The Jews searched the scriptures, thinking that by their Bible study alone they would receive eternal life. But they never came to Christ that they might know the eternal life that is in Him (Jn. 5:39,40). They thought "eternal life" was in a book, a reward for correct intellectual discernment and exposition, rather than in the man Christ Jesus. And for all our Biblicism, Bible Christians need to examine themselves in this regard. For like Peter as a Bible student, we must be Christ-centred more than purely Bible-centred; we must see Him "in all the Scriptures", knowing that the whole word of God's revelation was made flesh in Him.

'Simon' means 'hearing', one who listens. This was one of his distinct characteristics. I'd like us to consider a number of points which reveal Peter's attitude to the word.

- Firstly, something which indicates the depth of Peter's familiarity with the Old Testament. Look at Mt. 16:22: " Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee" . Peter is quoting verbatim here from Is. 54:10, which speaks (in the Septuagint) of showing mercy to oneself. As an illiterate fisherman, he must have meditated and meditated upon the words he heard spoken to him in the synagogue readings. Let's be aware that in the preceding verse 21, Jesus had been explaining that passages like Is. 53 pointed forward to Christ's suffering and resurrection. Peter is responding by quoting a verse a little further on, in the same context. If Peter as a Bible student understood that Jesus was the Old Testament Messiah, he surely understood, in theory at least, that the Old Testament required a suffering Messiah. For him, of all men, to discourage Jesus from fulfilling this was serious indeed; hence Christ's stiff rebuke, likening him to the satan of His wilderness temptations, in that Peter too misquoted Scripture to provide an easy way out.

- Another example of relevant Old Testament quotation is shown when Christ asked Peter to kill and eat unclean animals. He replied by quoting from Ez. 4:14, where Ezekiel refuses to eat similar food when asked to by the Angel. Perhaps Peter saw himself as Ezekiel's antitype in his witnessing against Israel's rejection of the word of God in Christ (note how Ez. 4:16 is a prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction in AD70). 'In the same way as God made a concession to Ezekiel about this command to eat unclean food', Peter reasoned, 'so perhaps my Lord will do for me'. But the Lord was to teach him even greater things than Ezekiel.

- Peter's unswerving respect for his Lord's word is seen as he looked out of that sinking ship on Galilee, battling with his own humanity as he weighed up in his own mind whether to be spiritually ambitious enough to get down into that raging water. He only felt able to take such a leap of faith if he had Christ's word behind him. So he yelled out above the noise of the wind: " If it be thou, *bid me come* unto thee" (Mt. 14:28). In other words: 'With your word behind me, I'll have a go; without it, I won't'. How much spiritual ambition is there within us? Or do we huddle in the sides of the ship, or desperately expend our own strength to bring about our salvation, without even seeking the word of Christ?

- Peter's preaching in Acts is largely comprised of quotations from Old Testament passages- probably ones he had eagerly meditated upon during his fisherman days, and then throughout the three and a half years of foot slogging round Galilee that followed.

- He was one of the few who really grasped the meaning of the Lord's miraculous provision of bread, and the discourse which followed. The Lord had said that He was the living bread, of which a man could eat and live for ever. Peter's comment that only the Lord had the words of eternal life showed that he quite appreciated that it was the *words* of the Lord Jesus which were the essential thing, not the physicality of the miracle (fascinating as it must have been to a fisherman; Jn. 6:51 cp. 68).

- Despite having toiled all night and caught nothing, Peter as a Bible student was able to subdue his natural wisdom, his sense of futility, and the sense of irritation and superiority which exists in the experienced working man: " Nevertheless (how much that hides!) at *thy word* I will let down the net" (Lk. 5:5). It would seem that the parallel record of this is found in Mt. 4:18, which describes the call of the disciples soon after Christ's triumphant emergence from the wilderness temptations. We learn from Jn. 1:41,42 that it was Peter's brother, Andrew, who first told Peter about Jesus, and who brought him to meet Jesus first of all. The point is that at the time of Peter's call as he was fishing, he had probably heard very few of

Christ's words personally. He had heard about Him, and listened to His words for perhaps a few hours at different times in the past. So where did he get this tremendous respect for the word of Christ from, which he demonstrated when Christ called him? The answer must be that he meditated deeply on those words that he had heard and understood, and came to appreciate that the man saying them was worth giving all for. Our far easier access to God's word does not seem to make us more meditative as individuals. We have access to hearing God's word which previous generations never had. We can listen to it on a Walkman, have tapes of well read Scripture playing at home, analyze it by computer, hear it sung to us according to our taste in music, read it from pocket Bibles as we work and travel... we *can* and *could* do all these things. My sense is that we just don't make use of our opportunities as we should. Why has God given our generation these special opportunities to be ultra-familiar with His word? Surely it is because our age contains temptations which are simply more powerful than those of former years. So it is *vital*, vital for our eternal destiny, that we do make as much use as possible of all these opportunities. We should be *cramming*, yes cramming, our hearts and brains with the words of God. I certainly get the feeling that Peter as a Bible student would have listened to a tape of Isaiah on his Walkman if he had one, as he went out fishing; that he'd have had tapes of the Psalms going all evening long in his little fisherman's cottage, wife and kids caught up in his enthusiasm too (Mk. 10:10,15 suggests that the incident with the little children occurred in Peter's house). There *are* a handful of Christian homes where this spirit is truly seen.

- With this background, it is not surprising to read that when a nervous Peter heard Moses and Elijah speaking God's word to Jesus, " he wist not what to say" (Mk. 9:5,6), and earnestly desired to make the three tents so that the wondrous experience would last the longer. There was Peter, hearing words intended to encourage the Son of God, fearful of his own humanity, evidently not understanding the depth of the glory which God's word was revealing, yet ever eager for more, to just bask in the experience of it. Would our sense of our own sinfulness, and our thirst for the word of God, was like that man's.

- Years later Peter as a Bible student was to comment on this: " There came *such* a voice to (Christ) from the excellent glory...and this voice which came from heaven *we* heard...we have also a *more sure word* of prophecy, whereunto *ye* do well that *ye* take heed" (2 Pet. 1:18,19). Notice the progression in his reasoning here. Peter considered it such an honour that he could hear the words which God primarily intended for Christ. And even more wondrous, the word of prophecy which we have all heard is an even *more* wondrous revelation of God's glory than the word of God which came at the transfiguration. Yet do we even begin to reach that sense of wonder which Peter had on the mount? That sense of rapture, of real spiritual transport, of reaching out of earthly things into Heavenly, that desire for the experience never to end, even though we realize that we only understand a fraction of the infinity which is revealed by God's word?

- Paul was Peter's hero, partly because of the spiritual depth of his writings " according to the wisdom given unto him" (2 Pet. 3:15,16). And Paul made precisely the same point as Peter; that the Scriptures which were relevant to Christ are actually directly applicable to us too, who are in Christ. Thus Paul reasons: " Christ pleased not himself, but as it is written (he quotes Ps. 69:9), The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me. For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for *our* learning...." (Rom. 15:3,4). So here Paul points out a well known Messianic prophesy, applies it to Christ, and then says that it was written for *us*. This is exactly Peter's point, when he says that the words which were spoken to Christ at the transfiguration were also for our benefit, and that the word of prophecy which

we have is to be treated in the same manner as if we had been cowering with Peter on the mount, hearing the words which Moses and Elijah spoke to Jesus.

- Appreciating the extent of Peter's devotion to Christ's words enables us to more fully enter into the man's spiritual and emotional tragedy when he denied Christ. He paid no attention to Christ's words of warning concerning Peter's own spiritual weakness. After that third cock crow, " Peter remembered *the word of the Lord* , *how* he had said unto him..." (Lk. 22:61; "how" may refer to the physical manner in which Christ spoke to Peter, as well as to the content of his words).

- When he received a vision he didn't understand, Peter " doubted in himself what this vision... should mean...while Peter thought on the vision..." (Acts 10:17,19). His zeal for understanding was rewarded. Perhaps the revelation was made to him first because the others were not sufficiently sensitive to the word to accept it?

- When the Angel told Peter as a Bible student " Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals...and follow me" (Acts 12:8), he was alluding back to the Lord's words to Peter, that when he would be old, others would gird him and carry him to his death (Jn. 21:18). The Angel was therefore saying that the time of Peter's death had not yet come. The lesson is, that the amount of comfort and reassurance Peter took from the Angels' words would have been proportionate to the degree to which he had meditated on his Lord's prophecy. And so with us.

Now this Peter, our example of faith, was a working man. He freely recognized this, yet (in later life) he was unafraid to rebuke the high flying intellectuals who were wrecking the first century ecclesia. He likens his rebuke of them to the " dumb ass speaking with man's voice" which rebuked Balaam (2 Pet. 2:16). This was what he chose to identify himself with; that inspired donkey. There was no great trained intellect in Peter; yet his zeal for God's word puts us to shame. As the time of the end progresses, it seems that more and more of Christ's church (in the Western world) are educated people. In this I see a tremendous danger. A man who could probably not read, who probably wrote his inspired letters by dictation because he couldn't write himself, had a zeal for understanding which puts us to shame. Paul correctly made the point (and who more aware that his intellectuality could run away with him than Paul) that God has chosen the weak things to confound the mighty; He has chosen the simple of this world to confound the wise (1 Cor. 1 and 2). I get some kind of intuitive feeling that Paul had Peter at the back of his mind as he wrote this letter to working class Corinth (1 Cor. 1:26). The deep mutual respect between theologian Paul and fisherman Peter is a real working model for our ecclesias. And we could go on to show how although John used a very limited vocabulary, he rose to depths of insight that are well beyond his most intellectual critics. Martin Hengel asserts of John's Gospel: "This Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman"⁽¹⁾. But why not, given the example of Peter?

So Peter as a Bible student is a sure encouragement to all those who feel that Bible study is beyond them. If we have a true love of Christ, we will have a love of His words, because He is to be identified with His words. Likewise God is His word (Jn. 1:1); to love God is to love His word. If we love Christ, we will keep His words (Jn. 14:15,21; 15:10). This is evidently alluding to the many Old Testament passages which say that Israel's love for God would be shown through their keeping of His commands (Ex. 20:6; Dt. 5:10; 7:9; 11:1,13,22; 30:16; Josh. 22:5). Israel were also told that God's commands were *all* related to showing love (Dt. 11:13; 19:9). So there is a logical circuit here: We love God by keeping His commands,

therefore His commands are fundamentally about love. Thus love is the fulfilling of the law of God; both under the Old and New covenants (Rom. 13:10). It is all too easy to see our relationship with God and Christ as a question of obedience to their words, as if this is somehow a test of our spirituality. This is to humanize God too far, to see God as if He were a fallible man; for if we were God, we would institute some kind of written test for our creatures: 'Do this, and if you don't, then I know you don't love me'. The God of glory is beyond this kind of thing. He is His word. If we love Him, we will be eager to know His words, we will dwell upon them, we will live them out in our daily experience as far as we can. In our seeking to know an infinite God, we will of course fail to see or appreciate the spirit of all His words. But He appreciates this. Yet in a sense our attitude to His word is an indication of our state of 'in-loveness' with God. Reading His word will not be a chore, a mountain to be grimly climbed and achieved each day; it will be a vital and natural part of our daily life, as natural and spontaneous as our desire to eat; and even *more so* (cp. Job 23:12). Now there's a challenge; not to relate to God's word *as* we do to daily physical food, but even *more so* .

Notes

(1) Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1996 ed.) p. 130.

4.9.2 Daniel As A Bible Student

Reading through Daniel it is evident that we are being invited to try to enter into his character. Our fascination with the prophecies can result in us failing to realize that a lot of information is being given about his character. Daniel as a Bible student always seems to me to be portrayed as actually part of the prophecies he gave; he was no fax machine just relaying God's words. He seems to be presented as representative of all those of later times who would hear the word of prophecy. It is for this reason that we are given so much insight into his character. For example, Daniel's spirit of "How long...?" is so exactly reflective of the attitude of all God's children down the years that it is hard to deny that Daniel is being framed as the representative of all the saints. Indeed, these very words are quoted in Rev. 6:10 concerning the attitude of the slain saints of the last days. Daniel's representative role is most clearly shown in the figurative death, resurrection and judgment which he receives in Dan. 10. In this Daniel is acting out the experience of each of the approved. His refusal to obey the command to worship Babylon's King is alluded to in Rev. 13:5; 14:9, which prophesies how the saints of the last days will be tested just as Daniel was, with a like miraculous deliverance. Thus Daniel seems to especially symbolize the latter day believers. The comforting "Fear not Daniel" (Dan. 10:12,19) slots in to many other instances of Angels saying these words to frightened men. This makes it appropriate to speculate that the latter day believers will hear the same words from the Angel who comes to gather them (and cp. Is. 35:4, which gives the same "fear not" message to the generation which sees the second coming). Again, Daniel's relationship with the Angel appears to be representative of that enjoyed by all the saints.

Gritting Teeth

So there seems little doubt that Daniel as a Bible student is representative of us. And yet this makes the following observation hard to come to terms with: Daniel is without doubt

portrayed as depressed, at odds with his surrounding world, earnestly desiring an understanding and relationship with God which seemed denied him, desperately lonely, disappointed that he was not seeing God's purpose reaching its climax. The New Testament message of joy, hope and peace must be balanced against the typology of Daniel. It seems that our Christian thinking and perception goes in cycles; we started in the nineteenth century with the grim, hard almost Puritan attitude of British Protestantism; now we seem to have gone the other way, towards a view of God and Christian life that focuses solely on positive experience. It may be significant that both these attitudes are related to those seen in the contemporary religious world. I'm not suggesting that we swing back to the nineteenth century; instead, what we need is a truly balanced approach.

Yet in Daniel as a Bible student we see not only the grim gritting of teeth of the true servant of Yahweh; we sense (rather than learn explicitly) his exaltation of spirit at the prophecies of the Kingdom. This balance of attitude is brought out by a series of allusions to Daniel which show him to be representative of all those in Christ:

1 Peter 1 (re. the saints)

Daniel

" An inheritance...reserved...for you" (v.4)

" Thou shalt... stand in thy lot (inheritance) at the end of the days" (12:13)

In heaviness of spirit (v.6)

Daniel's heaviness of spirit

" The proof of your faith...is proved by fire...unto praise and honour and glory" (v.7 RV)

The experience of Daniel's friends
Daniel praised, honoured and glorified (2:6 cp. 4:37)

" Whom having not seen ye love...now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice" (v.8)

The spirit of Daniel?

" Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls" (v.9)

Cp. Daniel's assurance of salvation (12:13)

" The prophets have *enquired* and *sought* diligently...*searching* what manner of time the spirit...did signify" (v.10,11)

Peter was certainly writing here with his eye on Daniel's enquiring and diligent searching " what manner of time" his prophecies referred to (8:15,27; 9:2; 12:8)

" Unto whom it was revealed (in response to their enquiries) that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister...

This is definitely alluding to Dan. 12:4, where Daniel is told that he cannot understand his own prophecies, but they will be understood by latter day believers to whom they will be relevant.

which things the Angels desire to look into" (v.12)

Angelic interest in prophecy is
mainly demonstrated in Daniel.

Enthusiasm For Prophecy

There is an impressive intensity in Daniel's desire to understand the prophetic word. By all means this needs to be contrasted with our latter day community growing sadly indifferent to the study of latter day prophecy. That prophecy is difficult to interpret and apparently confusing should inspire us to study it more rather than de-motivate us; Daniel as a Bible student was in an even worse expositional dilemma than we are, and yet this very dilemma inspired him even more to want to understand. We need to really soberly consider the force of the descriptions of Daniel's yearning to understand: " My thoughts much troubled me, and my countenance was changed in me: but (i.e. despite the trouble it gave) I kept the matter in my heart" (7:28). This suggests that it would have been easy to allow his inner turmoil to be visibly expressed in his appearance; but he kept the intellectual pain within him. Such deep *pain* at not being able to fully understand the word of prophecy needs to be contrasted with our easy indifference to finding prophecy a closed book. " I Daniel was grieved in my spirit in the midst of my body, and the visions of my head troubled me" (Dan. 7:15) expresses the deep physiological effects of Daniel's lack of understanding. This grief of spirit can be connected with the words of Is. 54:6, describing a woman " forsaken and *grieved in spirit* , and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused" . The same level of spiritual and emotional pain was seen in Daniel. It may be that Daniel felt his lack of understanding was somehow related to his own moral weakness (or that of his people).

" The wise shall understand"

The same deep frustration is found in 8:27: " I Daniel fainted, and was sick certain days; then I rose up, and did the King's business: and I was astonished at the vision, but there was none to make it understood" (RVmg.). We are invited to imagine Daniel earnestly explaining the vision to the other priests in Babylon, and finding no one to explain it. Daniel was doing a high-flying, executive job; a job where you didn't take days off. Yet his frustration at not being able to crack open Bible prophecy made him so intellectually frustrated that he just had to take some sick leave. None of his contemporaries would *ever* have understood why, if he told them: 'I'm so upset that I can't understand something in God's word. You see, I've therefore had some kind of breakdown'. " Then I rose up" suggests he was bed ridden for those few days, his physical energy sapped by his vast expenditure of mental effort. *Do any of us come anywhere near to this kind of zeal?* There is reason to think that the believers of the last days will need special strength to overcome the special temptations they face; part of that strength will be given through being able to accurately understand the prophecies of the last days, so accurately that everything will just be mapped out before us [\(1\)](#). " Knowledge shall be increased...the wise shall understand...Understand, O Son of man: for at the time of the end shall be the (understanding of the) vision" (12:4,10; 8:17). Note that " the vision" seems to be used by metonymy for " the understanding of the vision" (as in 8:26; 9:23,24; 10:14,16; 11:14; 10:1 cp. 7). Most of us, including the present writer, have fallen into the trap of thinking that we can't expect to accurately understand the pattern of events in the last days. Yet perhaps we are only finding excuse for our own lack of spiritual effort in searching the word.

It is significant that all Daniel's recorded petitions are asking God to either explain or fulfil His word. In 6:10-12 we read of Daniel as a Bible student making some unspecified request to Yahweh, praying facing Jerusalem; it seems fair to assume that he was asking to see the fulfilment and explanation of God's purpose with Zion. Yet there can be no doubt that Daniel was going out of his way to put his life on the line in doing this. He was fully aware of the King's decree that anyone caught praying like this was for the lions; and even more aware that he was being constantly watched to see if he toed the line or not. Most of us (and presumably most of the others in the Jewish ecclesia in Babylon) would have prayed silently, to ourselves, without opening the window to advertise the fact. Yet it seems that in Daniel's conscience, prayer to God was something which was so important that it was worth dying for. In this we see a cameo of how earnest was Daniel's desire for the understanding and fulfilment of God's word. And let's remember what we said at the outset; we really are intended to see Daniel as a Bible student as our example and representative. Do we really long for Messiah's coming as he did? For the restoration of Israel's kingdom, for the coming of Zion's King? The more clearly we understand the basic doctrines of the Hope of Israel, the more we daily *delight* in God's Law, the more we will capture the spirit of Daniel.

In the last days, "the wise shall understand" (12:10). Wisdom and Daniel are clearly associated, at least eight times (Dan. 1:17; 2:13,14,18,24,27,48; Ez. 28:3); as are Daniel and a desire to understand. Yet Daniel did not fully understand his latter day prophecies; "the wise shall understand" in the last days, Daniel was comforted. In other words, there will be a 'Daniel' category in the last days who will share his wisdom, and who will be given the understanding he so earnestly sought. We showed earlier that Rev. 6:10; 13:15; 14:9 describe the persecuted Christian remnant of the last days in the language of Daniel [\(2\)](#). The conclusion is that they (we?) will find strength to endure through the understanding of prophecy. Those who can't find time to do their daily Bible readings in this era of ease will either go under- or abruptly wake up to the vital power of the word.

Clear Conscience

We each have our reasons for not having the spirit of Daniel in our Bible searching. 'Too much else on my plate', or some such related excuse, will be the response of most. Yet Daniel was one of the highest flying Christians of all time; Prime Minister of Babylon was analogous to being President of the USA in the Middle Eastern world of those days. In the face of almost every conceivable spiritual distraction, Daniel fought hard to maintain his fine spiritual conscience through devoting himself to a love of God's word. The importance of *constantly* maintaining a clear conscience is demonstrated throughout Daniel's life. The book begins with Bible student Daniel refusing to eat the meat offered to idols; it must surely be intentional that the Spirit in Paul declares that there was nothing wrong with eating this- it was purely a matter of conscience, seeing that the pagan associations of the meat are meaningless to the true believer. Yet at sweet seventeen, the young Daniel dug his toes in, at whatever cost, to maintain his conscience; and, by implication, is commended for it.

The record reveals that Daniel went through a yo-yo pattern of being promoted into the limelight, and then (in an unrecorded manner) slipping out of the limelight into relative obscurity, from which he was promoted again. Thus in 2:48 Daniel is made Prime Minister, in the events of Chapter 3 he seems to be strangely absent, in 4:8 Daniel is brought in to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's second dream almost as an afterthought, implying he was out of the limelight; by 5:11 King Belshazzar was unaware of Daniel, but promoted him to "third ruler in the Kingdom" (5:29). Why did Daniel slip out of the limelight? Was it not for the

sake of his conscience? As a member of the Jewish community, it would have been so easy for Daniel to stay where he was, reasoning that holding down a job like that would enable him to do so much for the Truth. But he realized that his personal conscience and devotion to the spiritual life must be given number one priority if he was to help his people. There is an exact correspondence between the mind of Daniel here and the fervent believer who refuses promotion, jumps out of a career that is rubbing too strongly against the conscience... would our community featured more examples of men and women like this [\(3\)](#).

Loving The Word

The book of Daniel gives the exact dates when Daniel had both his promotions and his visions. Careful analysis of the record shows how his exaltations in this life occurred at the same time as major steps forward in his own personal Bible study and spiritual growth. When Darius came to power, Daniel was made chief of the three presidents of the Kingdom, promoted from being the third ruler of the Kingdom, i.e. the *least* senior of the three (5:29-6:2). Yet in that very same first year of Darius, "I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah the prophet... and (at that time) I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes...and whiles I was speaking..." Gabriel came to give him the prophecy of the 70 weeks (9:2-4,20). It doesn't take much imagination to picture the pressure on Daniel as Prime Minister in a new Government with a new King; probably he was the only survivor from the previous Government. Yet in the midst of this, he took time off to fast and wear sackcloth. His real enthusiasm was not for that high flying career he found himself in; rather it was for prayer, and coming to understand Jeremiah's prophecies. 'I've started a new job, I can't do my readings *every* day....I've got exams on at the moment, I can only pray briefly before meals... I've got to build up my new business, I'll just have to glance at the readings for the next 6 months or so...I've got problems, real problems, no one else would understand, but I just need to take a break, a complete break, say for a few months, and then sure, I'll come back to the daily reading of the Bible'. These are all common Christian attitudes. I have wandered close to each. The example of Daniel as a Bible student *mocks* each of them. "I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation" (Heb. 13:22).

We have suggested that Daniel chose to slip out of the limelight in the changeover from Nebuchadnezzar to Belshazzar. Thus he was exalted under Nebuchadnezzar, but appears insignificant at the time Belshazzar sees his vision (5:11). Significantly, Daniel was blessed with a vision in the first year of Belshazzar (7:1), presumably in response to his desire for further understanding. This could imply that Daniel was blessed for his resignation by more spiritual insight. Do we see things in those terms? Do we not suspect God may compensate us materially if we resign the things of this life? Do we dream of deeper spiritual knowledge as a response to our separation from the world? Or do we write such things off as unnecessary intellectualism, fascinating for those who are into Bible study but unnecessary for our personal relationship with God?

Double Life

Daniel as a Bible student lead a double life in this world; and he was all too painfully aware of it. No doubt this had a part to play in his depressions. He was at one stage official interpreter of the King's dreams; yet he had his own dreams, which he could not understand. He went through deep depression because of this, and then struggled up off his bed to "do the king's business", i.e. interpret his dreams (8:16 cp. 27). This neatly highlights the duality

of Daniel's life. The book of Daniel is not written in chronological order. One reason for this may be to give the sense that his visions of God's word increasingly dominated Daniel's thinking. We start off reading much information about his worldly life, interspersed with the visions; but increasingly, the emphasis is on the visions. This is not because Daniel got older, retired from political life and then had more time for visions. He seems to have had a 'career' all his life, but the implication from the way the record is put together is that the word of God progressively dominated his thinking and sense of priority.

The word of God so dominated the Lord Jesus that He became "the word...made flesh". He died as soon as He reached the necessary level of spiritual maturity; as soon as the word of God achieved the desired effect. On the cross we see him spiritually perfected, at the ultimate, highest level of spiritual maturity a human being could reach (Heb. 5:7-9). Daniel as the "Son of man", innocently thrown to the lions in a sealed den, and then miraculously delivered from death, is an evident type of the Lord Jesus. The spirit of Christ was certainly in him as a prophet (1 Pet. 1:10-12). Christ too ran the gauntlet of this worldly life, day by day, He too fought for his conscience every moment. He too, He too, He too....

Notes

(1) These reasons are presented in *The Last Days* pp. 192,281.

(2) In no spirit of glib suggestion do I conclude from many Scriptures that the ecclesia will almost certainly go through a period of persecution in the last days. See *The Last Days* pp. 144-182.

(3) Real life examples of this will be found chronicled in Robert Roberts, *My Days And My Ways*,

4.10.1 Types: Joseph And Jesus

It is evident from a careful study of the record that Joseph is one of the fullest types of the Lord Jesus. Yet significantly, there seems no explicit statement in the New Testament that Joseph did typify Jesus. This is interesting, seeing that Joseph must be one of the clearest and most detailed types of Christ. Surely this should inspire us to search for types in all Old Testament characters without being put off by the lack of direct reference to those types. It is sometimes argued that we can go too far in seeing types of Christ if we only rely on inferences rather than explicit New Testament indication that we are to see a type. Yet the type of Joseph rests solely on inferences put together, rather than on any explicit statement. We can therefore conclude that we may observe valid types of Christ from inferences, without explicit New Testament reference to it.

The following points suggest that almost every detail of Joseph's recorded life is prophetic of some aspect of the Lord Jesus. Joseph is simply one of the clearest types of Christ. There are many echoes of Christ which seem to have no specific purpose apart from to confirm us in our enthusiasm to constantly see the spirit of Christ in this record (e.g. 46:30 = Lk. 2:29,30). So we have in the life of Joseph a richness of instruction concerning our Lord Jesus. And this is exactly why we sit here before the emblems; to be instructed concerning the exquisite beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to wade through the types in order to persuade ourselves that Joseph's life really is typical of Christ. A desire to enrich our appreciation of the Saviour should be our motivation for going through the types in detail; it is not just an academic exercise, performing intellectual tricks with Scripture. The following could perhaps

be skim-read before you break bread, pausing to follow up any particular themes that catch your interest.

Joseph A Type Of Christ

1. The seed of Abraham, in whom the promises of fruitfulness and blessing upon all nations were fulfilled (47:27; 46:3 cp. 12:2; Dt. 26:5; Ps. 105:23,24).

The seed of Abraham.

2. The beloved son of his father.

Jn. 3:16

3. "The servant" (37:2 Heb.)

The suffering servant (Zech. 3:8; Is. 42:1 etc.)

4. Loved and exalted above his brethren

Heb. 1:9

5. "They hated him" because of his dream that one day he would reign over them (37:4,8).

Christ had problems with His brothers (Jn. 7:3); the Jews hated Christ and would not have him reign over them (Lk. 19:14)

6. Joseph was likened to a sheaf (37:7)

Christ was the wave sheaf (Lev. 23:11,12)

7. A progressive growth in hatred of Joseph (37:4,5,8)

The Gospels give the same impression concerning the Jews and Christ

8. Rebuked by his natural father (37:10)

Lk. 2:48

9. Israel would bow down to Joseph, although they refused to believe this at first and tried to kill him because of it (37:10)

Ditto for Christ

10. "...but his father observed the saying" (37:11)

As did Mary , mother of Jesus (Lk. 2:19,51)

11. "Let us slay him...and we will see what will become of his (prophetic, inspired) dreams"

(37:20)

Christ's inspired prophecies of His death and resurrection must have motivated the Jews' slaying of Him ⁽¹⁾.

.12. One of his persecutors tried to save him at the last minute (37:21)

As did Nicodemus and Pilate.

13. Cast into a pit with no water in it (37:24)

Ditto for Jeremiah, another type of Christ; pit = grave (Zech. 9:11; Ps. 69:15)

14. "They stript Joseph out of his coat" (37:23); was Joseph naked in the pit?

Same LXX word in Mt. 27:28; was Christ naked on the cross? See Heb. 6:6 "open shame".

15. "And they sat down" after symbolically killing him.

Mt. 27:36.

Sold him for pieces of silver.

Ditto for Christ. Jesus was "him...whom they priced on the part of the sons of Israel" (Mt. 27:9 RVmg.). The reference to "the sons of Israel" is surely an allusion to the sons of Jacob selling Joseph for his value.

16. His brothers said: "He is our brother and our flesh" (37:27)

"We are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones" (Eph. 5:30)

17. "Let not our hand be upon him" (37:27). They thought that the rigours of slavery would be enough to kill him.

The Jews handed Jesus over to the Romans. Does the type indicate some of them thought this fact would absolve them of guilt?

18. At least 2 of his 10 persecutors were unhappy about what they were doing , and said so (37:22,26). Perhaps the whole group egged each other on to adopt an attitude none were totally happy with in their conscience.

Ditto for first century Israel?

19. A blood drenched coat

Is. 63:2; Rev. 19:13.

20. Sent on a mission to his brethren, on which they symbolically killed him.

Christ sent first and foremost to redeem Israel (Gal. 4:4,5).

"Go...see whether it be well with thy brethren" (37:14)

Same Hebrew as 1 Sam. 17:18, also typical of Christ.

21. Symbolically killed by the shepherds of his father's flock (37:12).

Christ killed by the Jewish priests, the shepherds of God's flock.

"The anguish of his soul" and pleas for deliverance (42:21), ignored by the brothers.

"The travail of his soul" (Is. 53:12), ignored by Israel (Is. 53:1-4). Did the Lord shout for deliverance in His pit?

22. "When they saw him afar off...they conspired against him to slay him" (37:18)

"When the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves (i.e. conspired), This is the heir; come, let us kill him" (Mt. 21:38) [\(2\)](#). Mt. 21:38 is quoting the LXX of Gen. 37:18.

23. "Joseph is...rent in pieces. And Jacob rent his clothes" (37:33,34); Jacob shared in Joseph's death .

This is a fine prefigurement of the (sadly ignored) pain of God.

24. Judah disgraced after the condemnation of Joseph (Gen. 38)

Ditto for Judah as a nation after their rejection of Christ.

25. His master committed all that he had into his hand (39:8)

The Potiphar: Joseph and Pharaoh: Joseph relationship reflects that between God and Christ.

He "prospered", s.w. Ps. 1:3 concerning the righteous man prospering because he meditates on God's word.

Did the Lord's carpenter business likewise flourish, for the same reasons? He was in favour with God and man.

26. Joseph lost his garment before he went into the pit and before he went to prison (39:13) (3).

Jn. 19:23

27. Falsely accused of adultery, but with no remonstrance on his part; cast into prison.

Christ dumb before his shearers. In the 'Joseph as a type of Christ' story, prison = death; the ideas of prison and darkness are often associated (e.g. Is. 49:9). There was darkness at the death of Christ.

28. All the prisoners in the prison committed to Joseph's hand; "and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it" (39:22)

An eloquent echo of Christ's relationship with us?

29. "The Lord...gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison" (39:21).

Christ in favour with God and man (Lk. 2:52) (4).

30. In prison with two malefactors (one good and one bad?)

Christ on the cross with two thieves (one good, one bad)

31. "Remember me when it shall be well with thee" (40:14)

"Remember me"

32. Great pain in Joseph's heart because he knew his innocence (40:15); therefore the shame of a righteous man suffering as a sinner (cp. Christian AIDS victims).

Ditto for Christ- even more so.

33. The shame of Joseph in the dungeon (40:15); the lowest of the low, according to Ex. 12:29.

A type of the supreme degradation of Christ on the cross.

34. "They made him run hastily out of the dungeon...and changed his raiment" (41:14 mg.).

The energy of Christ's resurrection; change of clothing = change of nature, Zech. 3:3,4.

35. Because he knew Pharaoh's mind, he was exalted over Pharaoh's house and people (41:40).

Christ knew God's mind; now over both Angels (God's house) and us (natural & spiritual Israel)

36. "According unto thy word shall all my people be ruled" (41:40). Egypt would have been intricately obedient to his word.

The supremacy of the word of Christ in our lives; obedience to his word has a sense of urgency about it.

37. "Only in the throne will I be greater than thou" (41:40)

Christ rules on God's behalf, but God is still King.

38. "I have set thee over all the land of Egypt" (41:41)

Christ given all power in heaven and earth (Mt. 28:18). All Egypt ruled by his word,

therefore 'Egypt' = the church now, and also the future Kingdom.

39. "Bow the knee" (41:43).

Phil. 2:9.

Bread laid up in preparation for the famine.

Laying up the word as a foundation against the judgment (1 Tim. 6:19).

40. Given a new name: "Zaphnath-paaneah": 'Saviour of the world', or 'bread of life'

Christ given a new name on ascension (Phil. 2:6-9; Rev. 3:12).

41. A Gentile wife from a pagan king-priest background (41:45).

Marriage of Christ to us, king-priests (Rev. 5:10). Psalm 45 is full of allusion to Joseph (vv. 2,4,5,7,10,14, 16 etc.). Yet it is also a prophecy of the marriage of Christ to His bride, modelled on the marriage of Joseph.

42. "Joseph went out over all the land of Egypt" (41:45).

Christ's active involvement in our working out of our salvation.

43. Joseph's (half-Gentile) sons were counted as the twelve tribes of Jacob (41:51)

We are Christ's sons (Heb. 2:13). Joseph was called "tender father" (41:43 mg.) as Christ will be called 'Father' in the future age (Is. 9:6 Heb.)

44. Pharaoh's total confidence in Joseph and the power of his word (41:55)

God's attitude to Christ.

45. "According unto thy word shall all the people be ruled" (41:40) suggests a change in Egypt's legal system when Joseph came to power (cp. Ps. 105:22).

The changeover between the law of Moses and the word of Christ.

46. Throughout the record there is the unwritten sense that the brothers had a niggling conscience that Joseph might be alive.

This typifies the underlying Jewish conscience towards the Lord Jesus. They knew Christ as Messiah, but blinded themselves to the fact (Jn. 6:36; 9:41; 15:24 cp. 14:7).

47. Joseph's brethren fulfil his predictions without realizing it (fully, at any rate) by bowing before him (42:6).

Latter day Israel likewise?

48. Even under pressure, the brothers came out with the same old lie (42:13). They kept

repeating it so much that they believed it.

Exact replica of the Jewish attitude towards Jesus of Nazareth.

49. The brothers suffer in prison for three days to prod their conscience about Joseph (42:17).

Three year tribulation of Israel in the last days to bring them to accept Christ?

We get the impression that Joseph changed his plans for them several times; he recalled them when already on their journey etc.

Does this show that he hastened the day of revelation to them from purely emotional considerations- and will the Lord do the same with His Israel?

50. Joseph wept (this is recorded seven times in the record) (42:24). He must have found it hard to prolong the agony of not revealing himself to them immediately; he was motivated by a desire to make them see the enormity of their sin, for their spiritual good rather than his own vindication.

Joseph as a type of Christ makes his story prophetic. This is a stunningly deep prophecy of the intensity of Christ's feelings, as the mighty Son of God, towards wayward Israel in the last days. He was a man of sorrow in his mortal life, and will still have an element of this characteristic in the future.

51. The brothers delay in their return, doubtless because of the struggle with their conscience; never spoken of together, but operating on each man individually (43:10)

Will there be a 'delay' in Israel's repentance, and therefore in the full manifestation of Christ? Every Jew in the last days will go through the silent struggle of conscience about Christ.

52. Joseph celebrates their repentance with a meal together, at which they sit in their proper places (43:16)

The marriage supper of the lamb, with each in his proper place (Lk. 14:10; 22:30; Rev. 19:9)

53. "Slay and make ready" (43:16) for the meal.

This is the basis of the prodigal son parable (45:14,15 = Lk. 15:20); father = Christ; prodigal = repentant Jews, wanting to be servants and nothing else.

54. "The men marvelled" at his discernment.

Ditto for Christ- it is emphasized (Mt. 8:27; 9:8,33; 21:20, 42; 22:22; 27:14; Lk. 2:33; Jn. 4:27; 7:15)

They were merry with him (43:34)

He would fain have them enter into the joy of their Lord.

55. Joseph's cup is how he discerns (44:5)

The cup of the Lord likewise.

56. "Then Joseph could not refrain himself..." (45:1) implies he planned to drag out the process of spiritually refining his brothers, but his love for them caused him to cut it short.

"For the elects sake the days shall be shortened" by Christ (Mt. 24:22). The same Hebrew word is used in Is. 42:14 about how God can no longer refrain Himself in the last days.

57. "All them that stood before him" not present at his revelation to his brethren (45:1)

The Angels who accompany Christ will not be present at his meeting with Israel (Zech. 3:4; Is. 63:3)?

Communication without an interpreter.

A new paradigm of relationship with the Lord Jesus, face to face.

"Fear not: for I am in the place of God" (50:19 Heb.); "thou art even as Pharaoh" (44:18)

Joseph as a type of Christ reveals the revelation of God's essential love through the face of Jesus Christ.

The struggle to make the brothers believe the extent of his grace.

Our difficulty at the judgment (see The Lord Of Judgment).

58. "A great deliverance" (45:7).

Heb. 2:3 "that great salvation".

Israel saved, all the surrounding world also blessed with deliverance from the famine.

Ditto for the last days; the nations around Israel blessed materially to overcome the problems of the latter day judgments. These judgments are to make Israel repent, but in that time of trouble the whole world suffers.

Joseph As A Type Of Christ: Finer Details

In the light of all this, the following points give extra insight into our Lord's experience. Taken by themselves they would be stretching a point; but in the context of the above typology they take on a powerful validity:

- It must have taken Joseph quite some courage to explain the dreams to his brethren. "He dreamed yet another dream, and told it his brethren" (37:9). There was quite likely a certain bucking up of courage in the spirit of the Lord Jesus at age 30, when he 'came down from Heaven' and started preaching the glories of his future Kingdom to a cynical Israel.

- Joseph readily responded to his father's desire that he go to his brethren: "Here am I"

(37:13). Isaiah, another type of Christ, uttered similar words before his mission to Israel (Is. 6:8). Yet in both Joseph and Isaiah there must have been a sense of apprehension, sensing the persecution that would come. There was a point when Christ said to God: "Lo, I come..." (Heb. 10:5-7). This would indicate that in line with the typology of Joseph and Isaiah, there was a point when Christ received and responded to His Father's commission. This may have been some time in His teens; perhaps 17, as with Joseph? Or at 30 when he began His ministry and came "into the (Jewish) world"?

- "See whether it be well with thy brethren, and well with the flocks; and bring me word again" (37:14). Christ was sent to the shepherds and the sheep of Israel. This accounts for the special effort he made to appeal to the Jewish religious leaders, even when it seemed he was wasting time with them.

- "Joseph was a goodly person, and well favoured"(39:6) clearly means he was good-looking (like his mother, grandmother and great-grandmother). The record seems to stress that the family was good looking. Perhaps this gives another angle on an old chestnut: Was Christ good looking and handsome as the Son of God, or weak and ugly as the suffering servant? On the cross, "his visage was so marred more than any man...there is no beauty that we should desire him...despised...we hid as it were our faces from him" (Is. 52:14; 53:2-4). Yet Joseph was strong and good looking, pleasing in the eyes of men (and women). So may we suggest that Christ too was naturally strong and attractive, but he lost this due to the mental trauma of his life, resulting in his repulsive physical appearance as he hung on the cross.

- The woman who tempted Joseph seems to be the prototype of the temptress of the Proverbs. Her reasoning that the good man of the house was absent (Prov. 7:19) seems a direct allusion to Potiphar's wife. We have shown elsewhere that the Proverbs are largely a commentary on Old Testament historical incidents, and that the warnings to "My son" are also prophetic of God's instruction of His Son Jesus(5). If this is the case, it is reasonable to think that Christ too was tempted by a similar woman.

- The sensitive reader will perceive that Joseph had a strong fatherly image, even from a young age (40:7; 41:43 mg.; 45:8). The Lord Jesus likewise; hence He referred to the disciples as His children when they were in the same peer group. This is understandable in that He is the supreme manifestation of the sovereign Father.

- So many aspects of human weakness were tested in Joseph: pride with his brothers, lust with women, bitterness in prison, the meteoric rise to success in a career, the glamour and glory of the high life. And the Lord Jesus likewise went through it all, absolutely all- for our sakes.

- Two changes of clothing for Joseph; immediately on release from prison, and also when he was made ruler over all Egypt (41:14,42). This looks forward to the two stage glorification of Christ in both resurrection and ascension (or ascension and second coming in glory?).

- Joseph's wife had to forget all about her pagan past (41:45 = Ps. 45:10 = Dt. 21:13), especially her father's house. Joseph alluded to what she had gone through when he spoke of how he too had forgotten all his past suffering and his father's house (41:51). What a pair they were! Both had broken free of their pasts and were dedicated to the new life together. As such they typify the relationship between Christ and His bride.

- God (this is important) made Joseph forget all his "toil", his mental sufferings (42:51). This was a miracle; no amount of steel-willed suppression of his past could have made Joseph paper over all the pain. But God did a psychological miracle upon him. Has God done the same to Christ now in His glory, as He will to us one day soon (Rev. 21:4)? Yet Christ will be factually aware of His sacrifice and the associated pain. God presumably did not obliterate Joseph's memory cells, but He made him "forget" the pain. This is surely what God has done to Christ, and what He will do to us: take away the pain on a psychological level whilst still leaving a factual awareness. Is it too much to suggest that even now, God is ready and willing to do something like this?

- Joseph as a type of Christ means that his brothers also have significance. The brethren meeting Joseph at the end has many echoes of the judgment seat of Christ. The whole purpose of the painful process which led up to that meeting was for the benefit of the brethren, to make them realize the enormity of their sin and the greatness of Joseph's grace. Likewise the judgment is for our benefit; the outcome is known to God beforehand. Does the (emphasized) emotionalism of Joseph at this time indicate anything about Christ's attitude then? "What shall we say unto my lord? what shall we speak? or how shall we clear ourselves?" strikes a chord with Dan. 10:17, where even righteous Daniel in his figurative judgment finds it hard to speak. Our awareness of our sinfulness will doubtless have a like effect upon us. The moral desperation of the brethren ("how shall we clear ourselves?") will then be seen in us. Speechlessness is a characteristic of the rejected (Mt. 22:12); the brothers slunk away from Joseph's physical presence (45:4), as the rejected will (1 Jn. 2:28 Gk.). This all suggests that those accepted at the judgment seat will go through all the emotions of the rejected; they will realize that rejection is what they deserve. Those who judge (condemn) themselves now in their self-examination will not be condemned then.

- The intellectual and psychological ability of Joseph as the brothers stood before him was quite something. Joseph was indeed a type of Christ as he stood there. It seems to me that he cooked up his whole plan with them in a split second. He recognized them, remembered his dreams, and then started the process of accusing them of being spies, etc. His accusations seemed designed to draw out of them true news about their family affairs back home. The Lord's piercing vision and ability to elicit our ultimate truth from us in our own words will be manifest at the day of judgment.

- The desperate desire of Joseph for them to relax with him and accept his forgiveness led him to make them drunk so as to ease their relationship (43:34 AVmg.). This otherwise unethical act reveals the earnestness of his desire for them to be relaxed with him and open themselves to him. The Lord will have the same basic desire with us at the judgment.

- The news that Joseph was alive and glorified was received rather like that of Christ's resurrection: initial disbelief, but then the family of Jacob who believed it rose up and left all they had to go to be with Joseph; Israel in AD70 and the last days are likewise bidden leave their stuff and go to be with Christ (45:20 cp. Lk. 17:31). The brethren went forth on this journey with the admonition not to fall out with each other by the way (45:24). The wonder that was ahead of them should have made petty differences disappear.

- The Joseph:Jesus typology would have been surely understood by the Lord. It could be that the way Joseph was saved from the pit and then from slavery in Egypt, when it seemed to all others he had died, may have encouraged the Lord to think that somehow he would have been saved from the actual experience of death- hence His pleas for deliverance and the actual cup

to pass.

Closer To The Cross

And so the study of Joseph as a type of Christ leads us closer to the cross, to knowing the Son of God hanging upon it. We know that Joseph in prison was typical of Christ's death. Ps. 105:17-23 is the Spirit's commentary upon the sufferings of Joseph: "He (God) sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a servant; whose feet they hurt with fetters; he was laid in iron: until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him...Israel also came into Egypt". In the context of the Psalm, God is comforting Israel that all their sufferings had been experienced by Joseph. Israel as a nation are often spoken of as being in prison in a Gentile world (Ps. 79:11; 102:20; Is. 42:7,22; 49:9); just as Joseph was. Prison and death are often associated because a spell in prison was effectively a death sentence, so bad were the conditions. Israel being in prison is therefore a symbol of a living death. On the cross, Christ was the great, supreme prisoner (Ps. 69:33- this is an intensive plural, referring to a singular great prisoner). Like Joseph, He went through all the emotions of the prisoner; the shame, depression, introspection. As Israel were comforted in their living death by the fact that there was an individual in the past who had gone through all they were going through as a group; so the new Israel ought to take comfort together in contemplating the experiences of Christ. He bore our communal sorrows, griefs and sins; this is why we as a community rather than purely as individuals need to be bound together in remembering Christ.

The sufferings of Joseph were supremely in His mind. They had to be so varied and yet also intense so as to include the traumas of each of us. Ps. 105:18 highlights the mental aspects of Joseph's suffering. The verse is badly translated in the AV: "Whose feet (the same word is translated ability, endurance, journey) they hurt (Heb. 'to browbeat or depress') with fetters: (i.e.) his soul (AVmg.) came into iron". His very soul was in iron, trapped, oppressively boxed in as he lay in the darkness. As Christ hung in the darkness He too was depressed by the weight of His mental burden, a burden so great it must have pushed His brain to maximum neurological capacity. The spirit of the crucified Christ is in Ps. 142:7: "Bring my soul out of prison...the righteous shall compass me about" (cp. Ps. 22:22). Christ poured out His soul unto death; "he was taken away by distress" (Is. 53:12,8 AVmg.) suggests that it was the mental crisis in the brain of Christ on the cross which resulted in His death. This is why Pilate marvelled that He died so quickly. It is evident from this that the physical process of crucifixion did not kill Christ, but rather the heartburst (both figurative and literal) which it brought upon Him. Do we not sense that striving in our minds as we fellowship His sufferings? Surely we do, but from a great distance. Yet we should sense it more and more, it should make us get out of this sense of drifting which we all too often have, day by day drifting along with very little stirring up our minds. Here is the challenge of the Joseph record and seeing Joseph as a type of Christ; to just begin to capture the mental anguish of the Son of God as He hung there.

Notes

(1) They crucified Him because they rejected the words He spoke from God (Jn. 12:48). The language of rejection is used both about the Jews' crucifixion of Christ (Lk. 17:25; Mk. 12:10) and their rejection of His words. Thus Heb. 6:5,6; 10:28,29 connect despising the word with crucifying Christ afresh.

4.10.2 Things You Can Only Ponder: Did Israel Eat The Passover?

The number of firstborn males after Israel left Egypt was remarkably small (around 20,000, Num. 3:43). Women in most primitive societies have an average of 7 births. this would mean that given a total population of around 2,800,000 on leaving Egypt (Ex. 12:37), there should have been around 400,000 firstborn males. But instead, there is only a fraction of this number. Why? Did Israel eat the Passover?

My suggestion- and this is well in the category of things you will never know for sure and can only ponder- is that many Hebrew firstborns died on Passover night. Israel were warned that if they did not properly keep the Passover, “the Destroyer” Angel would kill their firstborn (Ex. 12:23). “The Destroyer” is mentioned in 1 Cor. 10:10: “Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the Destroyer” (*olothreutes*; this is a proper noun in the Greek). Who was the Destroyer? If Scripture interprets Scripture, it was the ‘Destroyer’ Angel of Passover night. In similar vein Heb. 11:28 speaks of “He (the Angel) that destroyed (Gk. *olothreuo*) the firstborn”.

Israel were side-tracked from what should have been the central object of their attention: the blood of the lamb. They were disobedient from the day God knew them, i.e. Passover night (Dt. 9:24). They ate the Passover, but murmured under their breath; and it was because of this murmuring, this obsession with chips on their shoulder against their leaders, the petty grumbles of life, a failure to be awed by the wonder of the redemption through that Paschal lamb...that they shared Egypt’s judgment. Did Israel *properly* eat the Passover? *Very* soon afterwards, the people reminded Moses of this incident: “Would to God *we* (maybe this is the emphasis) had (also) died by the hand of the Lord (a phrase often associated with Angel’s work at passover: Josh. 4:24; Is. 11:11; 19:16; Dan. 9:15; Heb. 8:9) in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pot (Young’s Literal) and when we did eat bread” (Ex. 16:3). They weren’t just saying they wished they had died in Egypt; they wished they had died by the hand of the Lord. Sitting by the flesh pot and eating bread is perhaps a reference to eating Passover that night, when in (perhaps) 90% of Hebrew families the firstborn had slumped down in death. They wished they too had died that Passover night. They felt Moses was going to kill them as, by implication, they blamed him for killing the firstborn.

Israel were intensely disobedient to God from the time of their exodus from Egypt, even before their deliverance from the Red Sea (Dt. 9:24 = Ex. 20:5,6). Perhaps this was because Moses’ faithful keeping of the Passover meant that the Angel which destroyed the (Egyptian and Hebrew) firstborn did not destroy the whole of Israel as God had initially planned (Heb. 11:28). Perhaps it was because of this righteousness which God imputed to Israel at that time that He makes no specific mention of their huge failure.

Israel’s exodus from Egypt on Passover night was a type of our exodus from the world at the second coming (Lk. 12:35,36 = Ex. 12:11). The firstborns represent us, the ecclesia of firstborns (Heb. 12:23 Gk.). Perhaps 90% of the firstborns failed to be delivered because they murmured, they allowed themselves to be distracted from the fundamental basis of their redemption: the blood of the lamb. What percentage will it be for the new Israel?

4.10.3 Things You Can Only Speculate: What Happened In Eden?

The following study is written more convincingly than it is believed by the writer. There will be some conclusions which you come to in your Bible study of which you will never be 100% certain. I include this as an example.

The classical view of the fall supposes that as Eve's teeth sunk into the fruit, the first sin was committed, and soon afterwards Adam followed suite, resulting in the curse falling upon humanity. What I want to discuss is whether the eating of the fruit was in fact the first sin. If it was, then Eve sinned first. Straight away, the Bible-minded believer comes up with a problem: the New Testament unmistakably highlights Adam as the first sinner; by *his* transgression sin entered the world (Rom. 5:12). So sin was not in the world before *his* transgression. The ground was cursed for the sake of *Adam's* sin (Gen. 3:17). This all suggests that Eve wasn't the first sinner. The fact Eve was deceived into sinning doesn't mean she didn't sin (1 Tim. 2:14). She was punished for her sin; and in any case, ignorance doesn't mean that sin doesn't count as sin (consider the need for offerings of ignorance under the Law). So, Eve sinned; but Adam was the first sinner, before *his* sin, sin had not entered the world. We must also remember that Eve was deceived by the snake, and on account of this was " (implicated / involved) in the transgression" (1 Tim. 2:14). " The transgression" . Which transgression? Surely Adam's (Rom. 5:14); by listening to the snake she became implicated in Adam's sin. The implication is that " the transgression" was already there for her to become implicated in it by listening to the serpent. This is the very opposite to the idea of *Adam* being implicated in *Eve's* sin.

So I want to suggest that in fact the eating of the fruit was not the first sin; it was the final physical consequence of a series of sins, spiritual weakness and sinful attitudes on Adam's part. They were mainly sins of omission rather than commission, and for this reason we tend to not notice them; just as we tend to treat our own sins of omission far less seriously than our sins of commission. When we consider the Lord's teaching of Mt. 7:22,23 and 25:42-44 together, He's saying that those rejected at the day of judgment will be so on account of their *omissions*- hence their surprise, and anger because they knew that they had *done* good works; they thought that what they had *committed* was morally acceptable to God, and this would usher them into the Kingdom. But their sins of *omission* cost them the Kingdom.

What happened in Eden was that the garden was planted, Adam was placed in it, and commanded not to eat of the tree of knowledge. The animals are then brought before him for naming; then he is put into a deep sleep, and Eve is created. *Then* the very first command Adam and Eve jointly received was to have children, and go out into the whole earth (i.e. out of the garden of Eden) and subdue it to themselves (Gen. 1:28). The implication is that this command was given as soon as Eve was created. There he was, lying down, with his wife beside him, " a help meet" ; literally, 'an opposite one'. And they were commanded to produce seed, and then go out of the garden and subdue the earth. It would have been obvious to him from his observation of the animals that his wife was physiologically and emotionally designed for him to produce seed by. She was designed to be his 'opposite one', and there she was, lying next to him. Gen. 2:24 implies that he should have cleaved to her and become one flesh by reason of the very way in which she was created out of him. And yet he evidently did not have intercourse with her, seeing that they failed to produce children until after the fall. If he had consummated his marriage with her, presumably she would have produced children

(this deals a death blow to the fantasies of Adam and Eve having an idyllic sexual relationship in Eden before the fall). Paul saw Eve at the time of her temptation as a virgin (2 Cor. 11:2,3). Instead, Adam put off obedience to the command to multiply. There seems an allusion to this in 1 Cor. 7:5, where Paul says that married couples should come together in intercourse "lest Satan (cp. the serpent) tempt you for your incontinency". Depending how closely one reads Scripture, there may be here the suggestion that Paul saw Adam's mistake in Eden as not 'coming together' with his wife.

But Adam said something to Eve (as they lay there?). He alone had been commanded not to eat the tree of knowledge. Yet when Eve speaks to the serpent, it is evident that Adam had told her about it, but not very deeply. She speaks of "the tree that is in the midst of the garden" rather than "the tree of knowledge". She had been told by Adam that they must not even touch it, even though this is not what God had told Adam (Gen. 2:16,17 cp. 3:2,3). So we are left with the idea that Adam turned to Eve and as it were wagged his finger at her and said 'Now you see that tree over there in the middle, *don't you even touch it* or else there'll be trouble, O.K.'. She didn't *understand*, he didn't *explain* that it was forbidden because it was the tree of knowledge, and so she was deceived into eating it- unlike Adam, who understood what he was doing (1 Tim. 2:14) [\(1\)](#). Adam's emphasis was on not *committing* the sin of eating the fruit; he said nothing to her about the need to multiply and subdue the earth.

The next we know, Adam and Eve have separated, she is talking to the snake, apparently indifferent to the command to *subdue* the animals, to be their superiors, rather than listen to them as if they actually had superior knowledge. When the snake questioned: "Yea, *hath* God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree..." (Gen. 3:1), Eve was in a weak position because Adam hadn't fully told her what God had said. Hence she was deceived, but Adam wasn't.

So, *why* didn't Adam tell her more clearly what God had said? I would suggest that he was disillusioned with the wife God gave him; he didn't have intercourse with her as he had been asked, he separated from her so that she was alone with the snake. "The woman, whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree..." (Gen. 3:12) seems to reflect more than a hint of resentment against Eve and God's provision of her.

Not only was Adam disillusioned with Eve, but he failed to really take God's word seriously. Romans 5 describes Adam's failure in a number of parallel ways: "transgression...sin...offence...*disobedience* (Rom. 5:19)" . "Disobedience" translates a Greek word which is uncommon. Strong defines it as meaning 'inattention', coming from a root meaning 'to mishear'. It is the same word translated "neglect to hear" in Mt. 18:17. Adam's sin, his transgression, his offence was therefore not eating the fruit in itself; it was disobedience, neglecting to hear. That this neglecting to hear God's word seriously was at the root of his sin is perhaps reflected in God's judgment on him: "Because thou hast hearkened unto *the voice of thy wife*..." rather than *God's* voice (Gen. 3:17).

Adam's sin was therefore a neglecting to seriously hear God's word, a dissatisfaction with and effective rejection of his God-given wife, a selfish unwillingness to leave the garden of Eden and go out and subdue the earth (cp. our natural instincts), and a neglect of his duty to multiply children in God's image (cp. preaching and pastoral work). All these things were sins of omission; he may well have reasoned that he would get round to them later. All these wrong attitudes and sins of omission, apparently unnoticed and uncondemned, led to the final folly of eating the fruit: the first sin of commission. And how many of our more public sins are prefaced by a similar process? Truly Adam's sin was the epitome of all our sins. Romans

5 points an antithesis between Adam and Christ. Adam's one act of disobedience which cursed us is set off against Christ's one act of righteousness which blessed us. Yet Christ's one act was not just His death; we are saved by His life too (Rom. 5:10). Christ lived a life of many acts of righteousness and refusal to omit any part of His duty, and crowned it with one public act of righteousness in His death. The implication is that Adam committed a series of disobediences which culminated in one public act of commission: he ate the fruit.

There are three lines of argument which confirm this picture of what happened in Eden which we have presented. Firstly, Adam and Eve were ashamed at their nakedness. Perhaps this was because they realized what they should have used their sexuality for. Eating the tree of knowledge gave them knowledge of good (i.e. they realized the good they should have done in having children) and also evil (the capacities of their sexual desire?). Adam first called his wife "woman", but after the fall he called her "Eve" because he recognized she was the mother of living ones (Gen. 3:20). By doing so he seems to be recognizing his failure of not reproducing through her as God had originally asked him. The way they immediately produce a child after the fall is surely an expression of their repentance.

Secondly, it seems that God punishes sin in a way which is appropriate to the sin. Consider how David so often asks God to take the wicked in their own snare- and how often this happens. The punishment of Adam and Eve was appropriate to the sins they committed. What Adam wasn't bothered to do, i.e. have intercourse with his woman, became the very thing which now every fallen man will sell his soul for. They ate the tree of *knowledge*, they *knew* they were naked, and then Adam *knew* Eve (Gen. 4:1); this chain of connection certainly suggests that sexual desire, whilst not wrong in itself, was part of the result of eating the tree. There is an artless poetic justice and appropriacy in this which seems simply Divine. What they couldn't be bothered to do became the very thing which has probably generated more sin and desire to do than anything else. Adam was to rule over Eve as a result of the fall- the very thing he wasn't bothered to do. Eve's punishment was that her desire was for her husband- perhaps suggesting that she too had no desire for Adam sexually, and therefore was willing to delay obedience to the command to multiply. They were both driven out of the garden- perhaps reflecting how they should have left the garden in obedience to God's command to go out and subdue the natural creation to themselves. Because Adam wasn't bothered to do this, even when it was within his power, therefore nature was given a special power against man which he would never be able to overcome, and which would eventually defeat him (Gen. 3:17-19). This all shows the logic of obedience; we will be made to pay the price of obedience even if we disobey- therefore it is logical to obey. Note in this context that the Hebrew behind "Desirable to gain understanding" in Gen. 3:6 "can also be translated, without notable alteration, as "desirable in order to become childless"" (2)- suggesting they didn't want to have children, they didn't want to obey the command to multiply. And therefore the curse was that they would indeed have children and suffer in doing so.

Thirdly, there seems evidence that the eating of the fruit happened very soon after their creation. Eve hadn't seen the tree before the serpent pointed it out to her (Gen. 3:6); and consider that they could eat of all the trees, but not of the tree of knowledge. But what about the tree of life? This wasn't forbidden, and yet had they eaten of it, they would have lived for ever. We are told that this tree brings forth fruit every month (Rev. 22:2); so presumably it had not fruited, implying the fall was within the first month after creation.

The practical outcome of what happened in Eden is that we are to see in Adam's sin an epitome of our essential weaknesses. And how accurate it is. His failure was principally due

to sins of omission, of delaying to do God's will because it didn't take his fancy. Time and again Biblical history demonstrates that sins of silence and omission are just as fatal as sins of public, physical commission (e.g. Gen. 20:16; 38:10). To omit to hate evil is the same as to commit it (Ps. 36:4). Because David omitted to enforce the Law's requirements concerning the transport of the tabernacle, a man died. His commission of good didn't outweigh his omission here (1 Chron. 15:13). The Jews were condemned by the Lord for building the sepulchres of the prophets without erecting a placard stating that their fathers had killed them. We have a debt to preach to the world; we are their debtors, and yet this isn't how we often see it (Rom. 1:14). Israel sinned not only by worshipping idols but by thereby omitting to worship God as He required (1 Sam. 8:8). Adam stayed in the garden rather than go out to subdue the earth. Our equivalent is our spiritual selfishness, our refusal to look outside of ourselves into the world of others. Because things like disinterest in preaching or inattention to subduing our animal instincts are sins of *omission* rather than commission, we too tend to overlook them. We effectively neglect to hear God's word, although like Adam we may make an appearance of half-heartedly teaching it to others. And even when we do this, like Adam we tend to focus on *avoidal of committing sin* rather than examining ourselves for the likelihood of *omission*, not least in our lack of spiritual *responsibility* for others. Because of his spiritual laziness, Adam's sin led Eve into deception and thereby sin, and brought suffering on untold billions. His sin is the epitome of ours. So let us really realize: none of us sins or is righteous unto ourselves. There are colossal ramifications of our every sin and our every act of righteousness on others.

Notes

(1) There are similarities in more conservative Christian groups; e.g. the father or husband who lays the law down about the need for wearing hats without *explaining* to his wife or daughter *why*.

(2) H. Renckens, *Israel's Concept of the Beginning: The Theology of Genesis 1-3* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1964) p. 270.

4.11 Things You Can Hope To Understand Some Day:

Bible Questions With No Answers

These are all questions from the margin of my Bible:

1. The OT prophets consistently associate the return of the Jews to the land and the fertility of the land with a spiritual revival of Israel. Since 1948 the Jews have begun to return, and the land has flourished. But where is the spiritual revival? Is there a group of believers hidden away in the land, unknown to us (cp. the situation at the first coming of Elijah)?
2. "I charge you...that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please" (Song 2:7; 3:5). What does this mean, both practically and in the symbology of the Song?

3. How can men worship the true God in ignorance (Acts 17:23)? Or was Paul just being uncharacteristically polite in his preaching?
4. God " hath made of one blood all nations of men...and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; *that* (so that) they should seek the Lord" (Acts 17:26,27). How does geographical distribution etc. lead to men seeking the Lord?
5. Is God's will now done on earth or not (Mt. 6:10)?
6. Mt. 27:46 says that Christ addressed God as " Eli" ; Mark records that he said " Eloi" . There is a difference. What? Why?
7. " I will not rend away all the Kingdom, but will give one tribe to thy son for David my servant's sake" (1 Kings 11:13). But wasn't Judah comprised of the two and a half tribes, not just one tribe?
8. In one day (and the days of Genesis are surely literal days) God created " every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew" (Gen. 2:4,5).
9. " Yet have I (God) set my king upon my holy hill of Zion. I (God) will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me (Christ), Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee" (Ps. 2:6,7). This is one of several examples of where the pronouns seem to be inextricably muddled in Messianic prophecies.
10. What is the physical, visible proof of virginity mentioned in the Law? If as usually explained it was a cloth with blood from a broken hymen some years ago, couldn't this have been so easily fabricated? What does the idiom of 'uncovering nakedness' refer to?
11. Why should we rejoice because the Father is greater than Christ (Jn. 14:28)?
12. Who are the fathers whom the latter day Elijah will turn towards their children (Mal. 4:5)?
13. Why the specific reference to the *right* eye in Mt. 5:29?
14. The faithful watching for Christ's return are described as men waiting for their master to *return* from a wedding (Lk. 12:36). But Christ's coming is also described as His coming *to* the wedding to marry the faithful.
15. How was Ez. 12:12 true of Zedekiah fleeing from Jerusalem: " he shall cover his face, that he see not the ground with his eyes" ?

Are these all indeed Bible questions with no answers? What do you think?

4.12 Reading the Bible Again for the First Time

There are times when surely like me, you have caught yourself doing or thinking so deeply wrongly- when just minutes before, you were reading Holy Scripture. And of course, we've seen this happen so often in others- that's always so much easier to see. There's a split between Bible study, and the

real issues of life. And it's that split I'd like to explore, and suggest why it exists, and what we might practically do about it.

This split between Bible study and practice is often observable in the way that speakers or pastoral figures will give expositions of Scripture which leave it to the audience to draw the practical lessons. The speaker or leader somehow balks at that crucial point of overflow between the theoretical and the practical. This has bred the fair enough observation by the cynical that 'I get nothing out of church, it's all just academic, mere ideas, nothing practical'. One reaction against this has been the talk on a purely practical, 'life' level, which has no Biblical underpinning. One man's ideas about 'what we ought to be doing' can be as good as any other man's. It matters what Biblical texts mean, but we need to be asking the right questions in order to connect them to life in practice. Unless we do, we enter into the crisis of so many believers- whereby the Bible becomes sterile and remote from them; the shining path of the new life becomes a rut. And yet we rightly proclaim the Bible as God's word to be the basis of our lives, and to be a living word.

Left Brain, Right Brain

This basic division between theory and practice is actually perfectly natural. It's how we are structured. The human brain is divided into two parts- the right and left 'hemispheres', connected by a bunch of fibres. In cases of severe trauma to the head, the brain can flood with blood and death then follows. Brain surgeons began separating the two hemispheres in cases of such trauma in order to preserve life. As the patient learnt to function again afterwards, it became clear that the left hemisphere controls the right side of the body [and vice versa]. The left hemisphere was found to control speech, naming things, grammar, abstract thinking, the intellect. The right hemisphere was observed to be controlling meaning-in-context, emotion, perception of size, colour etc. The split between right and left hemispheres is in fact very similar to the split we observe between our Bible study on the one hand, and our practical application and feeling of it on the other. So my first point is not to despair at the existence of the split. It's part of our being. The challenge of being a whole person in Christ is to synthesize the two sides. It therefore shouldn't surprise us at all that in spiritually immature individuals and systems, the most profound, gripping exposition of Scripture can be listened to with riveted attention and every approval- and yet produce absolutely no practical outcome in the lives of the listeners.

The integration of the Biblical text with human life in practice thus becomes one of the keys in spiritual life, and is a technique which needs to be acquired as soon as possible on our spiritual journey. The problem is that if we fail in this, as the actual text of Scripture becomes more familiar to us over years of reading and hearing it discussed, it becomes the harder to find a second naivete, to really come to God's word and His Son 'again for the first time'; to be as it were a born again virgin. All human creativity likely arises from the process of the left hand analyzing data, and the right interpreting it and reordering it into a coherent whole. If the right hand doesn't do this, then the data as it stands can be seen as contradictory- and those cynics who revel in supposed 'Bible contradictions' have simply failed to come to the text with a mature mind and both parts of their brain. If left and right work together, we see synthesis and not mere words of text; both form and content at the same time. I wonder if this idea of left and right hemispheres is alluded to in Scripture. There are some verses which certainly seem possibly relevant- e.g. we read that we are to progress our spiritual warfare "with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the

left" (2 Cor. 6:7). Our right eye can cause us to stumble (Mt. 5:29), the left hand is not to know what the right hand does (Mt. 6:3). "I will pray with the spirit [right hemisphere?] and I will pray also with the mind [the left?]" (1 Cor. 14:15).

We live in a society which on one hand favours left-brain thinking. Analysis, hard fact, selfishness, awareness that generosity means that we lose- these are all left brain attributes. And they are rewarded, whereas spirituality requires the free function of the right hemisphere. But some have reacted so far against what they perceive as cold intellectualism that they end up wanting only the fuzzy, feel good kind of spirituality which is based purely on sentiment and without any underpinning in Biblical truth.

Terra Incognita

How practically, then, can we come to the Bible in a holistic manner, as the whole person? How can we engage more meaningfully and practically with the text we read? We often find answers in things we are so familiar with that we have ceased to give them their true weight. If we accept that the Bible really is Divinely inspired, then we are called to attention by its every word. This is no mere textbook, novel or history book. These words are God speaking to us personally. Seeing this is God speaking to us as mere men, let us not assume that we understand the text before reading it. For example, as I approach Luke 15 my temptation is to skim read the text and think: 'The lost coin- ah, yeah, the woman is Jesus, the coins were all she owned, same feeling for Jesus when He loses us... then, the lost sheep... ah yes, balancing a story about a woman with one about a man... He calls the neighbours to rejoice and brings the confused animal into His house, that is an element of unreality, just shows how happy Jesus is if we come back... then the prodigal, yeah, that's an extension of the other two, old men didn't run in the East, had to walk sedately, so he ran to save his son shame at the hands of the villagers, we should save the sinner from shame too... I remember reading that book about all that, *Through Peasant Eyes*, that's a really good book, the one with orange letters on the spine almost at the far end of the middle shelf of the bookcase by the window'. And time and again as I read the chapter- that can be where I remain. The same old thoughts, good and helpful in themselves, but not really registering deep within me because they are so familiar. And I emerge from Luke 15 not much better in practice. But it's more comfortable to treat Scripture like this, because we have profound anxiety at the prospect of the unknown. It's far cosier to just assume that we are on familiar ground.

We need to pray for the ability to come to God's word fresh. To meet Jesus again for the first time, as it were. If we sense more deeply the Divine inspiration of the words and our own desperate frailty and limitation of understanding the Divine, we will approach the text as *terra incognita*, unknown and even frightening in its possible demands upon us. For who dare assume that they fully understand the words of God in every dimension? If I were to feel that more deeply, then I would not start reading Luke 15 with the attitude that 'Ah Luke 15, yeah I know all about this'. The fact we may know something about the text doesn't mean that we know *all* about it. And this is an oft observed feature of the Bible- that we can study it multiple times and still something new comes out of the page at us. Our mental map of e.g. Luke 15 is not all that there is in Luke 15. The map is not the territory. And the more we perceive our own limitations of understanding, the more we will sense that the territory is still largely unknown to us. Our mental map of that chapter is indeed something, but it is almost nothing compared to the vastness of the territory.

Openness to Change

God's Spirit operates in many ways, but one of them is undoubtedly through His word. One reason the text doesn't change us may simply be because we don't want to be changed. One could be forgiven for thinking that a lot of people go to church exactly because they don't like the change they see around them- their own ageing process, the change of society further and further away from the safe environment [as they perceive it] which they recall from their childhood. And institutionalized religion is very often a safe place, with an atmosphere and smell which is at least 20 years behind the present. And we who are in some way involved with such organizations... lament our personal lack of change in response to the dynamism of God's word? Could the fault not be within us? One form this takes is our way of assuming we understand the text. Because we consider we 'have the Truth' in terms of having a valid relationship with the Lord Jesus and hope of eternity, we can too easily assume that therefore we fully understand every word in the Bible. But that doesn't follow. And yet that impression is probably behind a phrase I hear too often in Biblical discussion, when someone asks a question about the meaning of a verse: 'Ah but doesn't it simply mean that...' , and then some moral platitude or well agreed doctrinal truth is stated. This is reductionism, bringing the text down to a simplistic interpretation of what it 'simply means'. The same left brain approach can be seen in a desire to interpret the elements of the tabernacle or parables in a simplistic 'this equals that' approach. The idea is very much 'Now write that interpretation in your margin next to that verse, and go on to the next verse- and do the same'. And so the live, wild tiger dynamism of God's Spirit as it is in His word is tamed down to some simplistic and trite form of words- human words.

Read the Text for Yourself

That might sound obvious. But increasingly, people are reading not so much the Bible text, but *about* the Bible, ever enthusing about the latest 'absolutely awesome' book they bought from Amazon [at an equally 'awesome' special discount this month]. The ultimately awesome book is the Bible, not some nicely wordsmithed book about the Bible. If you 'get nothing out of' the Bible text, re-read it, pray for understanding, re-read it... and the most amazing things will come out of it to you. And as Harry Tennant used to say about Bible study, no jewel shines so brightly as the one you find yourself. One of those 'finds' can last a lifetime; whereas what you read in those 'awesome' [yes, the use of the word does rather bug me] Amazon books will likely be forgotten by you... next week, and surely by next month. God forbid that our relationship with Him should boil down to reading one of those awesome Amazon books about spirituality or about His word... whilst His own word remains unopened, our engagement with whatever we read *about* it dependent upon our dimming memories of the Bible text we read years ago. You may like to read the text in another language, if you know another one. Or in other versions. Or copy it out, making a summary of it. Read it out loud. Ask questions of the text. These are all things I have tried and can commend, but mere technique alone will not compensate for the correct attitudes to God's word.

Related to this- don't over elevate platform speaking, assuming that your religious duty is fulfilled by going to church and hearing a speaker expound the Bible to you. This again is not reading the text for yourself. As we sit there listening to the speaker, it's generally a very left brain experience. In response to the teaching we tend to make a yes / no, I agree / disagree, kind of answer within us. But there is no opportunity to engage with the speaker over every issue. A point is made, we assent

or not, and then, on to the next point, same process, next point, and the next... and possibly a few minutes of discussion at the end which you may or may not have a chance to get slightly involved with. There has been no engagement much with the text, rather with the ideas of a speaker in monologue, which you have said yes or no to. Likewise, if there is any spiritual discussion afterwards amongst the congregation it will likely focus around whether or not, in a binary sense, we liked / agreed with the speaker or not. Again, we ourselves have not been directly engaged with the text of Scripture by the whole experience.

Asking Questions

Asking the right questions is perhaps the most important thing in practice. Our pre-understanding can stop us asking them because we fear going out of our comfort zone, we fear new interpretations, and the whole idea of asking questions suggests that we do not in fact know the absolute truth about all of God's word. We know the truth of Christ, and by grace have sure hope of the Kingdom. But that isn't the same as holding the definitive interpretation of every Bible verse. Indeed, Bible verses may have several equally valid interpretations. Psalm 2 is quoted multiple times in the New Testament, each time with a different interpretation. Or take the parables. Left brain thinking wants to assign a direct, clear meaning to each element of the story. Right brain thinking takes them in wider context. We could say that parables have many hooks on them, which engage with us in different ways at different times. We may see elements of ourselves, e.g., in each of the various types of ground in the sower parable. And each time we read them, we see something new and are challenged in new areas. Somehow we need to de-familiarize ourselves with the story line of the parables, and come to them afresh each time. And this, it seems to me, is the key to reading all the Bible.

5.1 The Personal Lord

5-1-1 Our Personal Relationship With Jesus

It is common at baptisms to mention that Israel crossing the Red Sea prefigured the believer's exit from the world through baptism; and therefore the wilderness journey is a prototype of our journey through life, to the Kingdom. For every man, this life is a lonely desert trek, a wilderness walk, with the pillar of fire to warm us by night and the column of glorious cloud to point out the way. Time and again, believers yearn for more companionship on the journey; perhaps through marriage, or through having more brethren and sisters to meet with in their area. And time and again, they find that while these things undoubtedly *do* help us on the way, at the end, we're alone, *utterly and totally alone* in our personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. The intense nature of that personal relationship with Jesus will in essence be the same, for the happily married brother surrounded by believing children and grandchildren, to the lonesome, isolated sister in some remote corner of the globe, who doesn't speak the same language as most of the present body of Christ. The man who finds treasure [or, perhaps, a deposit of precious metal in a field which could be mined] hides the fact (Mt. 13:44), and sells all he has to buy that field. The hiding of the discovery speaks to

me of the utterly personal knowledge between a man and his Lord which we enter into when we 'find' the treasure of the Kingdom, the pearl of great price. For any man or woman who hears the Lord's words, He and His Father will enter in and make their abode with them (Jn. 14:23). Although we are a great multitude of redeemed, yet the communication of the Father and Son to us are still amazingly unique, even though we all hear and read the same actual words, and reflect upon the same facts. Right back at the beginning of God's relationship with Israel He had made the point that "I will meet you [plural] to speak there unto thee [you singular]" (Ex. 29:42).

There is the sustained implication that the personal relationship between Jesus and each of His followers is totally personal and unique. The Abrahamic covenant is made personally with every member of the seed "in their generations" (Gen. 17:7). The records of the renewing of the covenant to Isaac and Jacob are but indicators that this is the experience of each one of the seed. This means that the covenant love of God and the promise of personal inheritance of the land is made personally, and confirmed by the shedding of Christ's blood, to each of us. Paul appreciated this when he spoke of how the Son of God had loved him and died for him personally, even though that act of death was performed for many others (Gal. 2:20). This is one of the most essential mysteries of our redemption (and yes, there are some mysteries still); that Christ gave Himself *for me*, so that He might make *me* His very own; and therefore I wish to respond in total devotion to Him and His cause, to make Him the Man I fain would follow to the end. And yet He did it for *you* and for *you*; for *all* of us His people. All the current emphasis on fellowship and family life, good as it is, must never blind us to this ultimately *personal* relationship with the One who gave Himself for us. Each time a believer enters into covenant with Christ through baptism, blood is in a sense shed; the Lord dies again as the believer dies again in the waters of baptism. The Hebrew word translated 'to cut a covenant' is also translated 'cut off' in the sense of death (Gen. 9:11; Lev. 20:2,3; Is. 48:9; Prov. 2:21). Death and blood shedding are essential parts of covenant making.

"Many" will be rejected at the judgment seat because they don't *know* the Lord Jesus Christ; they never had a personal relationship with Jesus, even though they have experienced answered prayer, done miracles, worked for their Lord etc. (Mt. 7:22,23; 1 Cor. 13). They will have built a spiritual house, but on sand. It isn't difficult to be a good Christian outwardly. But to *know* the Lord Jesus? That's another question. John knew his Lord. He repeatedly describes himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn. 13:23; 20:2; 21:7,20). Doubtless John was aware that Jesus loved all His people; but John is surely exalting in the fact that the Lord loved him personally.

Our relationship with the Lord God is likewise personal. Each of us is "the work of God", and we should therefore respect each other's spiritual individuality (Rom. 14:20). Moses on that last day of his life addressed the whole assembly of Israel; and yet he so often speaks in the singular ("thee" rather than "ye"), as if to emphasize that the laws and covenant he was giving them was to them *personally*. Dt. 29:10,12 makes this clear: "Ye (plural) stand this day all of you before the Lord...that *thou* (singular) shouldest enter into covenant with the Lord". That covenant was made anew by God to each generation; as Israel were offered the choice of death or covenant-life in Dt. 30:15,19, so the very same words were offered to Israel in Jeremiah's time (21:8). In the same spirit, Moses points out that Yahweh is the only God that can be personally *known*; all the idols could not be known personally (Dt. 29:26). No fewer than 137 times in Scripture we read the phrase "my God". This was used in a public, unashamed way by many of God's children (it was a particular favourite of Nehemiah, David and Paul).

5-1-2 Individual Relationships In The Kingdom Of God

The parable of the unjust steward makes the point that in the Kingdom, the faithful will be given by Christ "the true riches...that which is your (very) own" (Lk. 16:12). The reward given will to some degree be totally personal. Each works out his *own* salvation, such as it will be (Phil. 2:12)- not in the sense of achieving it by works, but rather that the sort of spirituality we develop now will be the essential person we are in the eternity of God's Kingdom. When the Lord spoke of how the faithful will be clothed by Him in a robe (Mt. 22:11; Lk. 15:22), He is connecting with the usage of "clothing" as a symbol of the covering of righteousness which He gives, and which also represents the immortality of the Kingdom (1 Cor. 15:53,54; 2 Cor. 5:2-5). The choice of clothing as a symbol is significant; the robe covered all the body, except the face. The individuality of the believer still remains, in the eyes of Christ. What we sow in this life, we will receive in the relationships we have in the Kingdom; there will be something totally individual about our spirituality then, and it will be a reflection of our present spiritual struggles. This is Paul's point in the parable of the seed going into the ground and rising again, with a new body, but still related to the original seed which was sown.

The parable of the pounds describes the reward of the faithful in terms of being given ten or five cities (Lk. 19:17). This idea of dividing up groups of cities was surely meant to send the mind back to the way Israel in their wilderness years were each promised their own individual cities and villages, which they later inherited. The idea of inheriting "ten cities" occurs in Josh. 15:57; 21:5,26; 1 Chron. 6:61 (all of which are in the context of the priests receiving their cities), and "five cities" in 1 Chron. 4:32. As each Israelite was promised some personal inheritance in the land, rather than some blanket reward which the whole nation received, so we too have a personal reward prepared. The language of inheritance (e.g. 1 Pet. 1:4) and preparation of reward (Mt. 25:34; Jn. 14:1) in the NT is alluding to this OT background of the land being prepared by the Angels for Israel to inherit (Ex. 15:17 Heb.; 23:20; Ps. 68:9,10 Heb.). We must be careful not to think that our promised inheritance is *only* eternal life; it is something being personally prepared for each of us. The language of preparation seems inappropriate if our reward is only eternal life. The husbandman produces fruit which is appropriate to his labours, and so our eternal future and being will be a reflection of our labours now (Heb. 6:7). Not that salvation depends upon our works: it is the free, gracious gift of God. But the nature of our eternity will be a reflection of our present efforts.

We have elsewhere shown that our reward in the Kingdom will in some way be related to the work of upbuilding we have done with our brethren and sisters in this life [\(1\)](#). The "reward" which 1 Cor. 3:14 speaks of is the "work" we have built in God's ecclesia in this life. In agreement with this, Paul describes those he had laboured for as the reward he would receive in the Kingdom (Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19). Relationships in the Kingdom of God were to be his reward. This not only demonstrates the impossibility of attaining the "reward" if we ignore the brotherhood; it also shows that the Kingdom will mean something different for each of us; the "reward" we will be given will be a reflection of our own personal labours for our brethren in ecclesial life.



Some years later the Lord stressed the same point, when He promised the faithful that their reward in the Kingdom would be like a stone with a name written in it which nobody else knew, except themselves and their Lord, who gave it (Rev. 2:17). It has been suggested that this refers to a custom of writing a name on a stone, breaking the stone in half at random, and each friend keeping one half. The half stone would only fit exactly with the other half stone, and when the friends met in the future, they would fit the stones together as proof of their earlier relationship ⁽²⁾. Relationships in the Kingdom of God will be in that sense private and unenterable. Bible characters often have epithets in God's record of them- Judas who betrayed, Jeroboam who made Israel sin. We will be given such a name / summation of our relationship with the Lord in the Kingdom. Nobody else knows / understands / appreciates this name. This is a clear statement that other believers cannot enter into the personal relationship between a man and his God. Likewise, none of us can know the name which was written on the Lord Jesus (Rev. 19:12). None of us will ever quite be able to enter into the nature of the relationship between Father and Son. If we could, He would not be our Lord. Paul possibly expresses the same idea of an unenterable relationship in 1 Cor. 2:15: "He that is spiritual discerneth all things (about God), yet he himself is discerned of no man" (AVmg.). Our real spiritual being is a "hidden man" (1 Pet. 3:4). The Spirit describes our final redemption as our "soul" and "spirit" being "saved"; our innermost being, our essential spiritual personality, who we *really* are in spiritual terms, will as it were be immortalized (1 Pet. 1:9; 1 Cor. 5:5). This means that our spiritual development in this life is directly proportional to the type of person we will be *for evermore*. If, for example, we develop a generous spirit now, this is "a good foundation" for our future spiritual experience (1 Tim. 6:19). This is a stupendous conception, and the ultimate fillip to getting serious about our very personal spiritual development. Our mortal bodies will be changed to immortal, Spirit nature bodies according to the Spirit which *now* dwells in us (Rom. 8:11 Gk.). The attitude which we have to the Lord Jesus *now* will be the attitude we have to Him at the day of judgment (Mt. 7:23 cp. Lk. 6:46). He is the hidden manna; in the Kingdom we will eat Him, in the sense of having fellowship (the idea of 'eating') with Him who is now hidden from us in many ways (Rev. 2:17).

Rev. 2:17 suggests that eating the hidden manna is to be paralleled with being given the stone. The context implies this will be done at the day of judgment. According to a number of commentators, a white stone was laid down by the judge as a sign of acquittal and acceptance ⁽³⁾. The Lord would therefore be implying that after our encounter at the judgment, there will be an ongoing relationship in the Kingdom of God between us, a locking together of stones which no-one else possesses. The white stone is also parallel to the white, stone-looking manna of the wilderness years (Ex. 16:14,23; Num. 11:7). The reward we will be given in the Kingdom will be our spiritual food, to be eaten 'daily' throughout the Kingdom. Israel were to eat on the seventh day (a type of the Kingdom) the manna which they had gathered and prepared on the sixth day. The manna is a symbol of God's word as expressed in Christ (Jn. 6). Biblically, a name refers to personality and character. The new name which no one else knows thus refers to the reward "prepared" for us individually, the new personality which we will be in the Kingdom, the room in the Father's house prepared for each of us (Jn. 14:1). This latter idea alludes to the way that there were chambers around the temple named after individuals (e.g. Ezra 10:6). We will *each* have our own chamber, in this figure. This new personality will be written on the manna / stone, it will be the result of our own very personal distilling of the essence of God's word. The concept of a name written on a stone sends the mind back to the way in which the names of the tribes of Israel were written on the stones of the breastplate, each reflecting a different aspect of the light of God's glory (Ex. 28:17). We will do this through our personal understanding of God's word. It is a comforting yet sobering

thought that the Lord sees us as 'names'; not just as people. Biblically, the name speaks of the character. When He says He will confess us before the Father (Mt. 10:32), He means He will confess our name before God (Rev. 3:5); He knows us according to our names / characters. He speaks of ecclesial members as "names" in Rev. 3:4; He calls His own sheep by name, and they each know His voice, responding to His word *individually*. The call to one sheep will only be recognized by that sheep; the others won't respond (Jn. 10:3). He will take individual note of each sheep, treating them accordingly, as the shepherd leads more gently those that are with young (Is. 40:11). It seems that even now, we each have our own individual name with the Father and Son, encompassing their understanding of our essential character. It may even be that in the record of Scripture, God inspired the writers to record the names of individuals according to His judgment of them (or at least, how the faithful viewed them at the time), rather than by the names they actually went under. What mother would have named her child Nabal (fool), or Ahira (brother of evil, Num. 1:15), or 'sickness' or 'wasting' (Mahlon and Chilion)? These names were either given to them by others and the use adopted by God, or simply God in the record assigned them such names.

The personality we will be in the Kingdom will reflect the struggles we have personally endured in this life. Relationships in the Kingdom of God will reflect these. Thus those who had consciously chosen to be eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom ⁽⁴⁾ are comforted that in the Kingdom they will be given a name and place in God's temple better than of children in this life (Is. 56:5). All the faithful will be given a name and place in the temple; so what especial consolation was this to those eunuchs? Surely the point is that the name (personality) they will then have will gloriously reflect the self-sacrifice and personal Biblical understanding which they went through in this life. This alone proves that the reward will be individual. The Lord's picture of men entering the Kingdom without limbs is surely making the same point (Mk. 9:47); the result of our self-sacrifice in this life will be reflected by the personality we have in the Kingdom. And there is evidence that the Man we follow will still bear in His body, throughout eternity, the marks of the crucifixion (Zech. 13:6; Rev. 5:6).

As we face the Lord straight after the judgment experience, perhaps almost embarrassed at those marks He bears, there will be that unenterable personal bond between Him and us. Jeremiah, after a symbolic death and resurrection, went into the personal presence of the King for a private interview (Jer. 38); the Lord Jesus, it would seem, also had a private audience with the Father soon after His resurrection. Are these patterns of our experience? Israel left Egypt, passed through the baptism of the Red Sea, and then walked through the wilderness- all in enacted parable of our spiritual experience (1 Cor. 10:1). They then passed through the Jordan, and set foot in the land of promise (cp. our entry to the Kingdom at the judgment seat). But they had not been circumcised in the wilderness- possibly suggesting that the new Israel will not have cut off the flesh as they should have done in their wilderness walk. It is stressed at least five times in Joshua 5 that Joshua himself personally circumcised each of them, and then they kept the Passover. This would seem to tellingly point forward to our coming to the end of the wilderness walk of this life, and then entering into the Kingdom; to have a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus (cp. Joshua), who performs the intensely personal operation of rolling back and cutting off the flesh, and then we sit down together and keep the Passover, as the Lord clearly intimated we would (Mt. 26:29). This is how personal relationships in the Kingdom of God will be.

The idea of a personal meeting with the Father and Son is not only taught in typology. Job looked out of the tunnel of his depression and pain to the day when he would see God "for myself; and mine eyes shall behold (Him), and not another" (Job 19:27). Doubtless spurred

by the insensitive prying into his private spirituality by his friends / brethren, Job seems to almost exult that he would see God for himself, in his own way, and nobody else ("and not another"; see context) would see God in this way. David had a similar vision; he looked to the day of resurrection when he would be satisfied, when he awoke, with seeing the face of God with a good conscience (Ps. 17:15). These are the sort of pictures which should be embedded in our own private spirituality. Nobody, not even faithful brethren, can have dominion over our faith; by our *own* faith we stand (2 Cor. 1:24, filling in the ellipsis). Solomon exhorts his son to get wisdom, for "if thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself: but if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it" (Prov. 9:12). The understanding of God we gain from His word, and the result of rejecting it, is so intensely personal. We each have a personal seal, as it were, with our own personal characteristics on it; and we set to our seal the fact that God is Truth, that He is the God of our covenant ("Truth" is a word associated throughout the OT with God's covenant relationship with men; Jn. 3:33).

Is. 46:3,4 presents another such picture: "...the house of Israel, which are *borne* by me from the belly, which are *carried* from the womb: and even to your old age, I am he; and even to hoar (i.e. gray) hairs will I *carry* you: I have made, and I will *bear*; even I will *carry* [you]" . God is likening Himself to a woman who carries a child in her womb, then bears it, and then carries it as a baby, but *still* carries it when the child is an old man. Incidentally, this simile is proof enough that God is not somehow 'anti-women'. The God of all knowledge is aware of a fundamental psychological phenomena in all men; the fear, however passive and buried, of being without their mother; the fear of loneliness, the fear of eternal separation from the woman who bore and carried them. From the president to the happy village grandfather, this sense is there. Perhaps David appreciated this when he referred to a man weeping at his mother's funeral (not his *father's*) as the ultimate cameo of grieving and desolation of soul (Ps. 35:14). And yet God says that He is in some ways the eternal mother, the one who bore and carried us in babyhood, but the One who will yet carry us when we are gray headed and once again unable to walk. Yet He is also the everlasting Father, through His Son (Is. 9:6). It's a picture of exquisite beauty. Our relationship with God as the One who will *never* leave us is the *only* answer to what philosophers call 'the existential problem'; the awareness that has come to every thoughtful soul, the terror of being so alone as we get older, the dread of being without our human roots, of becoming the one to whom others (e.g. our children) look to as their background and root, whilst we ourselves have no tangible link with *our* past. This problem is defined by C.S. Lewis in *The Inner Ring*: "I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods...one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside" . This horror of existential loneliness can *only* be met by our sure knowledge that we have a very personal relationship in the Kingdom of God with our Heavenly Father, who will never ever leave us, and will preserve us unto His eternal Kingdom.

Individual Relationship: This Life

Having established that we have a personal relationship with the Father and Son and that this will be most clearly manifested in the relationships in the future Kingdom of God, we need to think about how this position came to be achieved; how all this works out here and now in the Kingdom of God in its present aspect. The entry of Israel into covenant with God was a pattern of what we undertake at baptism: "*Thou* hast (singular) avouched *Yahweh* this day to be thy God, and to walk in his ways, and to keep his statutes...and *Yahweh* hath avouched *thee* this day to be his peculiar people...that thou shouldest keep all his commandments" (Dt. 26:17,18). Notice the mutuality between God and the individual member of Israel (natural or

spiritual). This is exemplified in Phinehas; he was commended for being zealous / jealous (same word) for Yahweh, who is Himself a jealous God (Num. 25:11). He shared the characteristics of God and thereby enjoyed this mutual relationship with God. Israel were to teach their children that God had personally saved *them* at the Red Sea. The covenant made with Israel then was made not only with the “fathers” who were then alive, but with every member of every generation of God’s people (Dt. 5:3; 6:20). David spoke of praising God for the health of His face; and then talks of how God is the source of the health of *his* face (Ps. 42:5,11 RV). It’s as if the glory of the invisible God rubbed upon David, as it did literally for Moses, whose face became radiant with the glory of the Angel who spoke to him.

There seems a purposeful ambiguity in how the process of calling upon the name of the Lord is described in the Greek text; it can mean both us calling upon ourselves His Name, and also His Name being named upon us by Him. Joel 2:32 says that all those whom *the Lord* calls will *call on His Name*, a prophecy fulfilled in baptism. In similar vein, the Lord Jesus lived, died and rose as the representative of all men; and those who know and believe this chose to respond by identifying themselves with Him in the symbolic death and resurrection of baptism, and subsequent life in Christ- they make Him their representative, as He has chosen to be theirs. They respond to His willing identification with them by living a life identified with Him. Likewise if a man truly believes in Christ, He will ‘commit himself’ unto him (Jn. 2:24)- the very same word for ‘believe in[to]’. We believe into the Lord, and He believes into us.

Time and again the Sermon on the Mount / Plain seems to take a broad sweep in its record of the Lord’s teaching to us all; and then He suddenly focuses in on the individual. The AV brings this out well through the use of “you” (plural) and “thee” (singular): “Blessed are you poor...love your enemies...to him who strikes thee on the cheek...”. Note how many times there is this change of pronoun in Luke 6. Clearly the Lord wants us to see our collective standing before Him, and yet not to overlook the purely personal nature of His appeal to us individually. We are to be the ground that drinks in the rain of God’s word, and yet also the husbandmen who bring forth the fruit to God’s glory; and yet the ground brings forth fruit appropriate to those who have worked on it (Heb. 6:7). Does this not suggest that we each bring forth a unique and personally appropriate form of spiritual fruit?

Notes

(1) See ‘The Judgment And The Quality Of Our Brethren’, in *James And Other Studies* (London: Pioneer, 1992).

(2) Mentioned in H.A. Whittaker, *Revelation: A Biblical Approach* (Greenville, SC: Honest Truth, 1976).

(3) See John Thomas, *Eureka* Vol. 1 (London: The Dawn Book Supply, 1959 Ed.), p.315.

(4) It seems this is the only recorded case of men consciously becoming eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom. Did the Lord have these men of Hezekiah and Nehemiah's time in mind in Mt. 19:12? However, for another view of Mt. 19:12 (which applies it to all single converts), see [The Single Life](#).

5-1-3 Mutuality Between God And Man

There is a repeated Biblical theme that the believer's relationship with the Father too is essentially *mutual*. For example, we dwell in God (Ps. 90:1), and He dwells in us (1 Cor. 3:16). Thus “he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, *and God in him*” (1 Jn. 4:15,16). We

respond to God's *call* of us by *calling upon* Him (1 Cor. 1:2). We work out our salvation, and God in response works in us both to will and to work (Phil. 2:12,13 RV). When Israel repent, He will repent of His judgment of them (Joel 2:13,14). He has blessed us with all things (Eph. 1:3), and we all bless Him with all that is in us (Ps. 103:1,22; Eph. 1:3). He commits the "all things" of the Gospel to us, and we commit our "all things" to Him (2 Tim. 1:12 cp. 14; 1 Tim. 6:20). God's love is perfected in us, and because of this experience our love is also perfected in Him (1 Jn. 4:12,17). The Lord partook in our nature, and we are made partakers in Him (Heb. 2:14 cp. 3:14; 12:10; 2 Cor. 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:13). There are several examples where there is an ambiguity in the Hebrew text which reflects the suggestion of mutuality. Take Gen. 18:22: "Abraham stood yet before the Lord". And yet, as witnessed by several translations, this can just as well mean "The Lord stood yet before Abraham".

Moses is an example of this mutuality between God and man. God said that because He knew Moses by name, He would show Moses *His* Name (Ex. 33:12,17,19). Daniel is another example. He heard the voice of God's words, and then the Angel comes and tells him that God has heard the voice of his (Daniel's) words (Dan. 10:9,12). And with us too; if we hear God's words, then God will hear our words of prayer (Jn. 15:7). Several chapters in Jeremiah shows how the prophet feels or says something, and Yahweh responds to it (e.g. Jer. 9:1,2 = Jeremiah; v.3 = God; v. 10 = Jeremiah; v. 11 = God's response). David lifts himself up to God (Ps. 25:1; 28:2; 86:4), and asks God to lift up Himself in response (Ps. 7:6; 10:12; 94:2). Yahweh was his shepherd (Ps. 23:1), and he was to shepherd Israel (2 Sam. 5:2 Heb.). Or take Samuel. 'They didn't reject you, they rejected me, but they rejected you, in that you are with Me' (1 Sam. 8:7,8). In the Lord Himself we see the supreme example of a mutual experience with the Father. He sought God's glory (Jn. 7:18), as the Father sought His (Jn. 8:50).

And we must make this our way of life too. We work God's will, and He works in us (Heb. 13:21 Gk.). We are God's portion / inheritance (Dt. 4:20; 9:29; Eph. 1:18), and He is our inheritance (Ps. 16:5,6; 73:26; Lam. 3:22-24; Eph. 1:11 RV); we inherit each other. Our eye is upon Him (Ps. 25:5; 69:3; 123:2), as His eye is upon us (Ps. 32:8; 33:18). The Lord stresses, with apparently needless repetition, that to the man who responds to His word, "I will sup with him and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). There is something very touching in the picture of a man living alone (unusual in the first century), presumably due to old age or persecution, with no wife (either dead or left him); and the Lord of all knocks at his door. He lets him in (i.e. responds to the word of Christ), and "I... sup with him, and he with me". Two men, eating a man's meal, earnestly bent together over the table. It's a fine picture of the mutuality between the Lord and the believer. Even in failure and weak moments, that mutuality is still there. At the very time Israel put God to the test at Marah (Dt. 6:16), God responded by testing *them* (Ex. 15:25). When Israel were weary of God, He wearied them (Is. 43:22,24). Because they turned their back on Him (Jer. 2:27), He turned His back on them (Jer. 18:17); because they broke His eternal covenant with them, He eventually did likewise. On the other hand, God set the rainbow in the sky so that whenever *He* looks upon it, He will remember His covenant with man (Gen. 9:16). The pronouns seem wrong; we would expect to read that the rainbow is so that whenever *we* look upon it, we remember... but no. God condescends to man to such an extent that He invites us to understand that whenever we remember the covenant with Him, He does likewise.

This experience of an acceptive mutuality between God and man is surely at the very core of our spirituality; it should be part of an inner spiritual shell that nothing, *nothing* can shake: aggression from our brethren, disillusion with other Christians, persecution from the world,

painful personal relationships... Israel were to give their hand to God, and His hand in turn would give them a heart to follow Him further (2 Chron. 30:8 cp. 12 A.V.mg.). " This is the witness of God...He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness *in himself*...the (i.e. this) witness of God is greater" than that of men (1 Jn. 5:9,10). The ultimate proof that the Truth is the Truth is not in the witness of men- be they archaeologists, scientists, good friends or who. The real witness of God is deep in yourself. " Taste and see, that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8) is the most powerful appeal. John is using a legal word for " witness" . There is, of course, something intentionally contradictory here. For a witness must be independent of yourself. You can't really be a valid witness to yourself. But the Lord said that He was a witness of Himself, and this witness was valid (Jn. 8:14-18). We, too, John is saying, can be a valid witness to ourselves that our faith is genuine. Our personal experience of the Lord Jesus *is* valid. Paul proves the resurrection of Jesus by saying that " he has risen indeed" exactly because he (Paul) has seen the risen Lord (1 Cor. 15). This is the kind of 'evidence' we tend to fight shy of. But our personal experience of the Lord Jesus *is* a valid prop to our faith, according to the passages considered.

Solomon apprehended the reality of all this when he commented that all the wisdom and relationship with God that a man develops in his life cannot benefit anyone else; each soul must discover for himself (Ecc. 2:21). The emphasis which we have always given to *personal* Bible study and a lack of authoritarian spiritual leaders is surely correct. It was God's will that Israel should be without a human king. Their lack of such human leadership is described as them each doing what was right in their own eyes. Far from being the negative comment this is often taken to be, the idea is surely that while they were without a human King, as God intended, the people did what was right in their own judgment; they worked out their own relationship with God for themselves. It is significant that a quarter of the names listed in Heb. 11 were from the period of the Judges, when there was no human King.

The idea of a mutuality between God and man is quite a theme:

- The sacrifices, offered on the altar as the table of Yahweh, were the bread of God (Num. 28:2), offered at the same times [morning and evening] as God fed His people. He feeds us, and beyond our understanding our sacrifices can give something to God, we can touch His heart, and thereby 'feed' Him. This idea is brought out in Ez. 16:19: "My meat [food] also which I gave thee, fine flour, and oil, and honey, wherewith I fed thee...". The flour, oil etc. were the things Israel were to offer in sacrifice to God- the food with which they were to feed Him. Yet, Ezekiel goes on, they had offered them in sacrifice ['fed' them] to idols. Yet those very things were fed to Israel by God.
- "Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of" by God (2 Cor. 7:10). If we repent / change our minds, then God will not repent of His plan for saving us.
- The Lord 'found' Philip, and he responded by 'finding' Nathanael and saying that they had 'found' the Messiah. Philip found the Lord, and the Lord found him. And he responded by going forth and finding another man for the Lord (Jn. 1:43,45).
- There is a play on words with the Hebrew word *bayith* ['house']. It is used about David's house / family (1 Chron. 17:10,16,17,23,24) and that of God (vv. 12,14). Our house is God's house. He is, therefore, to be at the centre of family life.

- We are the apple of God's eye (Ps. 17:8; Dt. 32:10), and His word must be as the apple of our eye (Prov. 7:2). We dwell in God, and His word dwells in us (Jn. 15).
- David's men 'delivered' God's land, and He delivered them (1 Chron. 11:14).
- - In his famous final speech, Stephen evidently had humming in his mind the theme of the glory of God. He begins by saying that "The God of glory appeared..." (Acts 7:2). God heard that speech, and read his mind. And responded in an appropriate way- for to give Stephen final strength to face death, God made His glory appear to Stephen (Acts 7:55). And so it can be for us- although it all depends what we have humming in our hearts.
- God is able to "guard" what we commit to Him; but He commits "the good deposit" to *us* for us to "guard" (2 Tim. 1:12,14; 6:20 RVmg.).
- The way 'Abram' was changed to 'AbraHAM' and 'Sarah' to 'SarAH' shows how God wishes to mix syllables of His Name with that of men. Jacob was changed to Isra-el, mixing God's name with that of his father. This is indeed mutuality between God and man.
- The Lord now sits at the Father's right hand. But Ps. 110 describes God as being at Christ's right hand. The confusion of the idioms surely demonstrates the mutuality between them. And the relationship between Father and Son is openly offered to us in John 17.
- We are God's inheritance, and He is ours (Eph. 1:11,18).

God And Jonah: Move And Countermove

Jonah's relationship with God involved what could be called 'move and countermove'. God's responses to Jonah indicated a very deep awareness and sensitivity to what Jonah was saying and feeling. The way the record is presented in Jonah 4 [in Hebrew] brings this out powerfully:

Jonah 4:2,3	Jonah's monologue	39 words
Jonah 4:4	God's question	3 words
Jonah 4:8	Jonah's question	3 words
Jonah 4:9	God and Jonah in dialogue	5 words for God
		5 words for Jonah
Jonah 4:10,11	God's monologue	39 words

The Mutual Relationship Between God And David

This mutuality between God and man is brought out by the structure of several of the Psalms, in which God and David are shown to be involved in a dynamic, two way relationship. Consider Bullinger's analysis of Ps. 132:

A (vv 1,2) David swears to God

B (3-5) What David swore

C (6,7) Search for a dwelling place

D (8) Prayer to enter into rest

E (9) Prayer for priests

F (9) Prayer for saints

G (10) Prayer for Messiah

This was responded to by God:

A1 (v 11) God swears to David

B1 (11,12) What God swore

C1 (13) Designation of the dwelling place

D1 (14,15) Answer to prayer in D

E1 (16) Answer to prayer in E

F1 (16) Answer to prayer in F

G1 (17, 18) Answer to prayer in G.

Me, Myself And I: Knowing Ourselves

All this speaks of how seriously we are to take ourselves, the fact that I personally really really am in relationship with God, responsible to Him, answerable to my Heavenly bridegroom at the last day... that our religion isn't merely a following of a crowd, a mouthing of sets of words, a passionless holding of some intellectual positions. But that really and truly I myself, me myself and I, have a God and a Master and Lord who love me to the end, and before whom I will ultimately stand, and with whom and in whose love I really will eternally live; and before whom I must urgently, therefore, repent and live aright. So often the Lord Jesus turned back the comments and questions of His listeners to place the spotlight on them as individuals; and it was psychologist Luke who was especially conscious of this, as in nearly every example he records of Jesus responding to others, Luke makes this point. Consider and soak up the spirit of these examples:

'Hey! We really can do miracles!' was met by the Lord with an urgent appeal for them to rejoice even *more* ecstatically that their names were written in Heaven- that they would

really, personally, be in the Kingdom of God for ever (Lk. 10:17-20). Time and again, the Lord responded to requests for *Him* to do something by reminding those who asked of *their* responsibilities- e.g. 'Bring fire down on these guys! You have the Spirit, go on, do it, you surely can!' was responded to with a reminder that *you* don't appreciate what Spirit *you* have (Lk. 9:54,55). 'Send the people away... No, *you* feed them' (Lk. 9:12,13). 'Save us from this storm, Jesus, you miracle man!... Where is *your* faith?' (Lk. 8:24,25).

Lk. 12:13-21 records how a man asks Jesus to tell his brother to divide the inheritance with him more fairly. The Lord replies by asking the man to think again about *who* had given Jesus authority- for if indeed God really had given Jesus authority, then the man ought *himself* to fear the judgment of Jesus- for as the Lord goes on to show in the parable of the rich fool, He has the power to reject those who are materialistic, exactly because He has such authority from God. The Lord is pushing the man to look at himself and think of himself at the end of his life and before the final day of judgment; and to cease paying a mere lipservice respect to the authority of Jesus, but to take this for real, realizing what it means for his own personal responsibility.

In Lk. 13:1-10 the people tell Jesus how terrible is Pilate for killing some Galileans, and how judged those individuals were by God. He answers that *all* humanity are under danger of eternal judgment and they needed to start worrying about themselves rather than worrying about God's justice [or otherwise] with those Galileans. And the Lord follows this up with the parable of the unfruitful tree which by rights should be cut down, but He was urgently pleading for more time in order that it might bring forth fruit. In other words, the Lord's audience were to realize the intense urgency of *their* position rather than worrying about the justice of others' judgment. Their personal situation was *so* urgent, they really were to worry about bringing forth fruit, rather than being sidetracked by the issues connected with the suffering and possible judgment of *others*. It's not that these matters don't have importance; it was simply that those asking those questions of Jesus were in such a personally urgent position that they just had to get that right. And this seems to me most relevant to those who will not get personally themselves right with God because of their complaint about His justice with others. And Luke's record develops the theme yet further. In Lk. 13:23 we read of Him being asked the perennial question- why will only few be saved? His answer is simply to speak of the utter horror of personal rejection by the Lord Jesus at the day of judgment- knocking on the door, thinking this is your old friend's house, to be told "I never knew you". The idea is clearly to worry about the future which *we* may personally miss rather than debating the unsearchable issues of why, apparently, few will be saved. Same again with Peter's question as to whether the Lord's predictions of condemnation refer to the disciples or to the unbelieving world (Lk. 12:41)- the Lord's response was simply to speak about the need to personally be always prepared for the Lord's coming. And so it is with us- don't worry about who may be condemned, worry about your own personal readiness and how you will respond in that split second moment when we know for sure 'He's back!'.

In Lk. 14:15, the Lord continues to turn the questions / comments back on themselves. A man comments how blessed will be the person to eat bread in the Kingdom of God; and Jesus responds by telling the parable about how in fact the majority of those who receive invitations to eat break in the Kingdom actually turn it down because of worldly distractions. Again the message is clear. 'Take your focus off the blessedness of *others* in the future Messianic Kingdom; but concern yourself with the very real possibility that you *yes you yourself* may actually turn down the invitation to be there because you're too caught up with the things of this world'.

And the theme continues relentlessly. Lk. 14:25 records the people eagerly following Jesus, and then He turns and tells them that actually God is coming after them with 20,000 men and they have only 10,000, and they on a personal level *urgently* therefore need to make peace with Him- because every minute now counts. Time and again, the Lord is urging people to look at themselves and their own position, not follow Him because they're part of a crowd who does, not hesitate from personal commitment because of never-never questions about cosmic ethics and Divine justice which are well beyond us... He forces the spotlight back on us, me myself and I, time and again. And His audience squirmed, just as they do today. "When will the Kingdom come?" was another perennial question (Lk. 17:20)- again answered by the Lord redirecting the entire enquiry. "The kingdom of God is within you... as it was in the days of Lot... one shall be taken and the other shall be left" (Lk. 17:34). 'Don't worry about the calendar date, don't let a fascination with prophecy distract you from the personal reality that whenever I do come, some will be left behind. Will that be *you?*'. And in the same vein, Lk. 19:11-27: 'Will the Kingdom come really soon, like, in our lifetimes?'. Answer: the parable of the pounds. Trade *your* personal talent- because there is such a thing as people being rejected at the last day because they didn't do this. 'What will be the signs of the last days?' was indeed answered quite directly, but building up to a personal, incisive appeal to pray constantly that we will be preserved from those horrors and be accepted before the final judgment seat of God's Son (Lk. 21:7,36). It was as if the Lord was adding a powerful caveat- as if to say 'Now don't go and get obsessed and distracted trying to match these signs to current events- worry about how *you* will survive the last days, and whether, when you stand before Me in the very end, you will stand or fall before Me'. And 'Are you really the Messiah? Do you really fulfil all the Old Testament prophecies?' was met by an appeal to not stumble in faith (Lk. 7:21-23).

"What shall I *do* to inherit eternal life?" was another classic question (Lk. 18:18). 'Give me a list of dos and don'ts, I'm game'. But the answer was ultimately: "Follow me" (Lk. 18:22)- 'don't worry about specifics, but have a spirit of life committed to following Me, bearing My cross'. For that is reward enough. Likewise Peter was interested in what the reward would be for having given things up for the Lord; and the final answer is really 'I'm going to die on the cross- please share that death with me' (Lk. 18:28-33 and parallels). 'Who will be married to whom in the Kingdom?' was well answered by the Lord, but His final cut was that God is the God of the living and "all live unto Him", i.e. the fact *we* are alive means we are responsible for our actions to Him right now- and we must be moved by that, rather than by speculation about the physicalities of how *others* may be in God's Kingdom (Lk. 20:33-38).

The disciples asked that as a community, their faith may be increased so as to forgive others as Jesus requires them to (Lk. 17:5). The Lord's response is that they should on an individual level realize that even if they were perfectly obedient, they were "unprofitable servants" (Lk. 17:10)- and the only other time that term occurs on the Lord's lips is when speaking of how the unprofitable servant will be cast away to condemnation at the last day (Mt. 25:30). What He's saying is: 'Imagine condemnation. Being cast away as you stand before the judgment seat. That's you- that's what *should* happen, even if you "do" all. Get it- you're saved by grace, an amazing grace- respond to that, and forgiving others will flow naturally enough from that'.

'From where do you get your authority? What is your exact nature and relationship to God?' was answered by the parable of the servants who refused to receive the Son and give fruit to the owner (Lk. 20:9-16). The Lord could've answered: 'My authority? From God, He's my Father, I had a virgin birth, you know'. But He wasn't so primitive. Instead He appealed to

them to realize their own responsibilities to their creator and to accept His authority by giving fruit to the Father. Another group of Jews got caught up on the issue of whether Christ's forgiveness of others made Him God or not- just as some folk do today. His response was to refocus them on the fact that He wanted *you* to *know* that He had real power to forgive *their* sins (Lk. 5:24). I spend a lot of time arguing against the trinity and the 'Jesus = God' mentality. But the essence is, do we *know* on a personal level that the Lord Jesus really has the power to forgive *our* sins? "Should we give tribute to Caesar?" was likewise answered with the comment that whatever has God's image on it should be given to God- and seeing we're made in God's image, the Lord was asking that they gave their very personal selves to God, every part of their mind and body- rather than worrying about the 'guilt by association' that might come from paying your taxes to Caesar (Lk. 20:23-25). It was the same with Simon's concern that Jesus was associating with a fallen woman. The Lord's response to Him was not self-justification, but rather an enquiry as to how much Simon loved the Lord in response to the forgiveness of *his* sins (Lk. 7:39-48). And when the Pharisees criticized the disciples for mixing with sinners, the Lord's response was to appeal to them *personally* to repent (Lk. 5:30-32). And He went further in justifying His disciples, by answering another criticism of them by the Jews with the comment that unless they changed, they would be like old bottles broken by His new wine. *They* personally had to change- and they needed to focus upon that rather than criticizing others for their possible guilt by association.

Perhaps the most relentless, piercing example is in the Lord's three parables told in response to the enquiry as to why He ate with sinners (Lk. 15:1,2). The parables of the lost coin and lost sheep invite the hearer to identify with the heart of the God who seeks His lost. But the final climax of this triad of parables is that of the lost sons. Here the audience has to place themselves in one of two camps- the self-righteous son who ends up not eating with the Father, or the prodigal who sins so awfully and then eats with the Father in the hushed humility which experience of His grace along can bring. The Jews were worried about whom they might eat / fellowship with, just as many in the body of Christ are today. But the Lord turned it all around- *you* are a serious sinner, you need to make that long walk home to the Father in your day by day repentance, and eat with Him by His grace. He is seeking *you* to eat with Him; the question of whom *you* eat with is utterly secondary to that.

Personal Reality

This being in touch with ourselves is different to selfishness, self-centredness, self-opinionated egoism. It's about realizing that really, me myself and I, really I am responsible to God. The Lord Jesus died *for me*, rose again and will return *for me*, viewing me as His bride, longing for me. I personally will see Him, as Job reflected from the darkness of his depression, we shall see Him for ourselves, and will behold Him in a way which no other person can (Job 19:25-27). Further, God's word in the Bible is His message to me personally. Those events really happened, and they speak to me in a unique way. Surely we all need this reminder to focus upon our personal relationship with God. In so doing, we come to know ourselves; indeed, self-knowledge is required for any relationship of integrity, not least with our Maker. We need to see ourselves from outside of ourselves- how was I brought up? In what country, in which culture, with which perception of history? And so we will come to realize the kinds of pre-understandings and pre-dispositions which we bring to the Bible text, as in it we read God's word to us. We will be helped by the process to better clear our minds to receive that word, that knowledge of God, for what it is rather than for what we assume it to be and mean. And slowly there will develop a sense in us, as we read the Bible, that these things really did happen, and they really speak *to me*. It is hard for me to express in words

what I mean when I say that we will come to personally believe that the Biblical events happened. When we read the crucifixion account, we will sense the reality of those things deeply within us. If we were there, with our mobile phone and digital camera, there would've been a cross and dying man to photograph; if we'd have had an MP3 recorder, there would've been sound to pick up and record as the Lord said His dying words. And so it will happen with increasing frequency that there breaks over us what I would call 'a wave of personal realization'- that really all this is true, and true *for me*.

5-1-4 The Parable of The Talents: Aspects Of Spirituality

God's aim is that we the husbandmen bring forth all the required fruits (of the spirit) " in their seasons" (Mt. 21:41). This indicates that over time, the various members of the body between them will bring forth every aspect of God's spirituality. The parable of the talents indicates how we have each individually been given something different by Christ. The parable of the pounds is along the same lines; as is the story of the Master who went away and left his servants looking after the house. *Each* of them was given his own *separate* work to do (Mk. 13:34). This accounts for the way in which each of us will be judged according to our own works- i.e. according to how far we have done those things which Christ intended us personally to do. There is fair emphasis on this: Rom. 2:6; 1 Cor. 3:13; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 2:23; 22:12. Likewise, Christ came to do the works God gave Him to do (Jn. 5:36), and it seems He works with us on a similar basis. Mt. 25:29 presents a paradox: " from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath" . Does the rejected man have talents, or not? He did, of course, have a talent; but as far as the Lord is concerned, we only have what we have developed. If we don't develop, we have nothing; the fact we received the talent at baptism won't save us.

In the parable of the talents / pounds, the pounds delivered to us are Christ's goods (Mt. 25:14), His very *own* (Lk. 19:23). The goods of Christ are those which He took from the devil (Mt. 12:29), the absolute righteousness which is possible once sin is bound. I would suggest the goods of Christ refer to the ultimate spirituality which He has, the various aspects of His character. The ten pounds are delivered to the ten servants, who are to be compared with the ten virgins of Mt. 25. The ten servants and ten virgins represent the body of Christ, each of whom has been given a part of Christ's " own" to develop; we are called to develop His likeness, and I am suggesting that each of us has been given a certain amount and aspect of His perfectly righteous character to develop. The unworthy calls what he has been given "...thine" (Mt. 25:25)- when it was intended to be *his* personally (cp. Mt. 20:14). He just didn't let himself see the wonderfully personal nature of what God had given him. The goods are distributed " to every man according to his several (Gk. *idios*, individual, s.w. " private") ability" (Mt. 25:15). We each have our own private spirituality which we must develop in our own private way. The talents parable is alluded to in 1 Cor. 12:7-12: " The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each man (RV) to profit withal" . In the first century, this was seen in the way in which different believers were given different gifts of the Spirit. In our dispensation, each of us is called to manifest a different aspect of the Lord Jesus, the Lord the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18 RV). But the principle of 1 Cor. 12:7-12 remains true, as indicated by the way Paul reasons that we each have a different aspect of the Spirit to manifest because " by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body...and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" . In principle, these words are true of our baptisms. At baptism we were given our talents, our different aspects of the Spirit / mind of Christ to manifest. We are all in the Christ body, and manifest His spirit / mind in different aspects. And as the manifestation of different aspects of the Spirit in the first century caused frictions, so too today.

The state of perfection in the Kingdom is described as us (the complete church of all ages) having reached, " a perfect man...the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" , having grown up into Christ, who is the head of the body (Eph. 4:13,15). When Christ comes, we will each individually be made ruler over *all* that He has (Mt. 24:47), we will each individually be fully righteous, fully manifesting the Lord Jesus. There seems to be marked connection with the fact (brought out in the parable of the talents) that we will each have *all* the Master's goods, and the description in the next parable of those goods being distributed between us in this life (Mt. 24:47; 25:15). In the Kingdom we will no longer know partially, as a result of seeing parts of the whole picture; we will see face to face (1 Cor. 13:9,12 Gk.) ⁽¹⁾. As a whole, the church of all ages will fully have manifested His character. This is why it may be that the true church has been concentrated on different aspects of spirituality at different times. It also explains why the final date of the coming of Christ is in some way dependent upon our spiritual development. And it also explains why the whole body of Christ is told collectively " occupy till I come" (Lk. 19:13), using the Greek *pragmateuomai*, i.e. be pragmatic, be realistic, and develop these characteristics, so you may as a body reach the full reflection of Christ.

The 'delivering' of Christ's goods to us in the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14) is described with the same word as used concerning how the basic doctrines of the Faith were " delivered" to us at our conversion (Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 11:2,23; 15:3; 2 Pet. 2:21; Jude 3). We are asked to use that understanding of basics to develop our own character. It doesn't mean we're each given different doctrines; but we all have different characters and areas of spiritual growth, and we must each use the same doctrines we are " delivered" to develop these. This would explain why it's so easy to see others' lack of spiritual development in some areas, whilst being so sure that we have grown spiritually in other areas. Our observation is correct; this *is* the case. But it's nothing to be proud or critical about; we ourselves have our blind spots. This approach to the parables of the pounds and talents may also explain why brethren of past generations seemed so strong in some areas (e.g. defence of the Faith and preaching) but so weak in others (e.g. compassion). The body of Christ *is* Christ; the members of that body between them reflect every aspect of the Lord Jesus (Eph. 2:15,16). We may each be given a different aspect to reflect, and groups of believers in different historical periods may have been focused on different aspects, but the end result is that at the second coming, the body of believers will have reflected Christ fully.

The Personal Judgment

if we are correctly interpreting the parable of the talents, the faithful will have enough self-knowledge to be able to say: 'You gave me these basic doctrines and these characteristics to develop with them, and I can now present you with this...'. That part of the character and mind of Christ which was given to the unfaithful servant to develop is taken away and given to the faithful (Mt. 25:28). The unfaithful receive the basic doctrines but do nothing with them; they don't let them impact their character.

The faithful in the parable of the talents / pounds realize that " thy pound hath gained" what spirituality they can now offer Christ at the judgment. They understand that their growth was thanks to that basic deposit of doctrine delivered to them. Each of us have been given different aspects of Christ's character to develop from the same basic doctrines, and therefore we will each have an individual discussion with our Lord. We shouldn't think of the judgment as being a process which is more or less identical for each of us. This misconception arises

from failing to recognize that our meeting with Christ is only *likened* to a human judgment court. The similarities aren't exact.

The personal relationship which we have had with Christ will be very evident at the judgment. What we say to Christ in His ear in the bedroom in the darkness, will be openly spoken by Christ at the judgment (Lk. 12:2,3). God dwells in darkness (Ex. 20:21; 1 Kings 8:12). Speaking in the bedroom in secret with the knowledge we will be openly rewarded is the language of prayer (Mt. 6:6). Our private relationship with the Lord now, praying to Him in our bedroom, meditating about Him there, will then be spoken out loud. But there is a related statement from the Lord: What we hear from Him in the ear, we must speak openly (Mt. 10:26,27; after the pattern of Isaiah in 22:14). Putting these passages together, we get the picture of us speaking to God through Christ, talking in His ear, as one might whisper something very personal into a friend's ear, in the darkness of our bedroom. And then the Lord whispers back in our ear, i.e. His revelation to us (through the word) is very personal and not perceived by others; but we must openly, publicly act upon it. And this private relationship we have with the Lord in our prayer life will then be revealed openly at the judgment. God told Samuel "in his ear" about Saul's future, and although the message must have been hard to relay to Saul, Samuel did so, on the housetop (1 Sam. 9:15,25). The similarities with the Lord's words are too close to be accidental. Surely He saw each of us as passing through the essential experience of Samuel. As we witness our relationship with Christ to an unspiritual world now, so He will speak openly of us to God (Mt. 10:32; Rev. 3:5), Angels (Lk. 12:8) and to the world (Lk. 12:2,3). He will openly confess our name, i.e. our character and personality. What we have said to Him privately will be revealed in the light, i.e. in the Kingdom (Col. 1:12).

It must be said that ecclesial life can of itself become so consuming that it minimizes the believer's personal relationship with the Lord. This personal knowledge of Him, the regular experience of the cycle of repentance and forgiveness for His sake, the sense of His gracious hand working in our lives, this is at the root of all our service to the ecclesia- not vice versa. It has been observed, I believe correctly, that "Jesus had no intention of founding a new religion. Those who followed him were given no name to distinguish them from other groups, no creed of their own, no rites which revealed their distinctive group character, no geographical centre from which they would operate"⁽²⁾. It seems that Christianity was initially a movement within Judaism, until Judaism forcibly expelled the Christians and the need for a separate structure became necessary. Karl Barth (in *Church Dogmatics*) went so far as to describe 'religion' as an excuse for unbelief⁽³⁾. It is true that over organized ecclesial life can lead to a worship of the structure rather than the essence. The Lord's focus is undeniably on the individual, and this is where our own personal emphasis in the study and living of His Truth must primarily be.

Notes

(1) 1 Cor. 13 and Eph. 4 are difficult to interpret. A valid case can be made for them meaning that the dispensation of the Spirit gifts was partial, but the completed spiritual man was made possible once the New Testament was completed. I have outlined this in *Bible Basics* Ch. 2 (CAT, 49 The Woodfields, Croydon, Surrey CR2 0HJ England). But Paul's description of the completed, "perfect" state is so exalted that it is hard to resist applying it ultimately to our position in the Kingdom. "Then face to face...then shall I know (fully, not from parts); but *now* (as opposed to then) abideth faith, hope and charity" (1 Cor. 13:12,13) sounds like the Kingdom. So I would suggest we interpret those passages along these lines: 'Now, in the first century period of Spirit gifts, knowledge is partial; a completer state will come when the written word is finished. But even this is relatively partial, only a necessary step, towards the ultimate spiritual reality and knowledge of the Kingdom'. The parable of the talents speaks eloquently of all this.

(2) David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), p.50.

(3) He elsewhere observes how strange it was that the Lord didn't openly announce His messiahship "until the moment when the danger of founding a religion is finally past", i.e. when He was a bedraggled and condemned prisoner (Karl Barth, *The Word Of God And The Word Of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 82.

5.2 The Jesus Who Understands Weakness

"He hath not dealt with us after our sins...He knoweth our frame, he remembereth that we are dust" (Ps. 103:10,14) was surely true on account of the future sacrifice of the Saviour. The Christ was a demanding Lord, His expectations were (and are) high. And yet His parables reveal an immense sympathy and empathy with our weakness. In a normal human situation, it would be difficult to build a relationship with someone who had such apparently contradictory trends in His character. Perhaps we have the same problem in our struggle to know the Lord. He never denied that He came over in some ways as "a hard man" with high expectations; all He said was that seeing this was the case, we ought to act accordingly (Mt. 25:24) ⁽¹⁾. And yet He is also a man of grace and understanding far beyond anything reached by anyone else. He is truly the Jesus who understands human weakness. And note that He is described even now as "the man Christ Jesus", able to feel the pulse of our humanity. This, in passing, opens a window into what Divine nature will be like: we will be able to completely feel the human experience, to the extent of still bearing the title 'men' even in immortality. On this account we will be able to relate to the mortals in the Millennium.

The Lord's parables describe those He will save as the son who refused to go to work, but later went, sheepishly aware of his failure; the sheep that went away, i.e. those Christ came to save (Mt. 18:11) (a symbol of us all, Mt. 18:12 cp. Is. 53:6); the lost coin; the son who went away and sowed his wild oats, and then returned with his tail between his legs ⁽²⁾. Christ expects that we will fail, as grievously as those parables indicate. Yet we have somehow come to think that they refer either to our follies before baptism, or to those within our community who publicly disgrace themselves. Yet they describe *all* the faithful. But is there that sense of contrition in us, really? Aren't we more like the elder brother, or the son who said "I go, Sir, but went not" (Mt. 21:30)?

Different Levels

There is the suggestion in the parable of the labourers that the Lord makes some big concessions to human weakness. The Spirit in Paul points the contrast between realizing that salvation is by pure grace, and the wrong perception of salvation as a wage paid for works (e.g. Rom. 6). Indeed, the whole spirit of the Bible is that we should be willing to serve for nothing ⁽³⁾. The parable of the slave preparing his Master's meal after working hard for him a whole day makes this point. And yet in the parable of the labourers, Christ *agrees* with the labourers for a penny (note his humility, cp. God reasoning with men to accept His forgiveness, Is. 1:18); He asks them to go to work, and then He will give them the wages (cp. salvation). He even describes their salvation as "that which is right", so much did He present the Gospel to them from the selfish level they were then on. The Lord was not ignorant of the line of argument Paul would later present regarding salvation by pure grace. Surely the parable is teaching that the Lord recognizes that in our spiritual immaturity at the time of our conversion, we do need the Kingdom as a carrot, as a motivator. He treats us on this low level initially, hoping we will rise up the higher level of grace. It is possible to witness this spiritual growth in converts, and also in the community of true believers over time; initially we are motivated by the reward of the political Kingdom, but as spiritual perception increases, we grasp Paul's gospel of pure grace. The concept of working and being rewarded

decreases, and the recognition of salvation by grace increases, with the resultant zeal for a truer spirituality.

The parable of the unjust steward must be read in the context of the preceding parables of forgiveness. The man is in debt to his Master, surely speaking of our sinfulness (Lk. 16:3,4 cp. Mt. 18:24). He has wasted his goods- which are given to us at baptism (Lk. 16:1 cp. Mt. 25:14). He *could have* begged, but he was too proud. Therefore *in order to get forgiveness* he raced round forgiving everybody else. This suggests a spiritual selfishness which surely isn't ideal. And yet " the Lord commended the unjust steward" .

The Lord's offer of different levels is possibly seen in Mt. 19:12: " Him that is able to receive it, let him receive it" . But in terms of the parables, consider how the parable of the lost sheep shows Christ never giving up; but then there is the teaching of v. 15-18 concerning us trying to gain the brother that has offended us (Mt. 18:15 = Prov. 18:19), resulting in finally throwing him out of the church if we fail to reach an understanding with him. The teaching here seems to be that it is legitimate in such a case of personal offence to give up with the brother and disfellowship him. But the preceding parable shows Christ saying that He never gives up. And then in Mt. 18:22 Christ tells Peter (" I say unto *thee*" , singular) never to stop forgiving his brother in a case of personal offence, up to 70 times seven. My summary of all this is that the ideal standard is never to give up in trying to regain our brother; but it is possible to live on the level of 'taking up' every issue with him, and eventually disfellowshipping him. 'But', the Lord continued, 'For you Peter, I expect a higher level; constant forgiveness of your brother, all day long!'.

Recognition Of Weakness

The labourers parable indicates that the Lord's desire for response to the Gospel will increase as the coming of the Kingdom advances. Apparently He increasingly is the Jesus who understands human weakness. There is an element of unreality in the parable; the servant goes at the 11th hour and hires the men who others had refused, presumably because they didn't look strong enough for the work. This element of unreality serves to highlight the (humanly) irrational zeal of the Lord for the spread of the Gospel in the last days before His return.

The parable of the marriage supper explains why this is. We need to enter into the sense of urgency and tragedy which there was; the marriage of the King's son was going to be delayed because the guests didn't want to come. The shame, even anger, of the King (cp. God) and the bridegroom (cp. Christ) need to be imagined; and this really is the feeling of the Father and Son whenever the Gospel is rejected. And time and again it happens, from Sunday School kids to those hundreds who every year complete Bible study courses and turn away from the call.

These two parables show the blessing which will go behind the efforts to spread the Gospel to all the world in the last days. There is a fervent, *urgent* desire of the Lord for this, and so His blessing will surely be with all who catch the same spirit of urgency. According to the parable, the quality of converts is sacrificed (by the Lord, not us) for the sake of numbers- which connects with the idea that the coming of Christ is to some degree dependent upon the full number of the Gentiles being converted (Rom. 11:25). Likewise the drag net was brought to land once it was full of fish (Mt. 13:48). The Lord speaks of how " few" (the Greek implies physically weak, cp. the unwanted labourers in the market place) the labourers are (Mt. 9:37),

and therefore more (numerically) are needed. Any lamentation about the weakness of the latter day ecclesia must be seen in this context; the Lord is desperate for the places at the supper to be filled, although woe to those who come in without a wedding garment (Mt. 22:12).

Low Expectations

The Lord therefore has self-confessedly low expectations of the latter day ecclesia. He is the Jesus who understands human weakness. He challenged us that if we truly eat His words, we'll never hunger or thirst (Jn. 6:35); but 30 years or so later, He said that in the Kingdom, He will stop us hungering and thirsting (Rev. 7:16,17). He realizes that although we have it within our potential to live this kind of fulfilled spiritual life, in practice we will only get there in the Kingdom. The parable of the sower shows how the Lord foresaw that the majority who responded to His word would not hold on; He knew that men would not immediately appreciate the blood of His cross, but would prefer the old wine of the old covenant (Lk. 5:39). He saw that our spiritual growth would be an agonizingly slow business; as slow as a tiny mustard seed growing into a tree, as slow as a man digging a foundation in rock, or a seed growing and bringing forth fruit. Such growth is *very slow from a human perspective*.

Good and bad guests come together to the wedding (Mt. 22:10), there are wise and foolish virgins, good and bad fish slopping around all over each other, wheat and tares growing together...this is a real emphasis. An appreciation of this will end the image that if someone's a Christian they must be spiritually OK, that we're all loving aunties and uncles, that somehow Christian = safe. I know this isn't what we want to hear the Lord saying. But whatever else are we supposed to take all this emphasis to mean? The rejected in Mt. 22:12 are described as "friend", the same term the Lord used about Judas (Mt. 26:50). The suggestion is that there are Judases amongst us, although we can't identify them (and shouldn't try), just as the disciples couldn't. The evil servant who (in Christ's eyes) beat his brethren was a hypocrite, he didn't appear to men to be like that (Mt. 24:48-51); he was only cut asunder, revealed for who he was, at the judgment. He appeared to be an ecclesial elder who loved the flock.

Christ's low expectations of us are clearly demonstrated when He told the parables of the weddings. When you put them together, you get this picture: God made the wedding between Christ and us. The invited guests didn't bother coming, for very trivial, mundane reasons that they put in front of the honour of being invited to His wedding. Only tramps and beggars come to it, motivated selfishly by the thought of a free meal (cp. a penny for the day). But we, the bride, aren't ready (although Christ graciously doesn't mention that in the parable), and so He delays to come to the wedding. Back home, His most trusted household servants realize that He's delaying His return, and start to get drunk and beat each other. The excited young bridesmaids lose their enthusiasm and go to sleep. Eventually, the wedding happens, but some of the guests don't bother to turn up in a wedding garment, just in their filthy rags. The impression is clearly this: *the whole thing's a mess!* Yet this is the marriage of the Son of God to His dearly purchased bride, for whom He died, and lived a life of total self-control. Yet He *knew* the whole thing would be such a mess. No wonder Jesus so understands human weakness. But let's try to enter into the sense of shame and hurt which He must feel at our apathy; the shame is similar to the shame of the farmer who has tares growing in his field. Everyone sees it's the result of his workers sleeping instead of keeping the night watch as they should have done (Mt. 13:25). The Lord foresaw this; He saw that the ultimate harvest

wouldn't be a good one. Even some that looked like "good seed" would be rejected (Mt. 8:12 cp. 13:38). Yet in this same context, Christ speaks of how the believer starts off as a tiny mustard seed, but in the Kingdom grows into a tree which will shelter others (Mt. 13:32). He saw *how* small are our spiritual beginnings compared to our position in the Kingdom. The least in the Kingdom will be spiritually greater than John the Baptist was in his mortal life (Mt. 11:11).

Did you know your Lord was like this, full of sympathy, and yet a realist, so fully aware of how pathetic our response would be, on a community and individual level?

Notes

(1) See [The Demanding Lord](#). The way the servant was judged out of his own mouth, with the Lord being the kind of man he thought He was, is surely the principle of Ps. 90:11: "Even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath" (in practice).

(2) The prodigal son represents us all, according to the links between this parable and other Scripture.

(3) See [Serving For Nothing](#).

5.3 The Sensitivity Of Jesus

How Far...?

The Lord's parables were not just made up by Him off the cuff. They are evidently the outcome of much prior thought and reflection, perhaps during the carpenter years (and hours). They reflect the sensitivity of Jesus. The basis of their message was doubtless part of the private revelation which the Father made to the Son, which He faithfully spoke forth to us. And yet one guesses that the formulation of the parables was the work of the Lord's own mind, rather than speaking them forth directly from the Father as a kind of fax transmission. We therefore see in them much indirect revelation of the Lord's character. On one level, it is possible to see the story-line of the parables as just the necessary machinery in order to deliver the basic message. But let's remember that the Father and Son are of much higher intellect to ourselves. The way the Lord Jesus used the parables as He did, comprehensively answering every point of His detractors, revealing their weakness, and displaying the character of God all in a few brief, simple words, is proof enough of the intellectual and spiritual genius of Jesus of Nazareth. We use so much language and packaging that is redundant. Yet it seems hard to believe that the Father and Son would do the same. Some of the parables are given a very detailed interpretation by the Lord Jesus; clearly He saw every detail as significant. Again, it seems unlikely that other parables were not intended to be read in the same way, but rather on a more superficial level. The fact that some of their details seem so obviously redundant to us, without meaning, is to be expected seeing that we lack the mind, intellectually or spiritually, of the Son of God. We would be better to just accept that we fail to apprehend their meaning (at the moment), rather than come to the conclusion that sometimes the Lord's parables are intended to be interpreted very closely, whilst others are just stories giving a basic message. This is effectively limiting God's word in accordance with the limits of our own spiritual apprehension; we would be implying that the meaning of God's word is bounded by our own interpretational ability.

The Lord Jesus "knew what was in man", not only by direct revelation from the Father and the Old Testament word, but also from His own observation of our own nature, both in Himself and the surrounding world. The sensitivity of Jesus is reflected in this realization which He reflects. As the Samaritan came near to the wounded man (the ecclesia), realized the extent of his problem (the ravages of sinful nature) and was thereby moved with compassion, so Christ was motivated by His consideration of our position (Lk. 10:33,34); the Lord realized His humanity more and more, and progressively humbled Himself, achieving a progressively fuller identity with us by so doing, until He crowned it all by His death (Phil. 2:6-8). The main lying helpless on the Jerusalem - Jericho road was surely modelled on Zedekiah being overtaken there by his enemies (Jer. 39:5). That weak, vacillating man basically loved God's word, he wanted to be obedient, but just couldn't bring himself to do it. And so he was, quite justly, condemned. It's as if the Lord saw in that wretched, pathetic man a type of all those He came to save. And even in this wretched position, the Lord will pick us up and carry us home. This gives a fine, fine insight into His sensitivity to us. Indeed, several times the Spirit in the NT uses OT pictures of unworthy believers as the basis of a description of the faithful. We are of (Christ's) bones and flesh (Eph. 5:32) is a direct allusion back to the way David called the men of Judah *who were not enthusiastic for his return in glory* "my bones and my flesh" (2 Sam. 19:11,12).

The Lord Jesus also looked forward to the development of His future body as the ecclesia (e.g. Ps. 22:25; Mt. 18:17). He must have seen the problems we would face, He knew our weakness; as Moses, superb type of Christ that he was, looked ahead to the future weakness of Israel, so did the Lord Jesus ⁽¹⁾. Even in practical issues, He may have foreseen our state in the twenty first century far more than we realize; and again, in this we see the sensitivity of Jesus. Thus He speaks of the believer praying in his bedroom (Mt. 6:6)- at a time when private rooms were almost unheard of amongst ordinary folk. The degree to which the Lord foresaw our struggles even in His humanity should provide great stimulus in the difficult business of building up a personal relationship with Him now. For in His heavenly glory, His empathy with us is *even greater* than in His mortal life. He endured our nature and temptations *so that* He might be an empathetic High Priest (consider the implications of Heb. 2:10,17; 4:14,15; 5:1,2); Christ was fully consecrated as High Priest after His death, and it was then that He began to be the sympathetic, understanding High Priest which the Hebrew letter speaks of. The fact that Christ knows so thoroughly our feelings here and now, especially our struggles for personal righteousness, should *of itself* encourage our awareness of and relationship with Him.

The Problem Of Defending The Faith

The parables are full of almost incidental indications of how well the Lord knew our nature and how accurately He foresaw the future struggles of His body. He foresaw that the elder brothers would be self-righteous and unwilling to accept back into fellowship the repentant. Yet instead of making the father address the older boy with words like "You hypocrite! You yourself are disobedient! Get away from me, you callous hypocrite!", the Lord puts the words of grace themselves in the father's mouth: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine" (Lk. 15:30). The Lord foresaw that the elder brethren's relationship with the Father would be damaged by their harshness. But in the way the story ends, I see real hope for the hard line, right wing Christian who condemns his brother, in the light of the Lord's teaching that we will be judged as we have judged. Wrong such brethren certainly are; but their Lord is gracious enough, it seems, to still work with them. In the same breath as the Lord warned that by our words we will be justified and condemned, and that we will have to

account for them at the judgment, He also said that whoever speaks words against Him, He will forgive. I'd like to concentrate on other examples of where the Lord Jesus in His sensitivity foresaw this problem of dealing with apparently weak believers.

He foresaw that the hardest working brethren would be bitter at His acceptance of the weaker ones. His comment to them, "Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" (Mt. 20:15) was quarried from Jonah 4:2-4, where Jonah is also asked a similar question after his bitterness that God had allowed Nineveh to repent. We must be aware that such self righteousness and uncomfortableness at the repentance of others is a feature of our very essential nature. The Lord Jesus overcame this aspect of His nature superbly.

The parables of the two carpenters and the tares in the field show Christ's recognition that His followers would have a keen interest in the weaknesses of their brethren. He foresaw what has been the consistent problem of all groups who have held His true teaching, from the early church through the Bible-believing communities of Central Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, and right through our experience from the 1850s onwards: the problem of how to deal with members of the church who appear to err from the Truth He taught. In the primary context of sunny Galilee in the AD30s, His emphasis on these things would have appeared irrelevant to the 12. But the Lord's mind was far far ahead, way beyond His time, foreseeing the schisms of 40 years' time, imagining the struggles of His body 1900 years later. Consider the story He told of the carpenter with a beam in his own eye who is so keen to extract the splinter from the eye of his fellow worker (note how he almost forces himself upon his brother to do this!). There is something grotesque, absurd, over the top in this story. Christ's parables often have an element of unreality in them to highlight how His attitudes are unusual (e.g. the employer who pays all his men the same wages for different hours of work). And these unusual attitudes of His reflect the sensitivity of Jesus.

But in this story of the two carpenters there is something not only unreal, but almost cartoon-like. We read it and think 'The Lord's obviously exaggerating, nobody would really be so foolish'. But that's exactly how He knew we would think! Our attempts to sort out our brother really are that absurd! Christ is effectively saying: 'Now, I know you'll think I'm exaggerating- but I'm not' (Lk. 6:41,42). Often it seems the Lord intends us to think His parables through to their end, imagining the necessary details. A splinter will come out of the eye naturally, its presence will provoke tears which ultimately will wash it out. 'The grief of life will work on your brother to solve his problem, there are some spiritual weaknesses which time and the experience of life will heal; but I know you people will want to rush in and speed up the spiritual growth of your brother. But you can't do it!'. Christ even foresaw how we will stress the fact that our fellow believer is our "brother" as we try to do this; as if we'll try to be so righteous in the very moment when in God's eyes we do something grotesquely foolish. Doubtless the Lord's carpenter years were the time when He formulated this story. Perhaps He intends us to take it further, and pick up the implication that these two carpenters couldn't help each other; but there's another one who can...

The same awareness of our desire to inappropriately sort out the problems of Christ's ecclesia is shown in the parable of the tares; "wilt thou then that we go and gather them up?" (Mt. 13:28) shows Christ's knowledge that this would be the desire of His servants throughout the generations. If we take His teaching seriously, we must come to the conclusion that all of us have a desire to "help" our brethren by 'sorting out' the weaknesses which we see in them, but that there is the real possibility that often this desire is spiritually grotesque in God's eyes. According to the parable of the tares, we are very sure that we know who are the tares and

who are the wheat. But we can't be as sure as we feel, is the Lord's message. Some we feel are obviously tares are actually wheat. And the sensitivity of Jesus foresaw this so accurately.

There's a fascinating twist in this story that is exactly descriptive of our experience. The servants slept first of all, after the word was first sown, and only once the wheat and tares came to bear fruit did they pester the Master to let them root up the tares. This reference to bearing fruit must be read in the context of the preceding parable of the sower, which describes how the good ground bears fruit (Mt. 13: 26, 8). The implication is that the servants shouldn't have been sleeping first of all, thinking there wasn't really much to do in the field. And so it is a familiar pattern: conversion is followed by a period of feeling there isn't much to do, and then the realization dawns that due to our own negligence in those early days there are some tares in the ecclesia. The desire to sort out the tares therefore comes some time *after* conversion. And on the overall level, there is another truism: the servants of Christ are keener to eradicate error than stop it in the first place. It's sad to see that there is almost a despising today of the warnings against 'the thin end of the wedge'; awareness of the possibility of apostasy is seen as somehow negative- exactly as the parable predicts. The parable implies that *if* a greater level of watchfulness was maintained by the servants, there wouldn't be the tares. But, as the Lord foresaw, we seem to lack this watchfulness, often under the guise of feeling that we must sort ourselves out rather than guard against apostasy being introduced.

Spiritual Inappropriacy

The sensitivity of Jesus constructed that parable with the aim of showing the thoughtful how deeply inappropriate is their desire to root up the tares. He clearly had in mind the prophecy of Himself in 2 Sam. 23:6,7: " The sons of Belial shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken by (human) hands: but the man that shall touch them (Christ) must be fenced with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same place (just outside Jerusalem) " where Christ was " fenced with iron" . It isn't possible for us to uproot the tares because this can only possibly be done by the one who totally uprooted sin in Himself, dying to it on the cross. This association between Christ's right to judge and His victorious death is shown by the way the " tares" will be burnt in the same area as He was crucified in. Phil. 2:9-11 reasons along the same lines; because Christ died for us, He *therefore* has the right to have every knee bowing to Him at the judgment. On account of being " the Son of man" and yet also being our perfect Messiah, He has the right *therefore* to be judge (Jn. 5:27 cp. Dan. 7:13,14). The Lord understood all this; and to the thoughtful, those who would grasp His allusion to 2 Sam. 23, He was saying: 'If you think you can root up the tares, if you think you have that wisdom to identify the tares, you are really insulting the greatness of what I achieved on the cross. It's only on account of that that I have the ability and right to divide wheat from tares, sheep from goats'.

The Lord Jesus Christ's sensitivity to our thinking that we really have borne His cross comes out in Mt. 20:22: " Are ye able to drink of the cup that I drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said, We are able" . Those men, with all their unspirituality, could quite coolly state that they wanted the highest place in the Kingdom, and could say with confidence that they could shoulder the cross of Christ. The Lord's reply was gracious and generous spirited indeed: " Ye shall indeed drink of my cup" - 'when you're a lot more spiritually mature', He could have added. We *sense* rather than are explicitly told His sensitivity to men thinking they can shoulder His cross; for He alone knows what the cross of Christ entailed and entails. And in speaking of our own sufferings, we too need to learn these

lessons, and compare our sufferings against Christ's with the utmost caution, with the sensitivity to *His* feelings, recognizing that we must act as men and women who have been *counted as if* we shared His death, and not as those who have actually "resisted unto blood (in our) striving against sin". To confidently identify some of our brethren as tares is only one example of the way in which we can hurt our Lord's feelings, by acting and thinking in ways which are only appropriate for He who did actually carry the cross ⁽²⁾.

More Examples Of The Sensitivity of Jesus

We have only considered one area in which our Lord foresaw so clearly our likely weaknesses. I'd like to conclude with a few more examples of where how we reason in our weakness was exactly foreseen by the Lord:

- The story of the candle that was put under a bucket brings out an issue related to that of the desire to root up the tares: the candle was put there (presumably) on account of an almost paranoid fear that the wind would blow it out; but this over-protection of the lamp in itself caused the light to go out (Mt. 5:15). Time and again, preaching the light, holding up the beacon of the word of Christ's cross, has been impeded or stifled in the name of preserving the truth, strengthening what remains (words taken out of context). And because of this lack of witness, this lack of holding out the light to others, the fire of Christ has waxed dim amongst us. This ties in to the theme that preaching is not just commanded as a publicity exercise for Almighty God; He doesn't need us to do that for Him. It is commanded for the benefit of the preacher more than those preached to. To put a candle under a bucket or bed seems senseless; yet this is how senseless and inappropriate it is to hold back preaching for the sake of defending the Faith. Indeed to put it under a bed (Mk. 4:21) and then go to sleep (candles are normally only lit at night) is likely to destroy the person who does it, to burn them while they are asleep. All who have the light but don't preach it (in whatever form) are likely to suffer the same; notice how the Lord (by implication) links night time and sleepiness with an apathy in preaching. Evidently the Lord foresaw the attitude that has surfaced amongst His people in the late twentieth century: 'We must concentrate on keeping the Truth, new converts are often problematic, too much energy goes to preaching rather than building up ourselves in ("our most holy"!) faith'. Probably the resistance to preaching to the Gentiles in the first century used similar reasoning.

- The lost sheep who leaves the fold and goes off (Mt. 18:12) is based on Ps. 119:176: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments". The lost sheep that is found therefore has the attitude of recognizing it is lost, that it is still the servant of the shepherd although isolated from him, and still has not forgotten the things of God's word. The picture in Ps. 119:176 is strange indeed: a lost sheep asking the shepherd to come and find him. It's as if the sheep talks to himself, feeling the shepherd can't and won't hear, feeling that he's just too far away. And this is *exactly, exactly* the position of all those who leave the faith and return: they don't forget the doctrines of the Truth, in their hearts they feel too far away, but they wish somehow something could happen to get them back. This explains the type of sheep one is dealing with in the parable, and why the parable isn't true of all who go astray.

- There is an element of unreality in the story of the lost sheep. And that unreality reflects the sensitivity of Jesus. The shepherd doesn't return the sheep to the fold, but takes it home and calls his friends round to see the dumb animal and rejoice (Lk. 15:4-6). The Lord

knew we would frown a bit at this. He foresaw how hard it would be for us to rejoice in the return of a difficult sheep to fellowship.

- The labourers who were chosen to work first were the spiritually strong ones. Those still standing at the end of the day were probably weak or old; nobody wanted to hire *them*. The Lord foresaw how the apparently 'strong' in the ecclesia would struggle (and may still struggle at the judgment) with the fact that the weaker ones get, essentially, the same salvation as them.

- The parable of the prodigal ends on a negative note. The older brother's bitterness doesn't heal, he won't join the family, and his bitterness at his brother's repentance not only damages his own relationship with the Father, but also casts a shadow over the rejoicing. This is so realistic; the sad truth of this has been worked out hundreds of times in the history of His body. The gain of one brother so often means the loss of another.

- The parable of the wine exactly predicted the attitude of people to Christ's work in taking the Old Covenant out of the way. The Lord is surely saying: 'I know you won't immediately want the blood of my new covenant. I understand your nature, by nature you'll prefer what you are familiar with, the Old Covenant;; you won't "straightway" desire the new wine, but (by implication) you will, after a while' (Lk. 5:39). He foresaw how the implication of the blood of His sacrifice wouldn't be accepted by His people first of all. It would be a process, of coming to accept how radical the gift of His blood is. As we weekly take the cup of His covenant, we come to see more and more the excellency of that blood, and its supremacy over all else. Christ recognized that conservatism in human nature which will naturally shy away from the marvellous implications of what He achieved for us. And true enough, whenever we talk about the present aspect of the Kingdom of God, our present blessings of redemption in Christ, the sense in which we have already been saved...there is a desire to shy away from it all. And true enough, the early Christian believers desperately clung on to the Mosaic food laws, circumcision and synagogue attendance as far as they could; the command to witness to the Gentiles was likewise not taken seriously for some time. It must have been painful for the Lord to know this and to see it, recognizing in it a lack of appreciation of His life and final sacrifice, a desire to reconcile with God without totally committing oneself to His work. He saw the possibility of His blood being wasted if men didn't change from old to new wineskins. The slowness of the changeover in attitudes amongst the early believers must have been a great pain to Him; as if His blood was being poured out again. The implication is that we shed His blood afresh if we won't change, if we allow the conservatism of our natures to have an iron grip upon us we not only destroy ourselves, but waste the blood of the Son of God. The picture of the new wine being "spilled" uses the same word as in Mt. 26:28 concerning the 'shedding' of Christ's blood. Again, how utterly, painfully accurate. This is the danger of the conservatism that is in our natures; it was this which led men to shed the Lord's blood, and it is this same element within us which He foresaw would lead us to crucify Him afresh. How many times has this conservatism been mistaken as true spirituality! How careful we must be, therefore, not to adopt any attitude which glorifies that conservatism and masks it as the hallmark of a stable believer. The sensitivity of Jesus to the value of the human person was the very opposite of this.

Notes

(1) See [Moses: Spiritual Pinnacle](#).

(2) Against the teaching of this parable must be balanced our duty to separate from that and those which are false. This must be done, but without the implication that our act of separation is the uprooting of the tares.

5.4 The Grace Of Jesus

The grace of Jesus and His Father, so great, *so* free, was a challenge for even the Lord to express in any verbal medium. The way He spoke was grace itself. He wept over the men of Jerusalem, sorrowing that their destruction must come because "thou knewest not the time of thy visitation" (Lk. 19:44). He could have quite well said: "because you have rejected me..." . But His grace was greater than to say that. The utter inappropriacy of our salvation is brought out time and again in His teaching. The oil lamp with the bruised reed and smoking flax which annoyingly filled the house with smoke was nurtured and tolerated in hope by this Lord of ours. We in these last days are "the poor and the maimed and the halt and the blind" who lay in the city streets (Lk. 14:21). Yet we are invited and lead (the blind) or dragged / carried (the lame) into the great supper. For those who deeply meditated, the lame at the great man's table would have taken them back to lame Mephibosheth at David's table. His response to the invitation was to *bow*; think of a lame man bowing. How awkward it must have been, and how awkward he must have felt. "I'm a dead dog, from a family who cruelly hated you; why, why me?" was his response. And this ought to be ours. The awkward bow of that lame man, however embarrassing it was to watch for David in his glory, is a superb type of our attempts to respond to the inexplicable grace we have received from the Lord. He knows our weakness. Even though He taught plainly that 'the majority' (Gk; AV "many") of those He called would not be chosen, His parables often use percentages which imply that two thirds (parable of the pounds) or half (parable of the virgins) *will* respond. This shows the love that hopes, in the face of the finest knowledge and foreknowledge of human nature which any man has ever had.

A Penny A Day

The pureness of the grace of the Lord Jesus is hard to plumb. He knew that the extent of His grace would cause others to stumble. The element of unreality in the parable of the labourers shows this. He hired the labourers no-one else wanted, the old and weak workers, some of them only for an hour, and still gave them a day's pay. They must have walked away from the pay table with their heads spinning, scarcely daring to believe what they held in their hands- a matchless picture of the response of the faithful after learning of their acceptance at the day of judgment. But the outlook of those who felt their salvation (the penny) was less by grace than the others became bitter: "Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" (Mt. 20:15). In saying this, the Lord was referring back to Dt. 15:9, which warned Israel not to have an evil eye towards their poverty stricken brother (cp. the unwanted labourer) who asked for a loan near the time of the year of release, when all debts were cancelled. In the year of release, Israel were "to remit every private debt...and not *demand* it of thy brother" (Dt. 15:2 LXX). This is behind Mt. 18:28, where Christ speaks of the man who demands repayment from his brother. The Lord is implying: You should live in the spirit of the year of release all the time, giving without expecting. Lk. 6:35 has the year of release in mind, in the idea of lending without expecting anything back. This only happened in the year of release. "Is thine eye evil, because I am good" is therefore saying that the Lord's grace towards the poverty-stricken labourer had provoked an "evil eye" in the others, they somehow felt that they were having to give to him, that they were standing to lose by his acceptance. Yet, as the Lord implies, this is a nonsense attitude. Of course we don't stand to lose anything by another's acceptance!

And it's possible to reason that it was those 11th hour labourers represent the accepted, whilst the complainers are rejected ("Go thy way" has been read by some as meaning they were fired whilst the others were taken on permanently [\(1\)](#)). But with what superb accuracy does He get right inside the future mentality of many in His ecclesia! How very very true this parable has been time and again in the history of our community. Discussion of and practice of the idea of grace has provoked untold bitterness amongst those who feel they live less by grace.

The grace of Jesus framed the parable of the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho in terms of Zedekiah's flight from Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:4); a man who had repeatedly spurned the offers God made to him through Jeremiah, and who was attacked on that road by the Babylonians (cp. the robbers). Yet the parable shows that Christ will graciously save even a man like that; for according to the parable, Zedekiah represents every one of us.

The Fanatic Shepherd

The element of unreality in the parables often brings out the grace of Jesus the Lord. The farmer who hires weak, useless servants (those rejected by other employers) and gives them a day's wages for an hour's work is one clear example. And so too, if we think about it, is the Lord's story of the shepherd who so madly loves his sheep, whose life is so taken up by his job, that he would die to save one of them, and comes back triumphantly rejoicing when he has found the lost sheep (Lk. 15:5). The average shepherd would have surely accepted that some sheep are lost, it's the luck of the game. But this shepherd who dropped all and ran off after one lost sheep was no usual shepherd. And the element of unreality in the story brings out the Lord's grace towards us. Note in passing how the man : sheep relationship portrays that between us and Christ. As the sheep understood pathetically little about the shepherd's sacrifice to save it, so we too fail to appreciate the height of the fact that Christ died for us, as the shepherd for the sheep. In this was the grace of Jesus.

The Unprofitable Servant

The story of the slave who worked all day in the field and was then expected to come home and cook for his master without a word of thanks to him seems to be more realistic, lacking this element of unreality. But the Greek word "charis", usually translated "grace", is the one used for "thank" here (Lk. 17:9). The point is that we don't receive grace because of our going the extra mile, as we are inclined to think. We receive grace, but not as a result of all our special efforts; these are what are expected of us, on account of the fact that we have become slaves to our Master, the Lord Jesus. At the end of all our special efforts (in whatever sphere), we must consciously make an effort to recognize that we are "unprofitable servants" (Lk. 17:10). This must surely connect with Mt. 25:30, which describes the rejected at the day of judgment as unprofitable servants. If we judge / condemn ourselves, we will not be condemned (1 Cor. 11:31). This is just one of many examples of where the Lord's parables seem intended to be linked with each other- which further proves that they are not stories with a deeper meaning, whose storyline is not intended to be carefully considered. We must recognize not only that we are unprofitable servants, but that we have only done what was our "duty" or debt to do- the implication being that we were sold into slavery on account of an unpayable debt. This is exactly the figure used by the Lord to describe us in Mt. 18:25.

But there is a telling detail in Lk. 17:10 which further reflects the grace of Jesus: "When ye *shall have done* (not 'when you do') all these things which are commanded you, (you will)

say, "We are unprofitable servants" . It may be that this is taking us forward to the Kingdom; it is at the judgment that we 'do all' (Eph. 6:13), it is in the Kingdom that we will obey all the commandments (Ps. 119:6). This parable is a glimpse into the appreciation of grace we will have as we enter the Kingdom; once we are fully righteous, we will realize how unprofitable we are of ourselves (notice we may still feel in a sense "unprofitable" then). We will realize that all our service is only the repaying of the huge debt incurred by our sinfulness. *Then*, and perhaps only then, will we see works in their true perspective. This surely is the purpose of the judgment seat. We will walk away with the sense of wonder at the grace of Jesus that filled the one-hour workers as they walked away from the pay table with a day's wages.

Our Inability To Recompense

Our inability to do *any* works in the sense of extra acts of pleasure to God is brought out in the parable of the great supper. Christ prefaced this with the command: "When thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind...for they cannot recompense thee; for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just" (Lk. 14:13,14). He then goes on to describe how the Father and Himself put this into practice; in the invitation to the Kingdom, "the poor, and the maimed, and the halt and the blind" (Lk. 14:21) are invited; with the implication that Christ will be "recompensed at the resurrection of the just" . We don't recompense Him now by our works; we are lost sheep causing Him needless work and worry, wasting His goods and needing to get ourselves out of the problem (Lk. 16:1), needing His frank forgiveness for our huge debts (Mt. 18:24). As Job recognized, if we are righteous, we give nothing to God (Job 35:7). Our *un*righteousness commends God's righteousness (Rom. 3:5). All things come *out of* God: "Who hath first given to him? ...for of him, and through him, and to him, are all things" (Rom. 11:35,36); it's give, give, give with God. We are the poor beggars sitting down at the great supper, unable to recompense. Of course, it depends where we put the emphasis. The parable which relates how Christ desires fruit from us is followed by that of the marriage supper, where it seems we are just asked to accept an invitation with humility (Mt. 21:34; 22:3). The point surely is that we are invited, for no reason, to the Kingdom, and we must accept with the humility that will accompany a recognition of such grace (Lk. 14:9). But our experience of this grace will inevitably bring forth some spiritual fruit.

Again, it seems we are intended to follow the story through, and visualize the inappropriate, uncultured conduct of these beggars at the table, causing so much unspoken embarrassment and pain to the generous rich man. The link with Is. 55:1-3 would suggest that we can interpret the call to the supper as the call of the Gospel, and the hungry people sitting down to a fine meal as our ecclesial experience now (although this isn't to say that we can't read it as concerning the future Kingdom too). The preceding Lk. 14:8-11 describe us as sitting down at the feast in this life, until the host walks in and starts re-arranging the seating order (cp. the coming of Christ in judgment on His household). We are left to imagine the grabbing for food, the greedy, selfish eyeing up of the plates, the grasping, the lack of social skills, the lack of good conversation between each other, the occasional cursing under the breath, perhaps even throwing of food, the eager desire for wine, the lack of restraint. All in the company of the Master (God) and His servants (Christ and the Angels). And this, it seems to me, was the Lord's imagination of His immature ecclesia, feasting on the good things He has prepared for us. Can we not begin to enter just a little into the pain and acute embarrassment and sadness we cause to our gracious Host by the self-centredness of our natures, manifest as it is in spiritual terms so often? It's quite possible to become so spiritually selfish, so bent on our own salvation, that the whole spirit of the supper is lost. After all, the idea of a large

supper is to inculcate a social spirit rather than just to provide individual feeding to each of the guests. How many times has it been reasoned in these last days: 'Sorry, I have to work out my own salvation, I just can't spare time and can't risk association with my weaker brethren...'. And the Lord Jesus, in His perfect way, saw this coming as in sunny Galilee He formulated His parables of grace.

Predestination

One example of the Lord Jesus' emphasis on our salvation being through grace rather than our works is found in the way the parables teach that our acceptance is to some degree dependent on our predestination. Thus the parable of the types of ground suggests that we are good or bad ground at the time the seed is first sown; the fish are good or bad at the time they first enter the net; the wise virgins take the oil with them from the start of their vigil. I would suggest that this is not just part of the story. It was evidently within the Lord's ability to construct stories which featured the idea of bad seed or fish etc. changing to good, and vice versa. But He didn't; indeed, His emphasis seems to have been on the idea of predestination. This isn't to decry the effort for spirituality which we must make; but His stress of the predestination factor is surely to remind us of the degree to which our calling and salvation is by pure grace.

Imputed Righteousness

Through the grace of Jesus, He is in love with us; He has called us to be His bride. He sees us in an extremely positive light. He counts us as righteous to a degree that is a real struggle to believe- even during His ministry, "when we were yet sinners", and when the only example He had of His bride were those faltering 12. He tells the Jews that His people will fast and mourn for His absence after His departure, with the intensity that the friends of the bridegroom would have if the groom suddenly collapsed and died at the wedding (this seems to be the picture of Mt. 9:15, seeing "taken away" as an idiom for sudden death). This is surely a positive view of the sorrow of the body of Christ for their Lord's absence. Even if we see in this mini-parable only a description of the disciples' sorrow after the Lord's death, He is giving a very positive description of the disciples' joy, saying that they didn't fast for joy of being with Him; He describes their joy as the joy of the friends of the groom at the wedding. Yet the Gospels paint the twelve as a struggling, uncertain group of men, eaten up with the petty arguments of this life, unused to the self-control of fasting. Peter, for example, had until very recently been a possibly immoral young fisherman (1 Pet. 4:3).

The happiness of the disciples is explained in terms of them being at a wedding. The happiness of the wedding is normally associated with alcohol, and the context of Mt. 9:15 goes on to explain that Christ's new covenant is symbolised by new wine. The difference between John's disciples and Christ's was that Christ's were full of the joy of the new covenant. But there is ample reason to think that they were heavily influenced by Judaist thinking; they didn't go and preach to the Gentile world as Christ commanded, and even Peter was marvellously slow to realize the Jewish food laws had been ended by Christ, despite the Lord's strong implication of this in Mk. 7:19 (not AV). Yet the grace of Jesus saw His men *as if* they had grasped the meaning of the new covenant, *as if* they had the joy of true faith in and understanding of His work; and He spoke of them to the world in these terms. We can take untold comfort from this; for we dare to believe that the Lord does and will confess our name (character) in a like exalted manner to the Father and His Angels.

Just before His death, in full knowledge of the disciples' impending collapse of faith, the grace of Jesus confidently spoke of how His men would not follow " a stranger...but will flee from him" (Jn. 10:5). But the disciples fled from their Lord in Gethsemane, as He knew they would (from Zech. 13:7, cp. Mt. 26:31) at the time He said those words. He knew that He must die for the sheep who would scatter each one to His own way (Is. 53:6). " The time cometh...when ye shall be scattered, every man to his own" (Jn. 16:32); and true enough, they all fled from Him (Mt. 26:56). But in Jn. 10 He spoke of His followers as calm, obedient sheep who would not scatter if they had a good shepherd (Jn. 10:12); even though He knew they would. The Lord's way of imputing such righteousness to His followers seems to be brought out in Jn. 10:4 cp. 6: " The sheep follow Him (Christ): for they know (understand, appreciate) His voice...this parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake" , i.e. they didn't know His voice.

We are described as Christ's " own servants" , i.e. His special, trusted, right-hand men (Mt. 25:14)- even the one talent man who did nothing at all. He searches for the lost sheep until He finds it (Lk. 15:4)- as if He positively assumed that surely all lost sheep will return. This is surely a high view to have of us, higher, sadly, than we merit.

Christ And Israel

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is perhaps most clearly seen in His attitude to Israel. So many of the parables refer in some way to the love of God and Christ for Israel; and their love for rebellious, indifferent Israel is the supreme example of pure grace ⁽²⁾. He felt towards them as a hen for her chicks (Lk. 13:34). Here again is an element of unreality; a hen whose very own chicks won't be gathered under her wings. This seems to go right against nature; the pain of the rejected parent was there in the experience of the Lord. He wasn't just passively enduring the polemics of the Pharisees; they were His chicks, He really wanted them under His wings (cp. Israel dwelling under the wings of the cherubim). We must ever remember this when we read the records of Him arguing with them and exposing their hypocrisy. He wasn't just throwing back their questions, playing the game and winning, just surviving from day to day with them. He was trying to gather them, and their rejection of His words really hurt Him. Their reproach broke His heart; He didn't just brazenly endure it as we might the ravings of a drunken man (Ps. 69:20).

Lk. 13:7,8 teaches that after the three years of His ministry, during Christ's final six months, God suggested to Christ that the nation of Israel be cut down (this is but one example of the private intercourses between Father and Son). The Lord knew when He must die soon; He had already steadfastly set His face to go to die at Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51). It seems to me that He knew He would be killed by the Jews in a few months time. But He asks the Father to spare Israel for at least another year- as if to show that He knew they wouldn't accept Him even after His death, but He's saying to God: 'Give them a chance even after they kill me'. Those who think further along the lines suggested by the parable will see that in reality, Israel were not cut down by God for another 37 years. The implication is that this was due to Christ's pleading with God during those years for patience to be shown to the nation who rejected and crucified Him. The element of unreality in the story reflects the grace of Jesus- for it was unthinkable for a servant to argue back with his master, asking not to do what he had been ordered to do.

The Lord so respected Israel that He felt giving the Gospel to the Gentiles instead of them was like casting good food to dogs (Mk. 7:27). Israel (the children) didn't want to eat, but the

Lord painted them as if they did. The " crumb" that was cast to the dogs was a great miracle; but Christ saw that as only a crumb of the huge meal that was prepared for Israel. It seems the idea here is meant to be connected with His invitation to us to sit at table with Him and share the meal, both now (Lk. 14:8) and in the Kingdom (Lk. 12:37). Just one crumb of the Lord's meal is a mighty miracle, and yet we are asked to sit down and eat the whole meal with Him: as symbolised in our eating of " the Lord's supper" . This is an eloquent picture of the greatness of our position as members of His table now, as well as in the future.

The Enthusiastic Lord

This enthusiasm for Israel's response to the Gospel comes out again when the grace of Jesus likens Himself to a street kid in the market who really wanted to get a game going with the other kids. He offered to play funerals with them (through His appeal through John the Baptist), but they refused. He then offered to play weddings (through His Gospel of grace, joy and peace), but still they refused (Lk. 7:32). By all means connect this with another market place parable, where Christ (the servant) comes there to try to recruit labourers, on almost unbelievably good rates. The Lord's enthusiasm for the salvation of first century Israel (and us too) comes out in Lk. 14:5 RSV, where He likens the *urgency* of His mission to that of a man whose son has fallen down a well. He simply *must* get there, regardless of the Sabbath rules. And this, says the Lord, is His all out urgency to save men. We have all fallen down the pit from whence we must be rescued (Zech. 9:11). As we distribute leaflets, place our adverts, talk to our contacts, strive in our own character development towards salvation; this is the verve of the Lord Jesus to save us. It is only the hardness of the human heart that can stand in the way of the mighty enthusiasm of the Son of God for our redemption. Hence the sense of hurt, sadness and frustration to the Master when men refuse His efforts, as typified in the story of the wonderful banquet that was inexplicably spurned by the intended guests (Lk. 14:16). In passing, note the connection of pulling a man out of a pit with Joseph and Jeremiah, types of the Lord's resurrection (cp. Ps. 40:2). When a man is pulled out of the pit at baptism, he is sharing the experience of the resurrected Lord. And the Lord is naturally so urgent that men should share that experience which He suffered so much for.

This enthusiasm, this closeness to us, comes out in Christ's description of Himself as 'taking a far journey' away from us to Heaven. The Greek strictly means 'to leave one's own native people to go abroad'; with the implication that the Lord feels closer towards us than the Angels. This is exactly the line of argument of Hebrews 1 and 2: Christ didn't come to save Angels, He came to save us, therefore He had exactly our nature and feelings, not theirs. He is closely watching our spiritual growth, as the farmer watches the wheat and then *immediately* begins to harvest it once the humidity and growth is just right (Mk. 4:29). This is the enthusiasm with which the Lord watches our growth, not just individually, but as a community, i.e. the whole field. As the growth is still in some sense a mystery to the farmer, so it may be to Christ (Mk. 4:26,27); we grow, " he knoweth not how" . This could be taken as an eloquent essay in the Lord's own limitation of knowledge.

Finally. The Lord's zeal for our redemption and His enthusiasm to see us as righteous is brought out in the parable of the prodigal. The Father (manifest in the Lord) runs out to meet the son. That story was masterfully tied back in to Is. 64:5-8: " Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways...we have sinned...we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags...but now, O Lord, thou art our father" . The patient, hopeful father saw in the son a boy rejoicing and working righteousness; but this was hardly how *he* felt! And so it will be with Israel in

the last days. And so it is with each of us now, in our times of repentance. That surpassing grace is ours; we are seen as working righteousness when all we have is a bitter self-loathing and desire to somehow get back to God. But the crucial point is: *how often* do we have such a true repentance? We repeatedly sin, that we admit. But how frequently is there this kind of repentance which calls forth such grace, to see us as so righteous when we are so unrighteous, the grace of Jesus so great, so free...?

Notes

(1) This is the line of interpretation followed by H.A. Whittaker in his treatment of this parable in *Studies In The Gospels* (Wigan: Biblia, 1984).

(2) This point is repeatedly made, with overflowing evidence, throughout H.A. Whittaker *ibid* and John Carter, *Parables Of The Messiah* (Birmingham: CMPA, 1947).

5.5 The Demanding Lord

Once the Lord asked a man on the way to his father's funeral to immediately follow Him, and quit going to the funeral as he intended (Lk. 9:59). And He criticized the man for not doing this. Another who wanted to first "bid farewell" to his family was likewise criticized (Lk. 9:61). Even Elisha bid farewell to his family before following Elijah, and Elijah allowed him to do this (1 Kings 19:20)- but the Lord Jesus was more demanding. He described the disciples as a "perverse generation" because they didn't have enough faith to work a miracle (Lk. 9:41). Or again, He calmly bid them feed a huge crowd with just a few loaves: "How many loaves have ye? Go and see" (Mk. 6:38). We are left to imagine those men, almost paralysed and certainly gobsmacked by the extent of the demand, awkwardly going away to count their few loaves. He could be seen as a demanding Lord. The Lord Jesus said many "hard sayings" which dissuaded people from seriously following Him. He kept speaking about a condemned criminal's last walk to his cross, and telling people they had to do this. He told them, amidst wondrous stories of flowers and birds, to rip out their eyes, cut off their limbs- and if they didn't, He didn't think they were serious and would put a stone round their neck and hurl them into the sea (Mk. 9:42-48). He healed a leper, and then spoke sternly to Him (Mk. 1:43 AV mg.). All three synoptics record how He summarily ordered His weary disciples to feed a crowd numbering thousands in a desert, when they had no food (Mt. 14:16; Mk. 6:37; Lk. 9:13). He criticizes the man who earnestly wished to follow Him, but first had to attend his father's funeral. "Let the dead bury their dead" (Mt. 8:22) was a shocking, even coarse figure to use- 'let the dead bodies drag one more dead body into their grave'. And then He went on to speak and show His matchless, endless love. Mark 5 records three prayers to Jesus: "the devils besought him", and "Jesus gave them leave" (vv. 12,13); the Gadarenes "began to pray him to depart out of their coasts" (v. 17); and He obliged. And yet when the cured, earnestly zealous man "prayed him that he might be with him...Jesus suffered him not" (vv. 18,19). After the fascination, physically and intellectually, had worn off, very few of the crowds continued their interest. The Lord scarcely converted more than 100 people in the course of His ministry. We are familiar, from our own experience of sin and failure, with the pure grace of the Lord Jesus. We see that largeness and generosity of spirit within Him, that manifestation of the God of love, that willingness to concede to our weakness; and therefore we can tend to overlook the fact that the Lord Jesus set uncompromisingly high standards. I would even use the word "demanding" about His attitude. He expressed Himself to the Jews in ways which were almost provocative (consider His Sabbath day miracles). He intended to shake them. He seems to have used hyperbole in order to make the point

concerning the high standard of commitment He expects. Thus He spoke of cutting off the limbs that offend. He told those who were interested in following Him that He had nowhere to lay His head (Lk. 9:58). That may have been true that night, but the ministering women surely saw to it that this was not the case with Him most nights. The man who wanted to first attend his father's funeral was told that this wasn't good enough; although Abraham and Joseph did this. The man who wanted to go and say farewell to his family was told the same; although Elisha did this (Lk. 9:60,61). The Lord is surely saying that the commitment of such Old Testament giants was to be less than what He expected of those for whom He was to give His all. It isn't that He won't *save* a man who (in the parable) puts his father's funeral before the Lord's demands. But He expects the *ultimate* level of commitment from us. Likewise His Father had asked Abraham to offer his dearest: Isaac. This is the Father and Son with whom we have to do. His parables of Mt. 25 make the point that the rejected will be surprised at how hard He turns out to be: they didn't expect Him to judge sins of omission so seriously. Likewise the man who held on to his talent of the Truth seemed surprised when the Lord said that He expected more. The foolish virgins were likewise shocked to be told that actually they didn't know their Lord at all.

The Old Testament also reveals a gracious God who in some ways is a more demanding Lord than we might think. Reflect how Ahab was rebuked for not killing Benhadad, in obedience to God's command (1 Kings 20:35,42). But Ahab is not recorded as ever having been told to do this. What he had been told was that Yahweh would deliver the Syrians into his hand (:28). Presumably, God expected Ahab to infer from this that he should kill Benhadad; and rebuked him for his lack of perception, just as Jesus rebuked the disciples after the resurrection. The New Testament also has examples of our being expected to deduce things which at first glance we might find somewhat demanding. 1 Cor. 14:21 rebukes the Corinthians for speaking to each other in languages which their brethren didn't understand. Paul considered that they were immature in their understanding because they hadn't perceived that Is. 28:11,12 states that it will be the Gentile non-believers who will speak to God's people in a language they don't understand.

Dt. 20:5-7 commanded that in time of battle, those who had just recently married, bought a new house or planted a new vineyard- should not go to the battle. But these are the very kind of reasons which the Lord Jesus alludes to in Lk. 14 as the reasons given by some for not going and working for Him. This connection not only shows that He is in a sense far more demanding than the Old Covenant was. But what the Old Covenant considered a legitimate excuse for not going to battle- He does not. And even appears to condemn those who take such ways out. Truly He is a demanding Lord. All must be for Him, and any earlier ways of legitimizing or making respectable anything less than total commitment to Him must be rejected. In this He was indeed the demanding Lord- although He had and has every right to be.

The Harder Side Of Christ

There was a harder side to Christ. He was a demanding Lord. He told His disciples to forsake what they had and follow Him. They did. And apparently with no prefatory praise or introduction, He called them "ye of little faith...fools...slow of heart to believe". Of course, He may have prefaced these criticisms with something softer (cp. His letters to the churches); but the Spirit has preferred not to record it. Often His parables warn that those who think He will understand their weakness, those who are too familiar with His softer side. The parable of the great supper records men explaining to Christ why they can't *immediately* respond to

Him, although they want to when it's more convenient: " I have bought a piece of ground, *and must needs* go and see it...I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them...I have married a wife, therefore *I* cannot come" (Lk. 14:18-20). The implication is that they assumed that the servant calling them to the wedding (i.e. Christ) would understand that their excuses were quite reasonable; the man who pleaded marriage as his excuse would have been alluding to the Law's provision to have time off from the Lord's duties on account of marriage (Dt. 24:5). All these reasons were assumed to be quite reasonable, and the men sound as if they were confident that *of course* Christ would understand. The parable of the King's son records excuses which are more evidently unreasonable; some said they were going to work on their farm, when actually the banquet was going to be held in the evening (Mt. 22:5). There is a connection with the parable of Lk. 14, where the excuses seem more reasonable. But the similarity shows that as far as the Lord is concerned, *any* excuse, evidently irrelevant or apparently reasonable, is just not acceptable to Him.

But the point of the parables is that as far as Christ is concerned, these were all just empty excuses, even the excuse that appeared to be based on a past concession to weakness. He's saying that the invitation to His Kingdom, to His very own wedding, must take priority over all the everyday things of human experience which we assume are so justified, and which we assume He will quite understand if we put in front of Him and His call. *Every reader* ought to feel uncomfortable on considering this. It's this category of Christian who will be so surprised when they are rejected: " Lord, Lord, open to us....When saw we thee hungry...?" (Mt. 25:11,44). They thought they knew Him, but He has never known them (Mt. 7:23). This idea of surprise at rejection is to be connected with that of brethren thinking (mistakenly) that of course the Lord understands their putting His call into second place. He is a Lord they hardly know in this life, despite what they think, and He will be the same at judgment day. There's a point to be made from the way they are so confident they know Christ, but He says He has never known them. They didn't live up to the demanding Lord they served. The idea of a two-way relationship with Him was evidently foreign to them. They thought their theoretical knowledge and outward works meant that Christ knew them. The worrying thing is, how many of us feel we have a two-way relationship with the Lord?

Serving For Nothing

The Lord's parables set a high standard of commitment, without which, it is implied, the attainment of the Kingdom is impossible. Thus Mt. 12:12 likens the Kingdom to a city which can only be entered by " the violent (taking) it by force" . This is the language of crack storm troopers forcing their way in to a barricaded city. And according to the Lord, every one of us who hopes to enter the Kingdom must have this spirit. We must force our way in. What we may think of as righteousness which touches His heart is nothing more than the monotonous ploughing of a field, according to Lk. 17:8-10. This extraordinary story is so simple: A master doesn't thank his slave for ploughing all day. When he comes home in the evening, the slave's job is to get the Master's food ready, and then when the Master has been looked after, he can get himself something. The Master has no need to thank (Gk. *charis*, s.w. to give " grace") the slave, and the slave expects nothing else. This is how the Lord sees our works; He expects us to serve Him for nothing, because of our role as His slaves, and not because we expect any gratitude, recognition or reward. We serve because we are His slaves.

The parable teaches that absolute obedience should be the norm of our lives, not the exception, and that this is only what our Master demands and expects. From the way He told the story, Christ framed our sympathy to be with the slave. But His point is that when we

have done all, worked all day and then gone the extra mile in the evening, we should still feel unprofitable slaves, slaves who aren't much profit to their Master. The passive, unspoken *acceptance* seen between Master and slave in the parable should be seen between us and the Lord. There is no attempt by the Lord to ameliorate the Master : slave figure; " Ye call me master and Lord, and ye say well, for so I am" (Jn. 13:13). And yet we are told that at the judgment we will receive " praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5). This can not, therefore, be praise of our efforts at obedience; it will be praise for the status we are in on account of being in Christ, being counted as righteous as Him. The parable was spoken in the context of the disciples thinking that God would be very happy with them if they forgave their brother seven times a day (Lk. 17:3-6). But the Lord is replying that things like this, which to us may seem going more than the extra mile, should be the norm; such heights of spirituality are only the daily ploughing of the field, and are only the obvious minimum which Christ accepts. He won't shew us grace (" thank") for doing this- with the implication that His grace is totally undeserved, not related to our forgiveness of others or other acts of obedience. The story paints the Master as being rather ungrateful and hard, to see his servant work so hard, then go the extra mile, and not utter a word of thanks. And the Lord is saying: 'Yes, to the natural mind, that's how I am'.

Christ says that the slave will not expect the Master to say to him " Sit down to meat" , but will expect to be told, tired as he is, to gird himself and serve his Master (Lk. 17:7,8). The Lord's words here are surely intended to recall when He said that in the Kingdom He would make us each sit down to meat and come forth and serve us (Lk. 12:37). The point of the connection is to show that Christ's treatment of us in the Kingdom *will* be different from that of an ordinary Master, but we really, honestly shouldn't expect it; we should serve because we are His servants, not expecting any praise or response from him. As it happens, He will give us all this in the Kingdom, but we shouldn't expect this at all. As the slave would have been dumbfounded if his Master did this, so should our response be in the Kingdom. What makes it difficult is that we *know* our Master is like this, that He's a most unusual Lord, one who washes our feet; and the extraordinary relationship we have with Him ought to make us eagerly desire to show a similar service to our brethren (Jn. 13:13,14).

We are *expected* by Christ to realize that our relationship with Him means total commitment to His cause. In this sense Jesus is a demanding Lord. Thus when He gave the talents to His servants, He doesn't tell them to trade with them; it seems that the one talent man is making this point when he says 'You gave me your money to look after, and I looked after it, I didn't steal it; you're unreasonable to think I should have done anything else with it, you're expecting what you didn't give'. And the Lord is; He expects that if we realize we have the honour of knowing His Truth, we should get on and do something with it, not just keep it until He comes back. He doesn't have to ask us to do this; He takes it as being obvious. The anger of the rejected man comes over as genuine; he really can't understand his Master. He's done what he was asked, and now he's condemned because he didn't do something extra. He was a Lord that man never knew- until all too late. You can imagine how you'd feel if someone gives you some money to look after, and then expects you to have doubled it, although he didn't ask you to do anything with it. Likewise the command to take up the cross daily is amplified by three small parables, one of which says that the believer is like salt, but salt is no good if it has lost its saltiness (Lk. 14:27,34). What to us is the great height of carrying Christ's cross is seen by Him as being as usual and expected as salt being salty.

Finally. The harder side of the Father and the Lord Jesus should actually serve as an attraction to the serious believer. Peter knew that if it really was the Lord Jesus out there on

the water, then He would bid him walk on the water to Him. Peter knew his Lord, and the sort of things He would ask men to do- the very hardest things for them in their situation. He knew how Jesus could be a demanding Lord. Jeremiah “knew that this was the word of the Lord” when he was asked to do something so humanly senseless- to buy property when he was in prison, when the land was clearly about to be overrun by the Babylonians (Jer. 31:8). When Jeremiah had earlier found the curses for disobedience recorded in the book of the Law which had been lost, He 'ate them', those words of cursings were " the joy and rejoicing of mine heart" - they so motivated him (Jer. 15:16 = 2 Chron. 34:18-21). When Ananias and Sapphira were slain by the Lord, fear came upon " as many as heard these things" . Many would have thought His attitude hard; this man and woman had sold their property and given some of it (a fair percentage, probably, to make it look realistic) to the Lord's cause. And then He slew them. But just afterwards, " believers were the more added to the Lord" (Acts 5:12,14). The Lord's harder side didn't turn men away from Him; rather did it bring them to Him. The balance between His utter grace, the way (e.g.) He marvelled at men's puny faith, and His harder side, is what makes His character so utterly magnetic and charismatic in the ultimate sense. Think of how He beheld the rich man and loved Him, and yet at the same time was purposefully demanding: He told Him to sell all He had and give it to beggars. Not to the work of the ministry, but to beggars, many of whom one would rightly be cynical of helping. It was a large demand, the Lord didn't make it to everyone, and He knew He was touching the man's weakest point. If the Lord had asked that the man's wealth be given to Him, he may have agreed. But to beggars.... And yet the Lord made this heavy demand with a deep love for the man.

5.6 Lord Of The Cross

It is clear enough that the parables are indeed the self-revelation of the Lord Jesus. It is noticeable that there is a relative absence of direct comment upon His future sacrifice. It's as if it would have been altogether too simplistic for the Lord of Heaven and earth to repeatedly tell us details of His supreme work. He was more interested in revealing His attitude to us than in giving us insight into the agonies of His final sacrifice- agonies which He surely knew we would never fully grasp, this side of the Kingdom.

Belief In Victory

One reason for this was that the Lord was absolutely sure that He would be victorious on the cross; His parables speak of our responsibilities and blessings on account of what He knew He would achieve for us. Thus the Master in the parable is able to remonstrate with the unforgiving servant: "I forgave thee all that debt" (Mt. 18:32). The Lord's assumption was that He would attain our forgiveness on account of successfully enduring the cross. Yet He triumphed through His faith; although He was all too aware of the human possibility of failure, He believed He wouldn't fail, He made use of the constant encouragement of the word to this end. He described Himself as the Lord of the servants, and also as the King (e.g. Mt. 18:23 cp. 31- there are other similar parables)- even before His cross. He had such confidence that He would be crowned as a result of His future cross. The tenses in Greek can be used very exactly (unlike Hebrew); it was quite within the ability of the Lord to build into His parables the concept of future Kingship. He could have implied 'When I'm King, I'll judge like this'. But instead He saw Himself as already having overcome. "Be of good cheer, I have (already)overcome the world...now I go my way to him that sent me (bypassing the cross in His words)...I have glorified thee...I have finished the work thou gavest me to do"

(Jn. 16:33,5; 17:4); these are only a few samples of the Lord's remarkable confidence that He would overcome. This confidence is reflected in the parables. He was practising His own preaching concerning believing that we have already received what we ask for. No doubt His words recorded in Jn. 15-17 and the parables which reflected this confidence came back to Him as He struggled to quell His crisis of doubt in Gethsemane.

The Samaritan Saviour

Yet there are a few insights into how the Lord saw His cross. The parable of the good Samaritan explains how Christ took compassion on the stricken spiritual state of us His people, picked us up, made Himself vulnerable to attack by placing the man on His donkey, and caused us to be fully healed. The Samaritan was less vulnerable than the robbed man, on account of having a donkey. But he made himself even more vulnerable than the robbed man had been, in order to take him to the inn. The picture of the wounded man straddled over the donkey and the Samaritan walking patiently alongside shows what easy prey they would have been. The whole process of the man's redemption by this Samaritan is an account of the cross of Christ (not least the pouring in of wine and oil). The implication is that through seeking to save us, Christ made Himself more vulnerable than He would have been if He sought only His own salvation. And the Samaritan's speed of progress was more than halved; he had to walk rather than ride, keeping the wounded man balanced on the donkey. This parable seems to reveal that Christ realized at least in some abstract sense that His concern for us in some ways made it more difficult for Him; although the reality was that the motivation for His victory was largely due to His sense of responsibility for us.

The idea of him taking care for the man is expressed in the language of Ex. 21:19, which says that if a man wounds another, "he shall pay...and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed". This somewhat odd allusion (at first sight) surely indicates that the Lord took upon Himself the full blame for our stricken condition, presumably in the sense that as the second Adam He took upon Himself the guilt of Adam. This is why there are so many connections between His death and the effects of Adam's sin (e.g. the crown of thorns, the Garden etc.). The way Christ compared Himself to a Samaritan, half Jew and half Gentile, shows that especially on the cross, this is how He felt. He was mindful of both Jewish and Gentile aspects of His future body as He died. The Jews (and His own brothers, Ps. 69:8) treated Him as half Gentile (from a Roman soldier, the Midrash claims).

The Saviour Shepherd

Jn. 10:12 implies that Christ, the good shepherd, saw the wolf coming. He didn't flee, but fought with this ferocious beast until the death. He says that if He had not done this, the sheep would be scattered. The struggle between Christ and the devil / flesh was therefore at its most intense on the cross, in His time of dying. The cross was not only a continuation of His struggle with the (Biblical) devil. It was an especially intensified struggle; and the Lord foresaw this fight coming. There is an element of unreality in this story that serves to make two powerful points. Firstly, no normal shepherd would give his life in protecting his sheep. The near fanaticism of this shepherd is also found in Am. 8:4, which describes the Lord as taking out of the mouth of the lion the legs or piece of ear which remains of the slain sheep; such is the shepherd's desperate love for the animal that now is not. The love of Christ for us on the cross, the intensity and passion of it, is quite outside any human experience. Hence the command to copy His love is a new commandment. And secondly, wolves don't normally act in the way the story says. They will only fight like this when they are cornered, and they

aren't so vicious. But the point the Lord is making is crucial to us: the devil, the power of sin in our natures, is far more powerful than we think, and the struggle against it on the cross was far far harder than we would think.

And there's a more tragic point. In the short term, the sheep were scattered by the wolf, even though Christ died so this wouldn't happen. And Christ knew in advance that this would happen (Is. 53:6; Mk. 14:27; Jn. 16:32). The Lord faced His final agony with the knowledge that in the short term, what He was dying in order to stop (i.e. the scattering of the sheep) wouldn't work. The sheep would still be scattered, and He knew that throughout the history of His church they would still keep wandering off and getting lost (according to Lk. 15:3-6). Yet He died for us from the motive of ultimately saving us from the effect of doing this. He had clearly thought through the sheep / shepherd symbolism. Unity and holding on to the faith were therefore what He died to achieve (cp. Jn. 17:21-23); our disunity and apostasy, each turning to his own, is a denial of the Lord's sufferings. And this is why it causes Him such pain.

The Binding Of Satan

Of especial interest is the parable of the strong man being bound, because through this parable the Lord outlines what He felt His victory on the cross would mean for us. And surely we ought to be all ears in response to that.

The idea of Christ binding satan (the "strong man"), stealing his goods and sharing them with His followers is a picture of His victory on the cross ⁽¹⁾. It is full of allusion to Is. 53:12, which says that on account of the fact that Christ would pour out His soul unto death and bear our sins, "he shall divide the spoil with the strong (Heb: 'those that are bound')". With the same thought in mind, Paul spoke of how through the cross, Christ "spoiled principalities and powers" (Col. 2:15). It may be that this is one of many examples of the New Testament writers thinking in a Hebrew way, despite writing in Greek. "Principalities and powers" is perhaps an intensive plural, referring to the great principality and power, i.e. Satan. The way He 'triumphed over them in himself' (Gk. + AVmg.) would certainly make more sense if they referred to the Biblical devil / satan which was overcome within Christ (cp. the language of Heb. 2:14-18; 1 Pet. 2:24). Eph. 2:15,16 appears to be parallel to Col. 2:15. It speaks of how Christ "abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments...for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby". Col. 2:15 speaks of the Lord on the cross as the victorious champion, killing "principalities and powers" and then triumphing over them by sharing their spoils with his soldiers. Eph. 2:15 speaks of Christ on the cross "slaying the enmity" (the Biblical Devil) and achieving peace and reconciliation for all those within His body.

Yet in the immediate context, the Lord is offering an explanation of why His miracles proved He was the Messiah. He hadn't yet died on the cross; but He was doing the works which were possible as a result of the binding of Satan which He would then achieve. This is yet another example of the Lord's confidence that He would overcome, and God going along with Him in this. The Lord's miracles were a physical foretaste of the great spiritual blessings which would be made available as a result of the binding of Satan by Christ's death and resurrection.

The Spoils Of Satan

The "spoils" of Satan are those things which he has taken away; surely the spoils taken from Satan by Christ refer to the righteousness which our nature takes away from us. Lk. 11:22 adds another detail to the story. The "armour" of Satan which he depends upon is taken away by Christ on the cross, and then Satan is bound, and his spoils shared out. The armour of Satan is the antithesis of the armour of righteousness (Eph. 6:11,13). As the Kingdom of God has a God who dwells in darkness, a Prince, an armour, a Christ, a dominion, a will and spirit, fruits, rewards etc., so does the kingdom of (the personified) Satan. The armour of righteousness is the fruit of the Spirit, the righteous characteristics of the Spirit. The armour of Satan is the fruits of the flesh nature. These have been taken away by Christ, He has bound Satan, and therefore what Satan has robbed us of, the fruits of righteousness, his spoils, can be taken at will by the Lord Jesus. We have shown that Christ was alluding to Is. 53:12, which says that through the cross, Christ divides the spoil with the bound ones, i.e. us. In this lies a paradox. Binding is associated with sin (Ps. 68:6; Is. 61:1; Lam. 1:14; Lk. 13:16). We are bound, in many ways, intrinsically limited by our own natures. Only at the second coming will Satan be bound, i.e. the Lord's personal achievement will be physically shared with the world (Rev. 20:2). Yet we, the bound ones, are given the goods which the Lord personally took away from the bound Satan. Those goods are the righteous attributes which our natures stop us possessing as we should.

The dividing of the spoils to us by the victorious Lord (Lk. 11:22; Is. 53:12) recalls how the Lord divided all His goods between His servants (Mt. 25:14), the dividing of all the Father's goods between the sons (representing the good and bad believers, Lk. 15:12). We have elsewhere shown that these goods refer to the various aspects of the supreme righteousness of Christ which are divided between the body of Christ ⁽²⁾. The spoils divided to us by the Lord are the various aspects of righteousness which He took for Himself from Satan. The picture of a bound strong man having his house ransacked before his eyes carries with it the idea of suspense, of daring, of doing something absolutely impossible. And so the idea of Christ really taking the righteousness which the Satan of our very natures denies us, and giving these things to us, is almost too much to believe.

Lone Hero

It is normally the fellow-soldiers who share the spoils (cp. Heb. 7:4). But we didn't even fight; the spoils are divided amongst the bound ones (Is. 53:12 Heb.). Satan in general is still unbound (cp. Rev. 20:2). Christ bound the Satan within Himself personally, and took the spoils of victory for Himself. Col. 2:15 says that Christ "spoiled" as a result of His victory on the cross; and the Greek specifically means 'to completely divest for oneself'. He is being painted as the lone hero who took it all for Himself; of the people there was none with Him in His great battle on the cross (Is. 63:3). And indeed, He was the lone hero. But the point is that He has shared with us the spoils of righteousness which He took for Himself as a result, even though we are not worthy to receive them. Seeing the teaching of the Lord is just outline principle, it is evident that through His death He gained possession of absolute righteousness, and then shared this with us.

In the first century, the outward demonstration of this was in the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. "He led captivity captive (more language of the heroic victor), and gave gifts unto men", the miraculous gifts, in the first century context (Eph. 4:8,11). But what was taken away from Satan was not only power over illness. If this was the main meaning of Satan being bound and his spoils shared with us, then it would follow that the effect of Christ's binding of Satan was only in the first century; for those miraculous gifts of the Spirit are no

longer available; illness still triumphs over God's people. The spoils of Satan refer to the righteousness which Satan limits and denies. It is this which has been taken from him, and divided to us all as a result of the cross. The miracles of the first century were a physical reflection of this, just as the rending of the temple veil and resurrection of some dead saints was a physical foretaste of the spiritual possibilities opened up by the Lord's death.

The Lord's Gifts

There are many references to the spiritual blessings which are even now mediated to us (as the whole body of Christ) on account of the Lord's death; we (as a community) are given peace and "eternal life" (Jn. 14:27; 17:2; 1 Jn. 5:11), knowledge (2 Cor. 4:6), wisdom (Eph. 1:17; James 1:15), peace (2 Thess. 3:16), understanding (1 Cor. 2:12; 2 Tim. 2:7), love in our hearts (Rom. 5:5), grace (Eph. 4:7), comfort (2 Thess. 2:16), righteousness (Rom. 5:16,17), confidence (2 Tim. 1:7), sexual self restraint (1 Cor. 7:7). All the different aspects of the 100% righteousness of our Lord, all His goods, the spoils He personally took from Satan, are divided up amongst ourselves, some having spiritual possibilities in one area, others in another. As a community we are counted as if we have overcome the world, overcome Satan, as Christ did, although on a human level we are still bound (Jn. 16:33 cp. 1 Jn. 2:13,14; 5:4). Only at the day of judgment will we have overcome all (Rev. 21:7 cp. Lk. 11:22 s.w.), but we are treated as if we have already done so.

Grasping this extensive theme helps explain the deep sense of paradox which is central to all serious self-examination. We are counted righteous, we are given spiritual gifts of righteousness now, and our self-examination reveals this to us; but we are expected to develop them (according to the parable of the pounds). Yet we also see that we are pathetically bound by our Satan, somehow held back from that life of righteousness which we would fain achieve. All these things were deeply foreseen and appreciated by the Lord when He constructed this parable of binding Satan. Christ in His own life has overcome Satan, and has graciously shared the various aspects of righteousness with the whole of His body. This is the very idea of the body of Christ; between us, over time, we will approximate to the perfect reflection of our Lord. We have each been given different aspects to develop, different parts of His personality. This explains the difference in emphasis which can be observed within the different parts of the present body, and also in the history of the body over time.

When we as a community finally grow up into Him, "unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13), the whole process of Christ-manifestation (and thereby God manifestation) will be complete. This means that the speed of spiritual development in the latter day body of Christ will determine the exact date of the Lord's return. We are (hopefully and prayerfully) just adding the final touches to the full reflection of the Lord's body. The aspects of Christ which we as a community need to develop in these last days are presumably aspects which earlier generations were unable or not called to achieve. For example, it was simply impossible for earlier generations to do much to achieve the unity of the body. Now, with the possibility of the whole world-wide family being in close contact with each other, with the breakdown of distance and language barriers, it is a real possibility that the body should be one in a manner which was simply impossible to previous generations.

It seems to me, from what knowledge I have of myself and of our community, that many of these things which Christ died to achieve are tragically rejected, at best viewed suspiciously, by 21st century believers. The idea of gifts of righteousness, of being given something

spiritual for nothing, of each only reflecting aspects of Christ rather than complete personal perfection, of striving for unity in the body...all this is almost anathema to some. Yet it's anathema to our very natures, it's against the grain of each of us. Yet I submit, I trust with at least some genuine humility, that the things discussed in the above paragraphs are all utterly fundamental to the cross of Christ; He died in order to achieve these very things.

Notes

(1) The idea of binding the strong man must surely look back to Samson. The language can't just be accidentally similar (cp. Jud. 16:21). This means that the Lord saw Samson as the very epitome of Satan, even though ultimately he was a man of faith (Heb. 11:32). Thus the Spirit doesn't forget a man's weakness, even though ultimately he may be counted righteous.

(2) See The Personal Lord in From Milk To Meat.

5.7 The Spirit Of Jesus

I observe in many new converts something which was also in me for far too long: a perception of the Lord Jesus as somehow passive, sitting dutifully at the Father's right hand until the day on the calendar comes when He will return to take us unto Himself. This really couldn't be further from the truth. The Spirit of Jesus is *so* active. *All* power has been given to Him; He it is who opens the seals so that world history can progress (Rev. 6). The essence of our belief, our being 'in the Truth', being Christians, Bible students (however you want to term it)- is a personal relationship with the Father and Son. It really isn't enough to see the Lord Jesus as a theological concept called 'Christ', a black box in our brain marked 'Jesus', who of necessity had our nature, who overcame it as our representative, and therefore opened up the way of salvation for those who identify themselves with Him. This is all vitally true; but just as cold theology, it won't save anyone. It must be so deeply believed, that the saving power of the Lord's character and the great salvation He is achieving is known *now* in our humbled souls, and reflected in our thinking and being. The idea of a *relationship* with Him, of Him actually *doing* things for us now, seems to be something we shy away from. The recognition that we do not now possess the miraculous Spirit gifts has perhaps made us go too far the other way: to a position where the Lord Jesus is only a passive onlooker in our struggles, and the Spirit of Jesus and God is effectively dead. Of course, we must ever remember that the Lord will not make us do something which is quite against our will: otherwise we would be but spiritual robots. And we must be aware of the 'cheap grace' in this area peddled by the 'evangelical' movement and their happy-clappy songs. On the other hand, if our spirituality and final redemption is left down to our unaided freewill, we won't get very far. The self-analysis of any honest Christian will soon make that apparent. We simply don't rise up to the call of true spirituality as we ought to. In our own strength, we will take the wrong turning, make the carnal choice, five times out of ten. There must be the Lord's hand and strength in our struggles for spiritual mastery. Otherwise our salvation, if ever we could achieve it, would be by human works rather than God's work and grace.

The Work Of The Spirit Of Jesus

The Greek and Hebrew words translated 'spirit' don't *only* mean 'power'. They frequently refer to the mind / heart. We read of God giving men a new heart, a new spirit; of Him working on men's hearts to make them do His will. He gives them a new spirit. This doesn't mean that they of their own volition have the *power* of the Holy Spirit gifts, as, e.g., some in

the early church did. God will strengthen the heart / spirit of those who try to be strong (Ps. 27:14; 31:24). He can even, somehow, withhold men from sinning (Gen. 20:6), and keep us from falling (Jude 24). We should therefore have no essential objection to the idea of the Lord granting us His Spirit, in the sense of His thinking, His heart / mind. The word of God is the essential medium through which the Spirit now moves; but whether this is the *only* method, and *how* God's word is used by the Father and Son to effect their purposes: of these things we cannot speak. The NT emphasizes, time and again, that after baptism, the Spirit operates upon us in this sense. *How* it operates is another question. The full force of this emphasis is only apparent when it is catalogued. Notice that none of these passages can be read with reference to miraculous possession of Spirit gifts; rather do they refer to the work of God on men's hearts. We perhaps tend to assume that "the Holy Spirit" refers to miraculous gifts far more often than it does. The Corinthians possessed the gifts, but were in a more fundamental sense Spirit-less (1 Cor. 3:1). "John did no miracle", but was filled with the Spirit from his birth. Even the Comforter, which does refer to the miraculous gifts in its primary context, was, in perhaps another sense, to be unseen by the world, and to be *within* the believers (Jn. 14:17). It could well be that the Lord's discourse with Nicodemus concerning the need to be born both of water and Spirit must be read in the context of John's baptism; his was a birth of water, but Christian baptism is being described with an almost technical term: birth of the Spirit, in that baptism into the Spirit of Jesus brings the believer into the realm of the operation of God's Spirit. Consider the following selection of passages:

"The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:5)

"The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things (i.e. *now*, in this life) serveth Christ is acceptable" (Rom. 14:17)

"The God of patience and consolation *grant you* to be likeminded one toward another" (Rom. 15:5)

"Now the God of hope *fill you* with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13)

"Eye (the natural eye) hath not seen, nor (the natural) ear heard, neither have entered into the (unregenerate) heart of (the natural) man, the things which God hath prepared...but God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit...for what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. For we have received...the spirit which is of God: that we might freely know the things that are freely given to us (of the Spirit) of God. Which things also we speak...in the words...which the Holy Spirit teacheth" (1 Cor. 2:9-13)

"Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which ye have (been given) of God" (1 Cor. 6:19)

"He which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts" (2 Cor. 1:21,22)

"He that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the

earnest of the Spirit" (2 Cor. 5:5)

" Thanks be to God, which *put the same earnest care into the heart* of Titus" (2 Cor. 8:16)

" The communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14)

" That we might receive the promise of the Spirit (a reference to the Comforter?) through faith...that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ (what Jesus Christ promised: the Comforter?) might be given to them that believe" (Gal. 3:14,22)

" After that ye believed, ye were sealed with that (i.e. the specific, promised) holy Spirit of promise (the Comforter? when else was the Spirit promised?), which is the earnest of our inheritance (which we possess) until the redemption of the purchased possession...the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power" (Eph. 1:13,14,19)

" For through him we both have access by one Spirit [of Jesus] unto the Father" (Eph. 2:18)

" I bow my knees...that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; *that* Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith: that ye, being rooted and grounded (by Him) in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth (human, unaided) knowledge, that ye *might be filled* with the fullness (the characteristics, Ex. 34:5,6 RV) of God...him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" (Eph. 3:16-21).

" Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30)

" Be (let yourselves be) filled with the Spirit [of Jesus]" (Eph. 5:18)

" This shall turn to my salvation, through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19)

" (I) do not cease to pray for you, that ye may be filled (by him) with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding: that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing...strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience" (Col. 1:9-11)

" Ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction with joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:6)

" ...God, who hath also given us his holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 4:8)

" God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the Truth...now our Lord Jesus Christ himself...comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work" (2 Thess. 2:13,17)

" God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2

Tim. 1:7)

" That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in us" (2 Tim. 1:14)

" God peradventure will *give them* repentance...God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life...renew them unto repentance" (2 Tim. 2:25; Acts 11:18; Heb. 6:6- note that God gave repentance, not just forgiveness)

" Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ...that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Tit. 3:5-7)

" I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts" (Heb. 8:10; this is a condition of the new covenant which we are now in)

" The God of peace...make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ" (Heb. 13:20,21)

" If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally...and it shall be given him" (James 1:5)

" Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience...who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation" (1 Pet. 1:2,5).

This catena of passages could be easily extended. There can be no doubt that the operation of God's Spirit upon men is a major N.T. theme. *How* exactly it is achieved is beyond my present comment- save to say, that without a true love of and response to God's word, we are frustrating the evident enthusiasm and will of the Father and Son for our redemption.

" The Lord the Spirit"

The Lord Jesus is " the Lord the spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18 RV); and " the Spirit" is one of Jesus' titles in Revelation, so closely is He identified with the work of the Spirit. The Lord calls men and women to Him, having first prepared their way to Him, guiding the preachers of His word. He brings people to baptism, enters into a husband-wife relationship with them (Eph. 5:24), has children by them (i.e. spirituality develops in our characters, Rom. 7:4), strengthens them afterwards, keeps them in Him, " in everything...co-operates for good with those that love God" (Rom. 8:28 NEB), saves them in an ongoing sense, develops them spiritually, and then finally presents them perfect at His return. He is actively subduing " all things" , even in the natural creation, unto Himself (1 Cor. 15:27,28 Gk.). However, the NT focuses on His work amongst us, the ecclesia. Where two or three are gathered, He manifests Himself in the midst of them (Mt. 18:20). He is like a priest constantly on duty, bringing His people to the Father (Mt. 26:29 cp. Lev. 11:9).

The lampstand is a symbol of the ecclesia; the lamps are us. The oil is the spirit of Jesus. Aaron was as Jesus. He daily 'orders' us, enabling us to shine (Lev. 24:4). Jesus understood this to be so in saying that He came to fan mens' lamps into brighter light, to mend smoking

flax, not give up on it. And He is actively about this work on a daily basis as were the priests.

The Lord The Preacher

The Lord Jesus has compassion upon those who are ignorant of His Gospel, just as He does upon those who fall out of the way to life (Heb. 5:2, alluding to Christ as the good Samaritan who comes to stricken men). It is He who brings men to faith in God (1 Pet. 1:21; 3:18), revealing the Father to men (Lk. 10:22; Jn. 14:21), calling and inviting them to the Kingdom (1 Pet. 5:10; Rev. 22:17), going out into the market place and calling labourers (Mt. 20:3-7), almost *compelling* men to come in to the ecclesia (Mt. 22:8-10), receiving them when they are baptized (Rom. 15:7). He is the sower who sows the word in men's hearts, working night and day in the tending of the seed after it has take root (Mk. 4:27); the one who lights the candle in men's spirituality so that it might give light to others (Mk. 4:21). He permits and sometimes blocks preaching (1 Cor. 16:7,4,19; 2 Cor. 2:12; Phil. 2:24; 1 Thess. 3:11). When a preaching effort yields a much lower or higher response than anticipated: this is nothing else but the Lord Jesus working with us. He desires to manifest His meekness and gentleness through those who preach Him (2 Cor. 10:1). This very fact that He is working *through* His preachers ought to instil a far greater attention as to what manner of persons we are, as we reflect Him to this world. The Lord Jesus works through men like us (Heb. 13:21), He comes and preaches to men through those who preach Him (Eph. 2:17; 4:21). He works in the lives of His people so that they witness about Him to others (Col. 1:29), strengthening those who preach Him (2 Tim. 4:17 and often in the Acts record), with them in their witness to the end of the world, figuratively and geographically (Mt. 28:20), working with the preachers (Mk. 16:20), and by their preaching, He reveals Himself to men (Eph. 1:7-9), taking hold of them by the Gospel (Phil. 3:12). He is like the boy who brings the ship's line to shore (AV " forerunner" , Heb. 6:20), and then guides the ship to dock; or, to use a different figure, the author (beginner) and developer of our faith (Heb. 12:3).

The Lord Who Blesses

Baptism is to be associated with the ancient rite of circumcision. The Lord Jesus Himself as it were circumcises men at their baptism, cutting off the flesh of their past lives, and thereby inviting them to live in a manner appropriate to what He has done for them (Col. 2:11-13). He wishes us to be like Him, to have *His* Spirit. In this sense, through having the spirit of Jesus, He comes and lives in the hearts of those who accept Him (Rom. 8:1-26; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 2:20). There is a resultant joy in the heart of the convert after baptism, as a result of the Lord's work (1 Thess. 1:6). To this end, He blesses us with all the varied blessings of His Spirit (Eph. 1:3 Gk.). Not only does He expect us to develop His Spirit within us, but in response to this, He sheds His Spirit upon us at baptism (Tit. 3:5,6). This statement is not to be taken as many an evangelical would read it. The Lord Jesus sheds His Spirit in the sense of an outpouring of His work and involvement in the lives of the man who has accepted the Lord as his saviour in baptism. After that act of commitment to Him, He builds us up (Col. 2:6,7; 2 Thess. 3:3-5), using other brethren to do so (1 Thess. 3:2). Every visit, every letter, the Lord graciously uses. He does, of course, work Himself on the mind of men, but never totally separate from the word of the Spirit, and never forcing a man against his own will. The Lord Jesus writes on men's hearts (2 Cor. 3:3), He personally gives grace and peace (Eph. 2:7; 2 Thess. 3:16; 2 Cor. 1:2 etc.- a major theme in Paul's salutations), and thereby changes men from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18)- all done by the Spirit of Jesus. As brethren and sisters strive to fellowship His sufferings in their self-control and self-sacrifice, so He bestows His gracious power and comfort, as part of the relationship He has with us (2 Cor.

1:5; 12:9). By doing this, He brings glory to God (the manifestation of God's characteristics) in the ecclesia (Eph. 3:21). He strengthens brethren to have spiritual attitudes, for example, to be able to accept situations (Phil. 4:11-13); He succours us in temptation (Heb. 2:18; 2 Pet. 2:9), and guides our experiences so that we grow in true love for each other (1 Thess. 3:12). He comforts our hearts and establishes our words and works (2 Thess. 2:16,17). He directs the development of our thinking towards an appreciation of the Father's matchless love (2 Thess. 3:5). In all this, He establishes the minds of believers as they should be (1 Cor. 1:8; 1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 2:16,17; 3:3), He is with our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22; Philemon 25), and preserves us in Him (Jude 1,24). In all these things, the Lord is stronger than man and human flesh. Ultimately, at the end of the days of every man and woman who has remained in Him, He will have achieved His ends. The Lord Jesus is *with us* in the sense that the spirit of Jesus is in and with us. He wishes to live in our hearts. He has come to us, through the preaching of the Gospel. The parables which suggest that He is now absent are mainly in the context of describing His return and judgment. The actual material reality of being with Him will be of such an exalted nature that *relatively speaking*, it is as if He were absent- but in essence, He is with us. He tries to make the whole ecclesia, His body, cohere and grow together (Mt. 16:18; Col. 2:19 cp. Eph. 4:15,16)- although how often do we thwart His work.

He walks among the ecclesias He is building up (Rev. 2:1), opening up the hearts of individual members for examination (Heb. 4:13), searching our motives (2 Cor. 8:21; 10:18) by the spirit of Jesus, noting the good and bad points (Rev. 2:3,4), measuring their growth (Rev. 2:5,19), washing and pruning the vine so that it gives more fruit (Jn. 15), chastening so that the fruit of spirituality improves (Rev. 3:19), giving space to repent (Rev. 2:21) and punishing the apostate (Rev. 2:5). He even works with parents, nurturing and admonishing their children in spiritual growth (Eph. 6:4). Pause to reflect- that this is what He is doing with you, and the brethren with whom you meet and mix regularly. I would go so far as to suggest that as the Lord hung on the cross, He was motivated by the thought of all this future work which His sacrifice would enable Him to do. " He gave himself for us, *that* (so that) he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Tit. 2:14). So, let's do the works- for the Lord imagined us, in our paltry zeal, responding to His cross. " For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, *that* he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). That last clause covers *all* His work- the calling and guiding of men to baptism, the blessing of them and intercession for them... And He died as He did in order to be able to accomplish all this work for us. The final outbreathing of the spirit of Jesus was made toward that small body of representatives of His faithful people gathered around the cross.

The Saviour Lord

The Lord Jesus both *was and is* the saviour of the body (Eph. 5:23,26,27); He nourishes and cherishes us through our response to His word, as a faithful husband (Eph. 5:27). The salvation He achieves for us is being worked out in an ongoing sense. Atonement and justification are expressed to us in courtroom language, but this must not take away from the passion and ongoing nature of the salvation which has and is being achieved for us by our active Lord. We receive abundance of grace and righteousness in an ongoing sense (Rom. 5:17). He saved us in His perfect life and death; but through the spirit of Jesus He is our Saviour now, day by day, we are saved because of what He does for us now that He is alive again (Rom. 5:5,10): and finally He will save us into His Kingdom when He returns. To that end, He keeps hearts and minds in peace (Phil. 4:7), and supplies our spiritual needs (Phil. 4:19). He cleanses and justifies us in an ongoing sense (Gal. 2:17; 1 Jn. 1:7), He is our

Heavenly advocate for our every sin (1 Jn. 2:1), constantly praying for us, perhaps even after our death (Heb. 7:24-27 may imply); it is almost as if He lives through His sacrifice again, as He cleanses our consciences of sin (Heb. 9:14). We go forth to Him day by day, without the camp, bearing our stake- as if the cross is still there. On the cross, the Lord Jesus resigned His riches, that we through His poverty might be rich (2 Cor. 8:8). And yet Rom. 10:12; Col. 1:27; 2:2 and Eph. 3:8 tell us that the Lord's riches are *now* bestowed upon us, the riches of the spirit of Jesus, in our experience of His grace and salvation. The point is, the essence of the Lord's love on the cross, that devotion and victory which He rose to and obtained, is all still poured out upon us now. The cross is still there. If we reject Him, we crucify Him afresh, making Him actively re-live the shame of the cross (Heb. 6:6). He intercedes for us now as He did on the cross (Rom. 8:26 cp. Heb. 5:7-9), not only in support of our prayers, but also praying for us on His own agenda (as He did for Lazarus to be raised). The Lord praying in the mountain whilst the disciples, in their unspirituality, struggled on the lake...this is a cameo of the Lord's present work for us.

The Lord Jesus is truly alive and active amongst us and within us. Paul saw the Lord Jesus always before his face in ecclesial life. He recognized that we can sin against Him (1 Cor. 8:12), tempt Him (1 Cor. 10:9), provoke Him to jealousy (1 Cor. 10:22). In his final writings, Paul charges his brethren before the Lord Jesus (e.g. 1 Tim. 5:21; 6:13; 2 Tim. 2:14; 4:1). This may suggest that at the end of his life, Paul felt ever more strongly the real presence of the Lord. It is one thing to believe that Jesus of Nazareth rose again and was exalted; it is quite another to know Him as an ever-present, ever-working reality in our lives; the man, the more-than-man, whom we should see as our Lord and Master, our Captain, the One who leads by example hour by hour, the One who died for us and rose again: the One whom we are dedicated to serving (2 Cor. 8:5; Eph. 6:6). The language of serving, ministering to, attending upon the Lord Jesus *simply fills the New Testament*. He is a real, living Master and Lord, and according to our realization of this, our grasping of the spirit of Jesus, so will our service be.

Footnote: The Lord Jesus In Acts

The Gospel records, Luke tells us, were a record of all the Lord Jesus *began* to do; the implication is that Acts is a continued account of the Lord's work (Acts 1:1). Acts is, therefore, an account of the sort of work which we have detailed above. The risen Lord lead thousands in Israel to repentance (5:31), and did the same among the Gentiles (cp. 14:27), opening hearts to His Gospel (16:14), controlling the areas preached in (16:6,10; 22:21), adding to His church (2:47), almost giving faith to men (3:16), turning them from their sins (3:26), pricking their consciences (9:5), converting them (11:20,21), revealing Himself to them (9:16), His Angel arranging conversions (8:26; 12:11,23). The Lord's preachers are described as "preaching through Jesus"; their words were on His behalf (4:2). "Through this man is preached unto you..." , Paul emphasized (13:38). Even a Messianic prophecy about Christ as light of the world is applied to His preachers (13:47). Yet He had to strengthen, deliver and encourage His weak preachers, than He might work through them the more (13:52; 18:9; 23:11; 26:17). The healings done by the apostles were effectively done by Him working through them (4:10; 9:34; 13:11). He justifies them throughout their lives (13:39 Gk.), caring for those He has converted all their days (14:23), and at the end of their lives, receives the spirit of His followers (7:56,59). Given this intense activity of the Lord Jesus, it's not surprising to find examples of believers praying to Him as well as to the Father. And this should be part of our experience of Him too- after all, do we expect to meet a much loved Lord and Saviour at judgment day with whom we've never spoken before? Speaking of "the

Son of God”, John comments that “if we ask anything according to his will he hears us” (1 Jn. 5:14). That alone is proof enough that prayer to Jesus, including requests to Him, was the norm in the first century church.

Another related theme of Acts is that the work of the Father and Son are paralleled (e.g. 16:31 cp. 34; 15:12; 26:17 cp. 22). They are working *together* to achieve our final redemption. The concept is wondrous.

5.8 The Parables Of Judgment

It is apparent that the theme of judgment to come was prominent in the Lord's mind, and He wishes us to meditate deeply upon it. His many references to judgment day in the parables of judgment reveal at least two themes:

1. He puts far more emphasis on the rejected than on the accepted.
2. There is the theme of surprise in many of the parables of judgment. Both worthy and unworthy are surprised at both the process and outcome of judgment.

The day of judgment was an important theme with the Lord. There is an element of unreality in the way He speaks of the King as being the judge (Mt. 25:40); the implication is that our judgment will be an extremely important event; the King Himself is the judge (actually, the King of heaven and earth). This indicates that the Lord wishes to put before us the picture of those who have been called to the Kingdom but reject His offer. Sadly we seem to be shying away from this picture as a community, falling victim to the sloppy picture of God peddled by an apostate Christendom. This stress on rejection is only a continuation of the emphasis of the Old Testament. The real possibility of rejection at judgment day was evidently a motivator in Paul's life (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:27), and he used "the terror" of the coming day of judgment to persuade men in his teaching of the ecclesias (2 Cor. 5:11), and also in his preaching to the world (e.g. Acts 17:31). Paul's exposition of judgment to come caused Felix to tremble (Acts 24:25). I wonder whether he would if he walked into a Christian meeting today.

The parables of judgment have stress the theme of surprise at the process and outcome of the judgment. This ought to be a powerful influence on our thinking and behaviour. For all our study and preparation, that day will surprise us, it will shake us to the roots, as the newly built houses were rocked and battered to the foundations by the stormy wind and rain (representing Christ's interrogation of our conscience at judgment, Mt. 7:27). If that day is to be a surprise to us, we better have an appropriate humility now, recognizing that ultimately our perceptions of many things will be shown to be wrong. There is even the possible implication that some who will be accepted by the Lord who even at the judgment have wrong attitudes towards their brethren. Thus before the Lord of the harvest, those who thought they had worked hardest complained that those they thought had done less, were still getting a penny. They were rebuked, but they still had their penny (cp. salvation; Mt. 20:11). The subsequent comment that the first shall be last might imply that they will be in the Kingdom, but in the least place. Likewise the brother who takes the highest place in the ecclesia will be made with shame to take the lower place (Lk. 14:9). Or the bitter elder brother, angry at the Father's gracious enthusiasm for the worthless brother, is addressed by the Father (God) in language which is relevant to the Lord Jesus: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine"

(Lk. 15:30). These sentiments are elsewhere expressed about the Lord Jesus. Is the implication that bitter elder brother is still in Christ and accepted in Him, even though his attitude to his brother is not what it should be? The least in the Kingdom will be those who break commandments *and teach men so* (Mt. 5:19); but the least in the Kingdom will be counted greater than John the Baptist was in this life (Mt. 11:11). The simple message is that there will be some in the Kingdom who simply weren't very obedient in this their day of probation. Admittedly, these details are capable of other interpretations. But bear these points in mind, especially if you ever struggle with the apparent harshness of some Christians you may meet.

Different parables of judgment give different aspects of the judgment. It may be that we can put them all together and build up a time sequence of the process of judgment. Or it may be that the judgment will be different for each of us, and the parables reflect the different cases which the Lord (even in His humanity) foresaw coming before Him at the judgment. For the rejected, the process may be like this:

Firstly, incomprehension (Mt. 25:37) and surprised anger, then realization of the Lord's verdict.

He points out their failings,

Then they give an explanation of their behaviour (Mt. 25:24), justifying themselves (Mt. 25:44).

The Lord asks a series of questions, to which there is no answer.

Then there is the speechlessness (Mt. 22:12),

Followed by an ashamed slinking away from the judgment (1 Jn. 2:28 Gk.),

A desire to escape but having no place to run (Heb. 2:3, quoting Is. 20:6 concerning the inability of men to escape from the approach of the invincible Assyrian army). The rejected will see that the Lord is coming against them with an army much stronger than theirs, and they have missed the chance to make peace (Lk. 14:31).

It surely isn't incidental that this is exactly the pattern of events which the men went through who beheld the Lord's crucifixion. It's this correspondence which makes me lean towards the idea that the descriptions of the judgment are intended to be read as chronological fragments from the rejection of those who crucify the Lord afresh.

The Figure Of Judgment

We must ever remember that judgment as we meet it in the parables of judgment is only a figure being used to describe our meeting with the Lord. It's difficult to know how far to take the figure. Thus the question arises, Does Christ know beforehand who will be accepted, and the degree of their reward? Lk. 19:15 suggests that perhaps not; the Lord calls the servants "that he might know how much every man had gained by trading". He is ordained *to be* judge of all (Acts 10:42). However, as Lord of Heaven and earth, with all power given to Him, this seems unlikely- although it must be remembered that in the same way as God is omnipotent and yet limits His omnipotence, so He may limit His omniscience. The shepherd sees the

difference between sheep and goats as totally obvious. It needs no great examination. And yet the parables and the very figure of a judge weighing up evidence and coming to a conclusion seems to suggest the opposite. Surely the idea is that the judge, the omniscient Lord of all, will act at the judgment *as if* He needs to gather evidence from us and thereby reach His verdict. The parables give this impression because they surely describe how the judgment will feel to us. We demonstrate below how many of the parables imply that our acceptance at the judgment all depends on our attitude to our brother. But we know (or we ought to) that this isn't the *only* thing that our redemption hinges on; but the point of the parables is that this will be very prominent in our minds then.

So what is the purpose of the judgment, according to the parables of judgment? My sense is that it is for our benefit, not the Lord's, although an obsession with the figure of judgment may imply the opposite. In one parable, the Lord Jesus taught that *before* the actual judgment, the righteous will tell the Lord how many pounds the pound they were given has gained. In another, the Lord's picture was of the faithful *after* the judgment had been pronounced, questioning with the Lord as to whether they really had done what He had said. We get the picture of an initial account from us, the Lord's judgment, *and then a discussion with us after the verdict has been pronounced*. This of itself indicates that we are not to see the judgment merely as a method for dividing up the rewards and sorting out the punishments. Its aim is to glorify God through our response to the realizations which we are then driven to. The faithful and all their works are foreknown. From God's perspective there seems no reason why the faithful cannot be immediately transferred to immortality at the Lord's coming. They are, after all, seen by Him as being in Christ, who has risen again and received immortality. But how little appreciation of God's grace, what small self-knowledge would we have if this were the case. A few years of what we considered suffering, scratching around on the surface of our natures, almost spoilt by the constant care of our loving Father, then death, and then the next we know we are in the eternal glory of the Kingdom. The judgment seat will surely be a vital part of our spiritual education and preparation for receiving God's nature [\(1\)](#).

Immediately after it, we are told, "the Kingdom...will be likened unto ten virgins..." (Mt. 25:1 and context), the implication being that *then* we will perceive the truths contained in that parable; only then will we fully appreciate the result of watchfulness and keeping oil in the lamps. The rejected will see themselves thrust out of the Kingdom (Lk. 13:28); as if somehow they see themselves from outside of themselves. What spirituality they thought they had they will see as it were taken away from them (Lk. 8:18 A.V.mg.). This will be the result of the judgment process. 1 Cor. 11:32 may also be a reference to the educative effect of judgment: "When we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world". The world's condemnation will be at the second coming; the judgment and chastening to which Paul refers must therefore be that of the last day. However, in the context He is making the point that our self-examination at the memorial meeting and our response to the chastening hand of God in our present life is in fact a foretaste of that final judgment experience.

Then we will realize our sinfulness, then we will behold the greatness of God's grace and the supremacy of Christ's victory. Then we will realize how small our understanding was, how little of God we knew, and how great is the reward we are being given, how out of proportion it is to our present experience and responsibilities. We almost get the feeling that the servants thought they had done well when they presented the pounds they had gained as a result of how they had used the pound given them. The pound (mina) given was equivalent to at most \$1000 (2005). Yet the reward was way out of proportion, both to what had been given, and to what they had achieved with it: ten cities! The Master's words almost seem to be a gentle

rebuke: " Because thou hast been faithful in a *very little* , have thou authority over ten cities" (Lk. 19:17); " thou hast been faithful over a *few things*, I will make thee ruler over many things" (Mt. 25:23). The " Truth" we have now (and it is that) is " a very little...a few things" . We mustn't see it as an end in itself. Yet because of our humanity, our limited vision, the way we are locked up in our petty paradigms, we tend to think that the Kingdom will be rather similar to our present experience of " the Truth" . Yet the Lord emphasizes, at least twice, that what we have now is pathetically limited compared to the infinitely greater spiritual vision of the Kingdom. We (personally) will then be made ruler over *all* that Christ has (Mt. 24:47; the " many things" of Mt. 25:23); and in him are hid *all* the riches of spiritual wisdom (Col. 2:3).

" The true riches"

Lk. 16:11, in another of the parables of judgment, hammers home the same point; if we are faithful in how we use the things lent to us by God in this life, we will be given " the true riches" . What we now have is " the Truth" , because this is how the Spirit speaks of it. But Truth is relative, and the Truth God wants us to accept as Truth is doubtless designed by Him to be acceptable by mere mortals. But it isn't " the true riches" spoken of here. We are asked to be faithful in that which is God's, and then we will be given " that which is your own" (Lk. 16:12) in the Kingdom, as if we will be given " true riches" which somehow are relevant to us alone, the name given which no one knows except ourselves (Rev. 2:17). " Riches" represent the riches of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:13), and they are paralleled with " that which is your own" , as if somehow in the Kingdom we will be given a vast depth of spiritual knowledge and perception which is in some way relevant to us alone. To me, those few words of Lk. 16:11,12 take me to the brink of understanding what the Kingdom will be about. We can go no further.

But judgment day is not only for our personal education and humbling. It is for the enlightenment of us all as a community, in that there is fair evidence that in some sense the process of judgment will be public, and all the believers will see the true characteristics of those with whom they fellowshiped in this life. Thus the unworthy will be revealed as being without a wedding garment, and the faithful will see Him (for the first time) as walking naked and in shame (Mt. 22:11; Rev. 16:15). The evil servant will be " cut asunder" (Mt. 24:51), i.e. his hypocrisy will be openly revealed for the first time (remember, he was an ecclesial elder in mortal life, according to the parable). What we have spoken in the Lord's ear will be revealed by Him openly (" from the housetops") at the judgment (Lk. 12:3).

The Goats

According to another of the parables of judgment in Lk. 19:23, the Lord will shew the unworthy how they could have entered the Kingdom. Again, notice how the judgment is for the education of those judged. He will shew them how they should have given their talent, the basic Gospel, to others, and therefore gained some interest. This has to be connected with the well known prohibition on lending money to fellow Israelites for usury; usury could only be received from Gentiles (Dt. 23:20). Surely the Lord is implying that *at the least* this person could have shared the Gospel with others, especially (in a Jewish context) the Gentile world. This would have at least brought some usury for the Lord. This would suggest that issues such as apathy in preaching, especially the unwillingness of the Jewish believers to share their hope with the Gentiles, will be raised by the Lord during the judgment process. Of course, the Lord hadn't told the servant (in the story) to lend the money to Gentiles; he was

expected to use his initiative. The overall picture of the story is that *at least the man should have done something!* The Lord would even have accepted him if he lent money on usury, something which the Law condemned; if he'd have done *something*, even if it involved breaking some aspects of God's will... Instead, his attitude was that he had been given the talent of the Gospel, and he saw his duty as to just keep hold on it. He was angry that the Lord should even suggest he ought to have done anything else! We really must watch for this attitude in ourselves. He justifies himself by saying that he has "kept" the money (Lk. 19:20), using the word elsewhere used about the need to *keep* or hold on to the doctrines of the One Faith (1 Tim. 1:19; 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:13; Rev. 6:9). He had done this, he had held on, he hadn't left the faith. And he thought this was enough to bring him to the Kingdom. Sadly, our view of spirituality has almost glorified this very attitude. Any who show initiative have been seen as mavericks, as likely to go wrong. The emphasis has been on holding on to basic doctrine, marking your Bible with it, attending weekly meetings about it (even if you snooze through them), regularly attending...And, son, you won't go far wrong. The Lord, in designing this parable as He did, had exactly this sort of complacency in mind.

Finally. The Lord foretells the spiritual culture which He will show even to the rejected, when He mentions how He will call the rejected "friend" (Mt. 22:12), using the same word as He used about Judas (Mt. 26:50). Vine describes it as a word meaning "comrade, companion, a term of kindly address expressing comradeship". If this is how the Lord will address those who have crucified Him afresh- surely there is hope, abundant hope, for us.

The Sheep

The figure of judgment in the parables of judgment would suggest a grim faced judge, with all the dignity and soberness of the courtroom, whatever the verdict is. But there are elements of unreality in the pictures of judgment which are put before us in the parables. This judge is emotionally involved in each case (unheard of in a human court); He exalts: "Well done...enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Mt. 25:23). The picture of the happy judge, breaking down in joy at the verdict, inviting the hesitant believer to share his joy in their victory. The picture seems so imaginable; "enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" suggests a reticence, an unbelief, at the outcome. Compare this with the one hour labourers receiving a day's pay (Mt. 20:9), and the faithful almost remonstrating with their Lord that they have not done the things He reminds them of (Mt. 25:38-40) ⁽²⁾. But we will overcome our reticence; we *will* enter our Lord's joy; for we shall stand before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy (Jude 24). The Master is so delighted that His servants are watching for Him that He immediately sits down and gets a meal ready for them, doing the serving Himself (Lk. 12:37). There is an arresting element of unreality here. Would a Master really do this, at such an unlikely time at night, would he really serve himself, and would he really be so glad that the servants were waiting up for him? But these elements of unreality serve to teach the lessons: that the Lord will have unspeakable joy at His return because of our expectancy of the second coming, and He will surprise us by His glee and enthusiasm for us. In Him, in that day, will be fulfilled Zeph. 3:17: "The Lord thy God in the midst of thee...He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing. I will gather them that are sorrowful (us) for the solemn assembly", when the Lord will keep Passover with us again.

As stressed above, the purpose of the judgment is for our benefit, to develop our appreciation and self-knowledge. This is perhaps reflected by the ten pound man saying that Christ's pound had gained, had worked to create (Gk.) the ten pounds he could now offer (Lk. 19:16).

The man who achieved five pounds uses a different word in describing how the pound given him had made five pounds (Lk. 19:18), while the men in Mt. 25:20,22 uses yet another word to say the same thing. This is surely a realistic picture, each of the faithful comes to the same conclusion, that what spirituality they have developed is an outcome of the basic Gospel given to each of us at our conversion; yet they express this same basic idea in different words. The place of basic doctrine as the basis for the development of all true spirituality should need no further stress, if the Lord's teaching here is appreciated. But in the present easy-going attitude of the brotherhood, the importance of basic doctrine *does* need stressing the more. The man who didn't develop as he should have done accuses the Lord of reaping what he didn't sow (Lk. 19:21). But the Lord does sow the seed of the basic Gospel, as the parable of the sower makes clear. The point is that the unworthy fail to let that seed bring forth fruit, they fail to see that the Lord expects fruit from those doctrines they have been given. But they fail to see the link between the basic Gospel and practical spirituality; they feel he's reaping where he didn't sow. Christ will require His own, i.e. that which he has sown, the basic Truths of the Gospel, with usury (Lk. 19:23). The parable of the tiny seed moving the great mountain was surely making the same point; the basic Gospel, if properly believed, will result in the most far reaching things (Mt. 17:20 cp. 13:31). There is an element of unreality in the parables of the judgment, especially that of the pounds: wise use of a few coins results in power over several cities. We are left to imagine the men marvelling in disbelief at the reward given to them. They expected at most just a few pounds to be given to them. And in their response we see a picture of the almost disbelief of the faithful at their rewards.

Attitude To Others

One of the themes of the parables of judgment is that our attitude to our brethren will have an impact on the outcome of the judgment. Mt. 25:45 seems to suggest that our attitude to the weak ones of the ecclesia will especially be considered by the Lord. Of course, He knows the verdict and why He has reached it already; but it seems that the parable is teaching that *we* will be brought to realize that our attitude to our weak brethren has such an impact on our position before the Lord. For then we will realize that we are all weak. Consider His repeated emphasis on the importance of our attitude to others, to using the Truth we have been given in the service of others:

- The 'unjust steward' was saved because he forgave others their debts after getting into a mess himself. He wasted his Lord's goods, as the prodigal did (Lk. 15:13 connects with 16:2). Seeing the prodigal represents all of us, the lesson is surely that we all waste our Lord's goods, therefore the basis of salvation is through our forgiving others as an outcome of our own faith in the Lord's grace. This is one explanation of why the parable of the steward flows straight on from that of the prodigal.
- The rich man was condemned for not helping Lazarus.
- The Pharisee was condemned not just for being self-righteous but especially for his despising of his sinful brother.
- The one talent man was rejected because he didn't give his talent to the Gentiles and earn usury for the Lord.
- The big debtor was rejected because he wouldn't forgive his brother. The Lord says that He

will make such a person pay all the debt (Mt. 18:36). There is a connection here with an earlier parable, where He spoke of how unless a man agrees with his adversary quickly, the adversary will drag him to court and jail until he pays all that is due (Mt. 5:26). The adversary of the parable, therefore, is the Lord Himself. He is the aggressive invader marching against us with an invincible army (Lk. 14:31), with whom we must make peace by total surrender. Putting the Lord's teaching in context, He is showing Himself to be very harsh and demanding on the unforgiving believer, but very soft and almost unacceptably gracious to those who show forgiveness. Consider these aspects of the parables of judgment:

- The elder son went out of the Father's fellowship because he couldn't accept the return of the younger son.
- Many will be rejected at the judgment because they refused to care for their weak brethren.
- The drunken steward was condemned because he failed to feed the rest of the household and beat them.
- The lamp went out because it was kept under a bucket rather than giving light to others.
- Perhaps the hard working labourers were sent packing by the Lord because of their complaint at the others getting the same payment for what they considered to be inferior work to theirs. If the parable is meant to be read in this way, then it seems so sad that those hard working men (cp. brethren) were *almost* saved, but for their attitude to their brethren.

The RSV renders 2 Cor. 5:10 as teaching that we will be judged according to the deeds we have done in "the body", and it may just be that Paul had in mind 'the body of Christ'. Our actions there, to our brethren, will be the basis of our judgment. To keep the faith to ourselves without reaching out into the world of others was therefore foreseen by the Lord as a very major problem for us. And indeed it is. Disinterest in ecclesial meetings and overseas brethren, unwillingness to really enter into the struggles of others, apathy towards preaching, all often as a result of an obsession with ones' own family...this is surely the sort of thing the Lord foresaw. We all have the desire to keep our faith to ourselves, to hold onto it personally on our own little island...and it was this attitude which the Lord so repeatedly and trenchantly criticized. And in his demanding way, He implied that a failure in this would cost us the Kingdom. He more than any other must have known the desire for a desert island spiritual life; but instead He left the 99 righteous and went up into the mountains (i.e. He prayed intensely, after the pattern of Moses for Israel?), in order to find the lost sheep (Mt. 18:12). In a sense the judgment process has already begun; Mt. 18:24 says that the Lord has "begun to reckon" now, and so now we must urgently forgive one another. He is watching our attitude to each other here and now. Mt. 18:33,35 teach that the attitude we have towards our brother deep in our heart will be revealed and discussed with us at the judgment.

The lighting of the candle is a symbol of our conversion (Mt. 25:1; Heb. 10:32). Our lamps were lit by the Lord Jesus (Lk. 8:16; Heb. 10:32) for the purpose of giving light to the house. The Lord lights a lamp in order to search for His lost coin, that weak brother or sister that means as much to Him on a deep, indescribably personal level as a woman's dowry money in the Middle East (cp. a wedding ring; Lk. 15:8). But the lamp He lights is us. This is yet another example of His parables being intended to fit together. We must burn as a candle now, in shedding forth the light, or we will be burnt at the judgment (Mt. 5:15 and Jn. 15:6 use the same words). This is but one of many examples of the logic of endurance; we must

burn anyway, so why not do it for the Lord's sake and reap the reward ⁽³⁾? The ecclesias, groups of believers, are lampstands (Rev. 2:5 cp. Ps. 18:28). We must give forth the light, not keep it under a bucket, because "there is nothing hid which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad" (Mk. 4:21,22). In other words, the very reason why God has hidden the things of His word from the world and some aspects of them from our brethren, is so that we can reveal them to them.

If we don't shine forth the light, both in the world and in the household, we are not fulfilling the purpose for which we were called. Perhaps this is the meaning of Acts 16:10, where Luke says that they preached in Macedonia because they perceived that "the Lord had called us *for* (in order that) to preach the gospel (in this case) unto (the Macedonians)". Whether such an interpretation appeals or not, there are many passages which teach that our salvation will be related to the extent to which we have held forth the word both to the world and to the household (Prov. 11:3; 24:11,12; Dan. 12:3; Mk. 8:38; Lk. 12:8; Rom. 10:9,10 cp. Jn. 9:22; 12:42; 1:20; 1 Pet. 4:6 Gk.). Those who reap the harvest of the Gospel will be rewarded with salvation (Jn. 4:36). Such work *isn't* just an option for those who want to be enthusiastic about it. With what measure we give to others in these ways, we will be measured to at the judgment (Mk. 4:24 and context). 1 Cor. 3:9-15 likewise teaches that the spiritual "work" of "any man" with his brethren will be proportionate to his reward at the judgment. Paul certainly saw his reward as proportionate to the quality of his brethren (2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 2:19,20; Phil. 2:16; 4:1).

The Senior Slave

Mt. 24:42-50 teach that the servant who must feed the household with appropriate food represents each of us; he must watch for the Lord's return and be diligent in feeding the household; yet (it must be stressed), this parable is intended for each of us (cp. Mk. 13:37). If he doesn't do this, he is rejected. We are set a high standard here. Christ is "the goodman of the house", i.e. the senior slave who is responsible for all the others (Mt. 20:11), but here "the goodman of the house" represents each of us (Mt. 24:43; Lk. 12:39,40). We are in Him, and therefore we must try to share His level of concern for His household. He carried His cross for us, for our salvation. And He asks us to share His cross, i.e. His devotion to the body of believers, even unto death.

The "porter" was commanded to watch (Mk. 13:34); and he represents us all (Mk. 13:37). Watching over God's household is an idea taken from Ez. 3:17; as the prophets in the Old Testament parables of judgment were the watchmen of the house of Israel, so each of us are. When the Lord had earlier told this parable, Peter (like us) asked the obvious question: "Speakest thou this parable unto us (the twelve in the first century), or even to all?" (Lk. 12:41). The Lord's basic reply was "To all", although He didn't say so explicitly. Instead He said that if the Lord of the servant was away and came back unexpectedly, late at night, what a joy it would be to him if he found the lights on and the servant working diligently in caring for the others; *any* servant doing that is going to give his Lord joy; 'So, Peter, don't think about whether others are called to do the job, this is the ideal servant, you're all servants, so you get on and try to be like this ideal servant!'. The porter's job was to keep out wolves; the Greek for "porter" literally means 'the watcher' (s.w. Jn. 10:1, another example of how the parables fit together). An apathy in looking out for false teachers means we aren't doing the porter's job well, we are sleeping rather than looking after the household. Mt. 24:43-45 define watching for Christ's return as tending to the needs of our brethren; this is what will lead our hearts towards preparedness for the second coming, rather than the hobby of trying to match

current events with Bible prophecy.

" God the judge of all"

One final feature of the parables of judgment calls for attention. They often speak of the Lord Jesus as if He is the role of God. This shows the intensity of God manifestation there will be in Christ at the day of judgment; and yet the way Christ manifests God so closely is seen in other parables too. Thus Mt. 15:13 speaks of the Father as the sower, whilst Mt. 13:24,37 applies this figure to the Lord Jesus. Likewise in the parables of Lk. 15, God the Father lost the Son, but Christ, the seed of the woman, lost the coin, and He was the shepherd who lost the sheep. In constructing these parables as He did, surely the Lord was emphasizing that the Father and Son are absolutely united in their attitude to us; it is on account of this that the Father can really know our feelings as Christ does, even though He has never been human. Many of the descriptions of Christ in the parables are taken from Old Testament passages describing the feelings of *God* towards Israel, showing the truth of this in the first century context when Israel were still God's people. Thus the Lord's description of Himself as a hen wishing to gather the chicks of Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37) is based on Is. 31:5: " As mother-birds flying, so will the Lord defend Jerusalem" Heb.). Yet Lk. 13:8 could suggest that Christ's attitude to Israel was even more patient than that of God Himself; yet because their feelings to Israel are identical, the implication is perhaps that the Son enables and thereby persuades the Father to be even more patient with us than He would naturally be!

Notes

(1) And if we consider why there will be a Millennium instead of the Kingdom just starting, surely the answer must be that it is for *our* benefit, a preparation for us to enter the fully established Kingdom. Some of the mortals of the last generation will be given the opportunity to be the mortal inhabitants of the Millennium, whilst millions of others in previous generations have lived and died without hope. It seems one of the reasons why they will be there is for our benefit.

(2) This all suggests that even after our acceptance at the judgment, we may be more 'human' than we may now imagine. Some will be in the Kingdom who have big questions about the justice of God (Mt. 20:12,13 " friend"); the elder son is apparently accepted in the Father's fellowship, although his attitude to his weak brother is so wrong (Lk. 15:31); the wise virgins, apparently selfishly, won't give any oil to the others; some will sit in the Kingdom in " shame" because they thought they were greater than other brethren (Lk. 14:9- cp. the elder brother?); some remonstrate that a highly rewarded brother already has ten pounds, and surely doesn't need any more exaltation (Lk. 19:25).

(3) See [The Logic Of Endurance](#).

5.9 Parables Of The Kingdom

The Mustard Seed

There are a number of insights throughout the parables into how the Lord perceived His future Kingdom. Significantly, His emphasis in the parables of the Kingdom is upon our spiritual status then, rather than on the physical wonders which His reign will bring on the earth. He foresaw how although our faith is so puny now, as a mustard seed, we will be those who will be as a solid tree, a real place of refuge, to the nations of the Millennium (Mt. 13:31,32 = Ez. 17:23,24). Just a very small amount of real faith during this life will enable us to move " this mountain" , surely referring to Mount Zion in the immediate context (Mt. 17:20). The idea of Mount Zion being moved sends the mind to Zech. 14:4,5, describing how

Mount Zion will be moved at the Lord's return; and also to Ps. 125:1, which speaks of how they who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be removed; and yet Christ said we *will* remove it by prayer. The point of these allusions is surely to show that real faith will bring about the coming of the Kingdom, which is a totally super-human achievement; the unshakeableness of Mount Zion is likened to the solidity of true faith. The Lord's point seems to be that if we truly believe, then the coming of the Kingdom will be brought about by our faith; the outcome of our faith in this life will be seen in the Kingdom. But what our faith will achieve in the Kingdom will be hugely out of proportion to what it really is now.

But there is another way to read Mt. 17:20: "If ye have (now) faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall (in the Kingdom) say to this mountain (of Zion), Remove hence..." ; as if in the Kingdom we will be control of the physical world as the Lord was even in His mortality. In this case, His commanding of the sea and waves will be shared by us in the Kingdom; not just sea and waves, but mountains too (Mt. 8:27).

Handing Back The Money

The parables of the Kingdom speak of the eternal consequences of the judgment. The Lord will require His own at the judgment (Lk. 19:23). This doesn't mean, as the one talent man thought, that Christ will require us to give back to Him the basic doctrines of the Gospel which we were given at conversion. The Greek means to exact regularly, in an ongoing sense (s.w. Lk. 3:13); Strong defines it as meaning "to perform repeatedly...not a single act". When the Lord examines our achievements at the judgment, He will expect to keep on receiving the result of what we have achieved for Him in this life. This is the ultimate encouragement for us in our preaching and encouraging of others, as well as ourselves; what we achieve now will yield eternal, continual fruit to the Lord.

But Mt. 25:27 says that at the judgment, the Lord will *receive* back His own. Strong defines this as "to carry off, away from harm" (the same word is used in Heb. 11:19 re. Abraham *receiving* Isaac from the dead). There is the suggestion that the Truth which the Lord has given us is valuable to Him, and He fears our losing it; those who lose the faith lose the personal possession of the Lord Jesus. But at the judgment, when we hand it back to the Lord, He (not to say, we) will have that deep knowledge that now we can't fail Him any more, we no longer have the possibility of causing harm and loss to the treasured wealth which has been entrusted to us.

The Limitation Of Immortality

There is a theme presented in the parables of the Kingdom which one is cautious to develop. But with child-like enthusiasm to enter deeper into the Hope of the Kingdom, I offer the following point for consideration: The Angels are in some ways limited, in power and understanding, despite possessing God's nature. It's more than likely that we in the Kingdom will eternally grow in knowledge (and perhaps power?) as the Angels do [\(1\)](#). This lack of full knowledge and comprehension is hinted at in the parables:

- "They said unto him, Lord, he hath ten pounds" (Lk. 19:25) suggests that "them that stood by" somehow questioned the Lord's judgment; their sense of equality was not that of their Lord. They felt that the gloriously strong brother with his wonderful reward didn't need it to be made even more wonderful. "Them that stood by" could refer to the Angels, or to the way in which the judgment will in some sense take place in the presence of all the believers [\(2\)](#).

The fact is, even with God's nature, it will be difficult to appreciate the principles of judgment which the Lord uses; and so how much more difficult is it today!

- Those hired into the vineyard first " supposed (on judgment day) that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house...but he answered one of them (what's the significance of this?) and said, Friend (a description of the faithful, Jn. 15:15; James 2:23), I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is...I will give unto this last, even as unto thee" (Mt. 20:10-15). If the penny represents salvation, the harder workers only started questioning once they saw, to their amazement, the weaker and shorter workers receiving a penny. They received the promised reward of salvation, but couldn't understand the principles on which the Lord rewarded the weaker servants. If the hard working faithful will have a problem with this even at the judgment, how much more now?

Taken individually, none of these points from the parables of the Kingdom is very convincing. But put together, I suggest we see the emergence of a theme. It may be that these are the thoughts which pass through the minds of the responsible as they watch the judgment process; for it seems that in some sense it will be public.

Notes

(1) I have outlined the Biblical basis for this in *The Last Days* Chapter 27 (London: Pioneer, 1992).

(2) See [Parables Of Judgment](#).

5.10 The Love Of Christ

God has more spiritual culture, for want of a better way of putting it, than to describe the love of Christ just with a string of superlative adjectives. Paul prayed that his Ephesians would be strengthened by the Spirit's working in the inner man, so that they would "be strong to apprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge" (Eph. 3:18,19 RV). There is a paradox here; to know something that can't be known, that passes knowledge. We can only know that love by God working on our inner man, so that we realize the experience we have of the love of Christ, and by seeing it manifested in others. Yet we are helped in this by the way the Bible brings before us men who reached such a high level of love that it to some extent typified the love of Christ. If we appreciate that what they manifested was a poor shadow of His love, we start to see something of this length and depth and height which we fain would "be strong to apprehend".

The Love Of Moses

Take Moses. Israel hated him, they thrust him from them (Acts 7:39); due to their provocation he failed to enter the land. He had done so much for them, yet they bitterly rejected him- "this Moses", as they called him (Ex. 32:1,23 cp. Acts 7:35). But when God wanted to destroy them and make of Moses a great nation, he pleaded for them with such intensity that he achieved what few prayerful men have: a change (not just a delay in

outworking) in God's categorically stated intention. And especially, consider that time when Israel had sinned with the golden calf. Moses said that he would climb that mighty mountain yet again, and "I will make an atonement for your sin" (Ex. 32:30). He knew well enough that no atonement was possible without the shedding of blood (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22; and see the similarity with Phinehas making an atonement for Israel's forgiveness through the slaying of Zimri and Cozbi in Num. 25:8,13). And yet he hoped ("peradventure") that God would accept him as an atonement: "I will make an atonement". He intended to offer his own life as an atonement for them- for that people who hated him, who pushed him from them and in their hearts returned to Egypt. He climbed that mountain (nearly a day's work), and at the top he made an even finer and altogether higher offer to the Angel: "If thou wilt forgive their sin...blot me, I pray thee (notice the earnestness of his desire) out of thy book" (Ex. 32:32) (1). And he begged Yahweh to accept this for 40 days and nights, fasting without food or water (Dt. 9:17; 10:10). It wasn't just a once off, emotional outburst of a moment. Omission of the name from God's book is a clear reference to a believer losing his part in God's Kingdom (Ex. 32:33; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 17:8; 21:27; 22:19). This was not an offer made in hot blood; after the hours of climbing the mountain, Moses had decided what he sorely wished to do: to offer his place in God's Kingdom, so that Israel might be forgiven one awful sin. This is just superb. To offer one's physical life is one thing; to offer one's eternal life is quite another. And he pleaded with God to accept his offer, just for the forgiveness of one sin, of a people who hated him and were evidently bent on fulfilling the lust of the flesh. If this is how much Moses loved sinful Israel, think how much more Christ loved them. And if that's the level of Christ's love for sinful Israel, consider (or try to) the level of Christ's love for us who at least try not to thrust Him from us, who wish, in our weakness, to follow Him to the end.

To be blotted out of the book God had written may have been understood by Moses as asking for him to be excluded from an inheritance in the promised land; for later, a 'book' was written describing the various portions (Josh. 18:9). The connection is made explicit in Ez. 13:9: "...neither shall they be written in the writing of the house of Israel, neither shall they enter into the land of Israel". To be blotted out of the book meant to not enter the land (surely Ezekiel is alluding to Moses' experience). If Israel were to be blotted out there and then in the wilderness, then Moses wanted to share this experience. God had just spoken of 'blotting out' Israel from before Him (Dt. 9:14), and making a nation of Moses; but now Moses is asking to share in their condemnation rather than experience salvation without them. This was the extent of his devotion. On the last day of his life, Moses reeled off the great speech of Deuteronomy, knowing full well that he was to die without entering the land. In Dt. 9:18 he says that his prayer of Ex. 32:32 was heard- in that he was not going to enter the land, but they would. Hence his urging of them to go ahead and enter the land- to experience what his self-sacrifice had enabled. In this we see the economy of God, and how He works even through sin. On account of Moses' temporary rashness of speech, he was excluded- and yet by this, his prayer was heard. He was temporarily blotted out of the book, so that they might enter. Moses' fleeting requests to enter the land must be read as a flagging from the height of devotion he reached, rather like the Lord's request to escape the cross in Gethsemane. But ultimately he did what he intended- he gave his place in the Kingdom / land so that they might enter [although of course he will be in the future Kingdom]. This is why Moses stresses on the last day of his life that he wouldn't enter the land for Israel's sake (Dt. 1:37; 3:26; 4:21). He saw that his sin had been worked through, and the essential reason for him not entering was because of the offer he had made. It "went ill with him for their sakes" (Ps. 106:32).

In all this, Moses was typifying the death of the Lord. Is. 53:8 describes His cross as being “cut off [Strong: ‘excluded’] from the land of the living” (s.w. ‘the congregation’ - of Israel), for the transgression of His people. This is undoubtedly reference to the self-sacrificial exclusion of Moses from the land, that Israel might enter. The Lord died the death of a sinner, He chose like Moses to suffer affliction with us, that we might be saved. The intense prayer of Moses for Israel’s salvation inspired David in prayer (Ps. 25:11 = Ex. 32:30,31). And Paul makes a series of allusions to Moses, which climax in an invitation to pray like Moses for the salvation of others:

2 Tim. 2:24,25

Moses

“the servant of the Lord

A very common title of Moses

must not strive

As Israel did with him (Num. 26:9)

but be gentle unto all

The spirit of Moses

apt to teach

As was Moses (Ex. 18:20; 24:12; Dt. 4:1,5,14; 6:1; 31:22)

patient

As was Moses

in meekness

Moses was the meekest man (Num. 12:3)

instructing those that oppose themselves

at the time of Aaron and Miriam’s self-opposing rebellion

if God peradventure will give them repentance [i.e. forgiveness]”

“Peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin” (Ex. 32:30)- and he prayed 40 days and nights for it.

And note too:

2:19 = Num. 16:5,26

2:20 = Num. 12:7

2:21 = Num. 16:37

2:22 = Num. 12:2; 16:3

2:26 = Num. 16:33

This is quite something. The height of Moses’ devotion for His people, the passion of his

praying, shadowing as it did the matchless intercession and self-giving of the Lord, really is our example. It isn't just a height to be admired. It means that we will not half heartedly ask our God to 'be with' brother x and sister y and the brethren in country z, as we lie half asleep in bed. This is a call to sustained, on our knees prayer and devotion to the salvation of others.

The Love Of David

This kind of logical extension can be repeated in the consideration of David's love for Saul. Saul was his enemy, he drove David to absolute despair, his senseless persecution of David was articulated in every way he knew how. In all this we see played out the prototype of the hatred between the Jews and the Lord. Yet when Saul was slain for his sins, David's love for him was overflowing, to the point that his people saw that this was no political theatricism (2 Sam. 3:36,37). His lament over Saul was taught to the children of Judah (2 Sam. 1:18); and the chapters of 2 Samuel are full of examples of David's expression of love for Saul in every way he knew how. But it was not only at Saul's death that David had these feelings; after all, it's a lot easier to love someone when they're dead. Psalm 35 is David's commentary on his feelings for Saul: "They laid to my charge things that I knew not. They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul (spiritually). But as for me, when they (Saul and his family, in the context) were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into my bosom. I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother (i.e. Jonathan, 2 Sam. 1:26): I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother" (Ps. 35:11-15). Bowing down heavily as a man weeps at his mother's graveside is a powerful image. A man's grief for his mother must surely be the finest picture David could have chosen. That sense of infinite regret that he didn't appreciate her more. "As one that mourneth for his mother". But David goes on: "But in mine adversity, they rejoiced...". It's as if David realized that he had reached the point where he knew that he really did truly love his enemies. He wept for Saul as a man weeps at his dear dear mother's graveside. And he did this for a man who was utterly worthless. And this is a poor, poor shadow of the Lord's peerless love for Israel. And how much more does He love us, who at least try to make up for Israel's cruel indifference?

And finally, consider how thanks to David building an altar at his own expense and asking God to kill him and his family, God stopped the plague upon Israel (2 Sam. 24:16,17- the stretched out hand of God in destruction was what David asked to be upon him and his family). Israel were suffering the effect of their own sin, in not paying the temple tax (Ex. 30:11-16); but in the spirit of Christ, David was willing to die for them. He seems to have sincerely felt that their sin was his sin (25:17). And his dominant desire was counted as if it had been done, and thanks to his self-sacrificial spirit, the people were saved when they personally were unworthy.

The Love Of Jeremiah

There are so many descriptions of the pain of Jeremiah for an Israel who plotted to take his life, who "devised devices against me, saying...let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be no more remembered" (11:19), an Israel whom he would fain run away from in despair (9:2). Yet in response to this, "for the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt...oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night (in prayer?) for the slain of the daughter of my people". And I could go on and on with passages like this. He broke into a new paradigm of grief and love for Israel, which his people couldn't understand: "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by (as he sat by the wayside

weeping)? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me" (Lam. 1:12). God thrice forbade him to pray for Israel (7:16; 11:14; 14:11), yet they asked him to do so (21:2; 37:3), with the possible implication that they knew he was willing to do so. Finally, after all the Jews had done to him, they asked Jeremiah: "Pray for us unto the Lord thy God...then Jeremiah the prophecy said unto them, I have heard you, behold, I will pray unto the Lord" (42:2,4). Jeremiah went right against the specific prohibition of God because He so loved them. And Jeremiah's love, the real deep seated feeling, right deep in the very centre of his soul, was for a nation hardened against the Lord their God. And the love of Christ far, far exceeds anything Jeremiah reached.

The Love Of Caleb

Caleb was a Gentile who became adopted into the tribe of Judah and became a leader of the tribe. Yet he was graciously given an inheritance in the land of Israel. By his spiritual ambition, he was granted Hebron as his inheritance. He went up there and drove out the tribes with a faithful zeal unmatched in Israel. And yet, he gave away that city- for Hebron became a priestly city for the Levites to live in. He gave his place in the Kingdom to others (Josh. 14:12)- that was the level of love this great man reached.

The Love Of Paul

Paul had the spirit of Moses when he could say that he could wish himself accursed from Christ for the sake of his Jewish kinsmen. He was willing in theory to give up his salvation for them, even though he knew that in actual fact this is not the basis on which God works. He emphasizes that he is not using mere words: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not [note the double emphasis], my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 9:1-3). The Holy Spirit confirmed that what he felt in his conscience for them was in fact valid; this really was the level of devotion Paul reached for a nation who systematically worked for his extermination, and even more painfully, for the infiltration and destruction of his lifetime's work. The Jewish infiltrators had indirectly had their effect on Corinth, who mocked and denigrated the Paul who would have laid down his life for them. And yet time and again he calls them his brethren, he sees them as an innocent Eve in Eden, about to be beguiled by the snake of the Jewish infiltrators; he sees them as a chaste virgin. But remember how they denigrated him, in the cruellest ways. Yet his love for them was surpassing. And now with intended repetition, I make my point again: the love of Paul for Israel, for Corinth, the love of Jeremiah and Moses for Israel, the love of David for Saul...all these fantastic peaks of human love and sacrifice were only dim, hazy shadows of the love of Christ for wayward Israel, for whom primarily He died (Gal. 4:4,5). If this was his love for those who rejected Him, how much higher is His love for us who follow in weakness.

"Greater love..."

In the New Testament, we see the love of Christ directly, openly displayed. Particularly on the cross we see the very essence of love. Having loved His own, He loved us there unto the end, to the end of the very concept of love and beyond (Jn. 13:1). He knew that in His death, He would shew "greater love" than any man had or could show. There He declared the Name and character of God, "that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them" (Jn. 17:26). "Walk in love, as Christ hath loved us (in that) he hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2). "Hereby perceive we love, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 Jn. 3:16 Gk.). The

death of the cross was therefore the very definition of love; love is a crucifixion-love, a conscious doing of that which is against the grain of our nature. And you will have noticed that all these references add that we must therefore respond by showing that love to our brethren. It is not an option. To be unloving is to deny the very essence of the cross of Christ. Paul states that because of the Lord's death "as an offering for sin", thereby the 'commandment ["requirement" RVmg] of the Law is fulfilled in us' (Rom. 8:3,4). But in the practical part of that same letter, Paul defines the requirement / commandment of the Law to be one thing- simply "love" (Rom. 13:10). Love as God understands it is that we keep or fulfil His commandments (1 Jn. 5:3). What, then, is the connection? How could the Lord's death on the cross lead to the fulfilment in us of the Law's commandment / requirement of love? Quite simply, because it is now impossible for a man to be passive before the cross, and not to be inspired by Him there towards a life of genuine love. Paul isn't simply making some mechanistic, theological statement- that the cross fulfilled the Law, because it fulfilled all the types etc. It fulfilled the Law in that the Law intended to teach love; and the cross and dying of the Lord Jesus is now the means by which we can powerfully be inspired to the life of love which fulfils the entire Law.

He died as He did so that the love of God, the real meaning of love, might be displayed in a cameo, in an intense, visual, physical form which could be remembered and meditated upon. Observing the memorial meeting is the very least we can do to this end; and this itself is only a beginning. "The love of Christ constraineth us" not to live for ourselves, but unto him that died for us, and to show this by our concern for our brethren (2 Cor. 5:14 and context). Marvin Vincent has a telling comment on the Greek word translated "constraineth": "The idea is not urging or driving, but shutting up to one line or purpose, as in a narrow, walled road" (Word Studies Of The N.T.). We shouldn't be driven men and women; we are not urged or driven by the cross, but shut up by it to one purpose. There are only two ways before us, to death or life; and we are shut up by the cross in that road to life. In this lies the sustaining and transforming power of the cross, if only we would meditate upon it. It is an epitome of every facet of the love of God and of Christ. There the Name of God was declared, that the love that was in the Father and Son may be in us (Jn. 17:26).

You may know that I am an enthusiast for reading through a Gospel record in one or two sittings. One theme that jumped out at me once when going through was that whenever the Lord starts talking about His impending death, the disciples change the subject! And so it is with us. There is something that makes us turn away from the real import of the cross. The way exhortations so often stray from the essential point, the way we return so quickly to the things of here and now after breaking bread... we all know our guilt. Isaiah laments that despite the wonder of the atonement God would work out on the cross, scarcely any would believe it, and men would turn away their faces from the crucified Christ (Is. 53:1,3). And so it happened. Men and women went out that Friday afternoon to behold it, they saw it for a few moments, beat their breasts and returned to their homes (Lk. 23:48). My sense is that most of that crowd still died in unbelief, untouched by what they saw that day. And so it is with us. We break bread, and we rise up and go on our way, we return to the pettiness of our lives, to a spirituality which often amounts (at its best) to little more than a scratching about on the surface of our natures. But let's not look away, and change the subject; let's see the love of Christ, behold it, and by this very act be changed into that same image, from glory unto glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18).

And then we will come to know the mind of Paul, as he penned, albeit under inspiration, what to me are some of the finest pieces of writing of all time: "In all these things we are more

than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life...nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord...the love of Christ constraineth us...the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge...the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things...God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world " (Rom. 8:37-39; 2 Cor. 5:14; Eph. 3:19; Phil. 3:8; Gal. 6:14). Passages like these reveal the spiritual climax Paul reached as he meditated upon the real import of the love of Christ; they are written in what I would call intellectual ecstasy, Paul's inspiration notwithstanding, in deep personal realization of the height and depth and breadth of the love to which we stand related. And that ecstasy of realization, that mountain peak, is there for each of us to reach.

The Maturity Of Love

To achieve a lifestyle and way of thinking dominated by the love of Christ and the love which this inevitably brings forth in us is the absolute crowning climax of our Christianity. This is God's ultimate intention for us. I believe, seriously believe, that God is working in the lives of each of us towards this ultimate goal, through every niggling frustration of today and yesterday and tomorrow, and through every major blow on the anvil which we occasionally receive. We may die having fallen short of fully realizing this goal, our innate bitterness and selfishness may be that strong, we may be that lazy to tackle it; yet by His grace we will still be accepted into His Kingdom- in the same way as men like Jacob and David still had some evident aspects of spiritual immaturity in them at the time of their death, and yet they will still be accepted. There are verses enough which indicate that knowing the love of Christ, seeing the real meaning of the cross where that love was so intensely and publicly paraded, is the ultimate climax of our walk in Christ:

- The end of the concept of commandment is love out of a pure heart (1 Tim. 1:5). This is where it all leads. All commandments are "briefly comprehended" in that of love (Rom. 13:9).
- "Above all these things, put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness" (Col. 3:14); love is the ultimate spiritual maturity.
- "If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected (matured) in us" (1 Jn. 4:12). This is maturity; to grow to a point where the love of God dwells in us, and our love for each other has let that love reach the maturity it is intended to produce.
- If love is made mature, we may have boldness in the day of judgment; a mature love will cast out all fear of rejection (1 Jn. 4:17,18). These words are a real challenge. The fear most of us have of the judgment is because we have not yet reached that maturity of love. But then that, presumably, is why we are still alive, living through this process of development.
- Our experience of tribulation leads to the development of patience, then real hope of salvation, and above all, as the final stage of maturity, "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:5). 2 Pet. 1:5-7 describes a similar upward spiral of chronological development, again culminating in brotherly kindness and then, love. And then, Peter goes on, we will know the Lord Jesus Christ (v.8). This is not to say that we cannot show love in our days of spiritual immaturity, but "love" in the sense of

that final state which is saturated with the experience of Christ is the ultimate end which God is working in us to achieve.

All this explains the constant emphasis on the supreme importance of reflecting the love of Christ: "Above all these things, put on charity" (Col. 3:14); "above all things have fervent charity among yourselves" (1 Pet. 4:8). This is why John so often drives home the point that if we have reflected the love of God, then we are assured of salvation, for we have assimilated the essence of the Gospel and Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not for me to explicitly exhort you how better and more enthusiastically to reflect the love of Christ in your life. You will see how. For if you seriously behold it, the love and cross of Christ of itself will constrain you.

Notes

(1) It is difficult to interpret the Hebraism here. Moses may have meant: 'If you bar them from the Kingdom, then take my part out of it too; I don't want to be there without them'. Considering how they had treated him, this likewise shows his great love for them. A lesser man would have reasoned that being without that rabble of apostate renegades was what he looked forward to in the Kingdom.

5.11 Paul And Christ

Paul's Use Of The Gospels

The ultimate aim of our calling to the Truth is a relationship with the Father and His Son. Yet the idea of having a *relationship* with unseen beings is difficult. And yet it is utterly essential. Paul gives a fine example of how we really can develop a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Cor. 3:22 speaks of three groups in the Corinth ecclesia, following Paul, Peter and Apollos. Yet in 1 Cor. 1:12 someone says "I am of Christ". This seems to be Paul himself—so Christ-centred was he, that he wanted no part in ecclesial politics nor in the possibility of leading a faction. His Christ-centredness was a phenomenal achievement. One of the secrets of Paul's spiritual success was that he consciously modelled himself on the examples of faithful men that had gone before. These included Moses and John the Baptist. If we appreciate the extent to which Paul did this, it will be evident that he would have tried to assimilate the example of Jesus his Lord into his very being. Whenever we break bread, as we take that bread and wine, we are physically symbolizing our resolve to assimilate the personality, the spirit, of the Lord Jesus Christ, deep into our body and spirit. Israel labouring all night to eat that bitter Passover lamb are our prototype in this. The extent to which Paul succeeded in doing this becomes apparent when we analyse his writings from the perspective of how far they allude to the words of the Lord Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. To do this, I read through the Gospels, looking for connections with Paul's letters; I then read through his letters, looking for links with the Gospels.

Perhaps I need to say something about the business of 'links' between passages. It seems to me that some have gone too far in seeing such links; e.g. the last twenty sentences which you spoke will have some 'links' with the last 20 sentences which I have spoken. But this doesn't mean that you are 'alluding' to my words; because you don't know what my last 20 sentences were. Similarity of language doesn't necessarily imply a conscious connection between it. And yet we must balance this against the fact that all Scripture is ultimately recorded by the

same Spirit of God. There *are* many designed connections between passages, many of which hinge around a play on words, or a connection between just one word in one passage and one word in another passage. Many of Paul's expositions in Hebrews and Romans quote the Old Testament in such a way.

Conscious Links With The Gospels

I have recognized a connection between the Gospels and Paul's letters on the following criteria:

1. It is apparent that often the Bible and the Lord Jesus use words which are unusual; words which only occur two or three times in the whole Bible, and which could have been replaced by a commoner word. If, for example, the Lord Jesus uses a word which occurs in only one other place, it seems likely that there is an allusion being made to His words. Obviously one needs to look at the context to confirm whether this is the case.
2. Sometimes there is explicit allusion to the words of Christ; e.g. "the Lord (Jesus) hath ordained that they which preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14) is referring to His command of Mt. 10:10. He may make an allusion to the Lord's words without directly quoting them. Thus Paul's comment that as often as we take the bread and wine we "shew the Lord's death till he come" (1 Cor. 11:24) is surely an allusion, but not a quotation, to the Lord's comment that He would not take the cup again *until* He returns (Mk. 14:25). Likewise "I beseech you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" is surely a reference to the Lord's description of Himself as being, there and then, "meek and lowly of heart" (Mt. 11:29; 2 Cor. 10:1). Paul's point is that as the Lord was in His life, so He is now, in His heavenly glory.
3. There are sometimes phrases, involving up to 6 words, which are taken straight out of the Gospel records. It is putting too much down to chance to suggest that this is just an accidental similarity. Invariably the context supports the feeling that an intended allusion is being made.

However it should also be noticed that Paul sometimes consciously alludes to ideas within the Lord's teaching, and yet does so in a way that is not verbally similar. Thus Jesus only rarely speaks of 'the ecclesia'; rather does He speak of the flock, family and vineyard of God. Yet Paul translates as it were into more theological vocabulary what Jesus had expressed in images and parables.

Unconscious Links

However, there are other cases where a word or short phrase is used which appears to link back to the Gospels (as in 1 and 2 above), and yet the context does not seem to support the suggestion that there is an intended allusion. A few examples will make the point:

- "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" is rooted in the Lord's words that He came to call sinners and to seek and save the lost (Mt. 9:13; 18:11; 1 Tim. 1:15). Godliness having the promise of life both now and in the future is a reflection of Christ's teaching that the life of self denial would have its present as well as future rewards (1 Tim. 4:8; Mk. 10:29).
- Paul spoke of how we *must* go through tribulation to enter the Kingdom. Perhaps he was

alluding to the Lord's parable of the sower, where He taught that when, and not "if" tribulation arises (Mt. 13:21). Paul knew that it *must* come because of the way the Lord had worded the interpretation of the parable.

- "The great shepherd of the sheep" is a repetition of "the good shepherd that giveth his life for the sheep" - the greatest shepherd there could have been (Heb. 13:20 cp. Jn. 10:11,17).

- "Why make ye this ado and weep?" (Mk. 5:39) is unconsciously alluded to by Paul in Acts 21:13: "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart?" . If this is a conscious allusion, it seems out of context. But as an unconscious allusion, it makes sense.

- The way Paul shook off the dust of his feet against those who rejected his preaching was surely an almost unconscious reflection of the attitude which the Lord had enjoined upon his men; but there is no evidence that Paul was given the same commission (Acts 13:51 cp. Mt. 10:14).

- "Think not that I am come to destroy ("to make void", Darby's Translation) the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil" (Mt. 5:17) has some kind of unconscious, hard to define link with Rom. 3:31: "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law" . The Greek words for "destroy" and "make void" are different; yet the similarity of phrasing and reasoning is so similar. I can't pass this off as chance, yet neither can I say there is a conscious allusion here. There is, therefore, what I will call an 'unconscious link' here.

- "Shall not uncircumcision (i.e. the Gentiles)...judge thee (first century Israel), who...dost transgress the law?" (Rom. 2:27) is an odd way of putting it. How can believing Gentiles "judge" first century Jews who refused to believe? Surely there must be some connection with Mt. 12:41, which speaks of Gentiles such as the men of Nineveh rising "in judgment with this generation (first century Israel), and shall condemn it: because they repented..." . Again, I can't say there is a conscious allusion being made here. But the similarity is too great to just shrug off.

- "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food" (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12-14) surely alludes to Jn. 16:12, although it doesn't verbally quote it: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now".

Of course, it may be that there is a *conscious* connection in these places, it's just that I can't see it that clearly. But I would suggest that the mind of Paul was so saturated with the Gospel records that he was using ideas and sometimes language from them without realizing it. There are many other examples of unconscious allusion between the Bible writers. Even the Lord Jesus seems to have made 'unconscious' allusions, in the sense of making allusions without any semantic purpose. This is especially apparent in some of the links between His parables and the Proverbs. "So shall thy barns be filled with plenty" (Prov. 3:10) is alluded to by him, apparently unconsciously in the sense of being without semantic import, in the parable of the barns. Peter likewise was full of unconscious allusions to the Lord's life and words in the Gospels. Consider how he says to Cornelius: "I am he whom ye seek: what is the cause wherefore ye are come?" (Acts 10:21). He is combining allusions to Mt. 26:50 and Jn. 18:4-6, but without any apparent meaning. The similarities are too great to pass off as coincidence. The events in the garden were so permanently imprinted in his subconscious that

they just came out.

This idea of unconscious allusion shouldn't be so hard to understand with some reflection. If I'm with a North American for some time, I start to speak with an American accent. Children unconsciously come out with the phrases and expressions which they hear their parents use daily. Or take a read through the later writings of Robert Roberts. There was a man who truly loved his Bible and knew it well. All the time he is writing in the language of the King James version of the Bible. You can read a page of his writing and jot down next to almost every sentence the verses to which he is alluding. He often does so out of context; it's just that the word was so much in his mind that it came out in whatever he wrote. Or analyse the language of elderly believers who have been reading the King James version of the Bible all their lives. They may speak about our first principle doctrines as " those things which are most surely believed among us" . This is taking Lk. 1:1 a bit out of context, but that phrase is so apt that we use it to talk about basic doctrines, e.g. that the Kingdom will be on earth. Or we describe the warm handshake after a brother is baptized as " the right hand of fellowship" - using Gal. 2:9 out of context (notice it speaks there of " the right *hands* of fellowship" !). There's no harm in doing this, as long as we are aware of the fact that we aren't always using passages strictly in context. It's surely the inevitable outcome of a Bible-centred way of thinking. Or consider the prayers of Bible-minded brethren. Often they are packed with incidental allusions to Bible verses in their favourite version. The following list shows how very often Paul was consciously alluding to the Gospels; if he made so many conscious allusions, it's only to be expected that he makes many *unconscious* ones too. And take David. When he writes in Ps. 110 of how Yahweh said unto my Lord...he is quoting the very phrase used by Abigail years before, when they weren't even married (1 Sam. 25:30). He was unconsciously alluding to the words of his wife before they were married, even years later. It is of course true that context plays a vital part in Biblical interpretation. But this can lead us to overlook the fact that many New Testament quotations of the Old Testament- many of those in the early chapters of Matthew, for example- are picking up words and phrases from one context and applying them to another. Paul himself did this when he quoted the words of the poet Aratus "We are all the offspring of Zeus" about our all being the offspring of the one true God.

The point has been made that the NT writers hardly ever directly quote the Gospels as they do, e.g., the prophets; but they *allude* to them. And the conclusion has been powerfully drawn: " To live continuously cannot be done by quoting. To match every circumstance of our daily lives with an appropriate extract from a memorized saying of Jesus is neither possible nor desirable. Our learning in his life should be such as the Apostles' was: one which sees his actions, hears his words and reads the records of his thoughts, and makes them our own. So that as time advances we walk more naturally with his steadfast tread...speak normally in tones and phrases which remind others of what Jesus said and the way He said it..." .

Paul As Rabbi

Many of Paul's allusions, both to the words of the Lord and indeed to the Old Testament Scriptures, may appear to be merely incidental and out of context. We have suggested that this may have been a reflection of how his mind was so saturated with Scripture and the words of his Lord. But there is another additional possibility. Paul was trained as a rabbi, and would have been used to the rabbinic way of writing. The rabbis made *Midrashim*, or commentary / interpretation, on the Old Testament Scriptures. They believed that every

single word of God was worthy of extended commentary. Because many of their readers virtually knew the text of Scripture by heart, they often give no more than a word or at most a few words from a Scriptural quotation, intending the reader to recite the rest of the passage silently to themselves; and then the rabbi immediately added his comment. Indeed, a case can be made that the whole New Testament is a form of *Midrash* on the Old Testament, re-interpreting it in the light of Christ. Paul so often employs the same literary devices found in the rabbinic *Midrashim* ⁽¹⁾:

- *al tiqra* [read not thus, but thus- Gal. 3:16 is a classic example]

- *tartei mashma* [the word has another meaning]

- *muqdan umeuhar* [noting the earlier and later]

- and the habit of repointing the original Hebrew text to provide a word relevant in the context of which he is writing. This explains why some of his quotations appear to be neither from the Masoretic nor Septuagint texts. It may also help explain why some of his quotations / allusions to the words of the Lord may not be strictly literal quotations from the text of the Gospels.

Paul's frequent "What then shall we say to this?" occurs at least 5 times in Romans alone (Rom. 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 9:14,30)- and this is the classic phrase used by Jewish teachers at the end of presenting their argument to their students. Seeing then that Paul writes in a rabbinic way, as if He is giving a stream of *Midrash* on earlier, familiar writings [e.g. the words of Jesus or the Old Testament], we should be looking for how he may quote or allude to just a word or two from the Lord, and weave an interpretation around them. This means that many of the 'unconscious' allusions listed may not in fact be unconscious- it's simply that I've not perceived the interpretation which Paul is giving them within the context. There's homework enough for the enthusiast.

Notes

(1) See John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretation of Scripture* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1969).

6. The God We Hardly Know

6.1 God And Time

As we meditate on the implications of the basic doctrines of the Gospel of the Kingdom, a number of questions arise which, in my opinion, all have basically the same answer:

- *Will the judgment seat involve us all queuing up, waiting to be judged? How will we all come before Jesus individually?*

- *Why does the NT often speak of "the resurrection" as if it means resurrection plus judgment plus immortalization, rather than just referring to the physical act of resurrection from the*

grave? Why do passages like Is. 26:16 speak of the resurrection as if it is the reward, with no mention of the judgment?

- Why do so many of the prophets, Isaiah especially, appear to 'jump around' in their prophecies, from (e.g.) prophecies concerning their own time to the Kingdom to the first coming of Jesus etc. These breaks in context often seem to make the prophecies appear disjointed. The well known prophecy of Christ's birth in Mic. 5:2 is prefaced by a statement that Messiah would be smitten upon the cheek with a rod (Mic. 5:1). In our linear way of thinking, we'd expect this to be the other way around- Messiah is born, grows up, suffers, dies... but God doesn't think and write like that!

- Why does the Bible text keep changing tenses so quickly (e.g. Isaiah 53)?

My comment on all of these questions is that God is beyond the limitation of time, and therefore He expresses Himself in a time-less way. The Hebrew language reflects something of God's character; and it has no word for 'time' in the sense of duration- thus phrases like 'the days of x' are used to describe a lifetime, reign or period of activity. God existed 'before eternal times', i.e. before time began to be reckoned by aeons (Tit. 1:2). This is very difficult for us to even begin to understand. There is no shadow caused by turning with God (James 1:17 Gk.); He is beyond the concept of time as created by the revolving of our planet round the sun. "...They that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end..." (1 Cor. 15:23,24) is an example of where 1000 years of human time is skipped over between two verses. God simply doesn't see time as we do. With Him, time can not only be compressed so that a thousand years is as a day, but also dilated so that one day becomes one thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8). What God plans and purposes is effectively done at that moment of planning, so certain is His will and power. Therefore He speaks of those things which do not exist physically as if they do (Rom. 4:17). What will be, is now, from God's perspective. The Angel commented that God's words of future prophecy are "true and faithful...they are come to pass" (Rev. 21:6 RV). They are as good as done as soon as they are uttered, so certain are they of fulfillment. Thus 1 Kings 14:14: "The Lord *shall* raise him up a king...but what? Even now". This is the way to understand those passages which appear to teach that both Jesus and ourselves existed physically before our birth. God doesn't completely express Himself in our terms and language (although of course to some degree He does). There is a degree to which God is God, and He expresses Himself as He is. We must bring ourselves to accept His perspective. Indeed, faith is the ability to believe that what God has said will actually happen physically, and that therefore we can live as if we see that future physical event as actually having happened. In other words, faith is about adopting God's time-less perspective. Israel were told to separate themselves from Babylon because God had purposed to destroy that nation; they were asked to believe that what God had planned, He would actually do (Jer. 51:12), and therefore they should treat Babylon accordingly in their attitudes. Appreciating that God is beyond time, not just an everlasting being but without time, helps us to understand a whole range of Biblical issues.

The Judgment

We are taught that we must each appear personally before the Lord Jesus at the judgment, and have some kind of two-way dialogue with him concerning events in our lives. He is our Lord, and He will be our judge; Christ, not Angels, has been appointed by the Father as our judge. It is hard to believe that He will delegate authority for judgment to the Angels. He will confess our name to them after our meeting with him, and in any case, he will be our judge

on account of the fact that he was the son of man, that he had our nature, not that of Angels. It would seem inappropriate if He delegated our judgment to Angels. If we must each appear personally before the Lord Jesus, we have two options: either time is collapsed so that we all appear before Christ individually, *or* we appear before him in real time, in which case there must be some kind of queue for judgment, and a period of several months at least. This creates so many Biblical and practical problems (e.g. what will we wear or eat while waiting) that I would reject it in favour of the idea that the meaning of time will be collapsed at the Lord's coming. Indeed, it seems that the whole process of resurrection, judgment and immortalization may take place in a split second, although it will seem far longer.

If we could break this split second into real time, there would be the process of mortal emergence from the grave, judgment involving a period of time, then the righteous being grouped at Christ's right hand side, and then they would all be immortalised together. "Come...inherit the Kingdom" is spoken to the whole group of sheep; we will be immortalised together, at the same time. If we are all judged individually in real time, this is impossible. Some would be immortalised months or years after others. This collapsing of time at the Lord's return would explain why "the resurrection" is sometimes used as a description of the whole process of resurrection, judgment and immortality (even in the OT-Ps. 1:5 LXX; 24:3), and why 2 Thess. 1:7-9 speaks as if the judgment of the wicked and the coming of Christ from Heaven are simultaneous. We are the firstfruits (Rev. 14:14), and yet in some ways the Lord Jesus was the firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:20,23). Because we are in Him, and because God sees the gap between His exaltation and ours as irrelevant, we are called "the firstfruits" too. This is why Rom. 1:4 Gk. and 2 Cor. 5:14,15 RSV speaks as if ultimately there is only one resurrection: that of the Lord Jesus, in which we had a part as being in Him. The appearing of Christ is paralleled with our appearing with Him in glory (Col. 3:4)- because effectively, when He returns, we will appear with Him in the same moment. And the collapsing of time would explain difficulties such as how we can come before the judgment throne of glory when we ourselves are seated there (Mt. 19:28 cp. 25:31); and how the judgment of the world seems (from some Scriptures) to be simultaneous with the judgment of the household.

The collapsing of time would also mean that the place of judgment is irrelevant. There are practical problems with the idea of judgment in Jerusalem or Sinai. If it all happens in real time, Christ would come, raise the responsible dead, take us to (e.g.) Jerusalem, assemble us there for several months or years, and one by one grant us immortality. There seems no space for this in the Biblical description of events of the last days. Christ will sit on David's throne in glory; but this is where the judgment will occur.

If the judgment is in real time, we must be judged before Christ is enthroned, i.e. the Kingdom is established. But Mt. 25 teaches that we will come before Him *already enthroned* for judgment. The idea of "meeting" Christ at judgment employs a Greek phrase which distinctly means to go out to welcome a respected visitor ⁽¹⁾. Its three Biblical occurrences are all in this context (Acts 28:14,15; 1 Thess. 4:16,17; Mt. 25:6,10). This would suggest that the faithful go out to meet the Lord and accompany Him to the judgment. But this is rather difficult to square with the idea of good and bad coming together before the judgment and being separated from each other *there*. It is almost as if these descriptions are designed to push the thoughtful reader away from seeing the judgment as occurring in real time! Christ comes with the saints to save Israel from their enemies. Unless there is a secret coming of Christ to gather and judge the saints and then he is revealed to the world, this just isn't possible. And the idea of a secret coming of the Lord of glory just cannot be reconciled with

the clear descriptions of his coming in the NT. The coming of Christ in glory with the saints with him to establish the Kingdom *is* the coming of Christ.

Therefore it would be fitting if the whole process of Christ coming, resurrecting and judging his people, all happens in a moment of real time. Depending how one reads the Hebrew text of Zech. 14:6,7, this idea of collapsed time at the Lord's return is Biblical: "It shall come to pass in that day, that it shall not be clear in some places, and dark in other places of the world; but the day shall be one, in the knowledge of the Lord, not day, nor night: but it shall come to pass, that at evening time it shall be light" (AV mg.). The RVmg. speaks of "the planets shall contract"- the times and seasons they control would somehow contract. Is. 21:12 RV has a similar idea, again in the context of a judgment day: "The morning is come and also the night". This collapsing of time would also explain why it is impossible to construct a chronology of events in real time for the coming of Christ; the various prophecies of the last days just don't seem to fit together in chronological sequence. If indeed time is collapsed, this would enable all these prophecies to come true, but not in real time. Babylon is to be punished with famine in one day; yet famine is a process (Rev. 18:8). In one day her judgments come, and yet also in one hour (18:10). Surely the lesson is that time is compressed. The events around Christ's return were prefigured by those at the time of Joshua's conquest of the land. Some of the records of his campaigns require a huge amount to have been achieved by his soldiers within around 36 hours. The comment that so much was achieved "at one time" (Josh. 10:42) may hint at a compression of time to enable it. "The sun stood still" may well be intended to teach that the meaning of time was collapsed by God, rather than that the sun literally stood still (Josh. 10:12,13). And the sun standing still over Gibeon is mentioned in Is. 28:21 as typical of the time when Yahweh will do "His strange work, and bring to pass his act, his strange act" in the last days. The same may be true when the shadow went back for Hezekiah. The movement of the planets need not have been altered; the meaning of time was simply suspended. Rev. 8:12, also speaking of the last days, says that "the day shone not for a third part of it, and the night likewise". Could this mean that one day and one night last only two thirds of their usual length, whilst the judgments of the fourth Angel are poured out upon the land? I would suggest that the Lord had in mind the suspension of time when he asked that "the hour might pass from him" in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:35); rather than asking to escape the cross in this request, he was perhaps asking for it all to happen in only a moment of real time.

Let us not think that the collapsing of time here suggested only means that what would otherwise take a long time actually takes a short time. It may be that what is in fact a very short time feels like much longer. Thus Mt. 25:10 describes the rejected as foolish virgins going to get oil, and it taking so long that the door was shut and they were eternally outside the marriage. In real time, this may just be a momentary desire to have been more filled with the Spirit in the day of opportunity. But the whole process of realising this will *feel* to them as if it takes a long time to work out.

One final point concerning the judgment. God being beyond time, He is also beyond space. In terms of metaphysics, if one dimension is collapsed (e.g. time), so is another (e.g. space). The whole judgment process could take place on the head of a pin, or in a large desert. Space as well as time can be collapsed. Ezekiel in his visions and contact with God's people both in the land and in captivity moved at ease within both time and space. And this also needs to be remembered as we try to meditate upon what might actually happen at the day of judgment. These things must be borne in mind when we consider the references to the graves being opened and the dead coming forth, or the sea giving up the dead to be judged. This doesn't

necessarily mean that dead bodies will come floating up through the oceans. We are not helped in our perception by orthodox pictures of sleepy saints coming out of their graves yawning and rubbing their eyes. The descriptions of graves opening and bodies floating up through the oceans are surely expressing the ultimate reality of literal resurrection and re-creation of our bodies in human terms. The Lord's promise that He would not break bread again until He did it with us in the Kingdom (Mk. 14:25) seems to require a literal fulfillment. In a non-literal sense He breaks bread with His people even now. Therefore His statement that He would not do it again until the Kingdom seems to refer to His literal taking of bread and wine. Likewise His promise that He would literally gird Himself and come forth and serve us at a future banquet has to be linked in with this (Lk. 12:37). If all the faithful are to be gathered together to a meal, and literally eat bread and drink wine with the Lord, this suggests all sorts of logistical and practical 'problems'. It is easier to understand that space and time will have different meanings at the judgment and after.

Light On Other Areas

God being beyond time sheds some light on a number of otherwise difficult issues:

- Grasping God's view of time means that we will see the Kingdom as immortality, not everlasting life. The eternity of our future existence is not the big theme of the Bible; it is "God manifestation, not human salvation", in the words of John Thomas. The process of eternity, the life and Kingdom of God, is already going on now; the tree of life *is* now (not 'will be'; Greek tenses are precise) in the midst of the paradise of God, at least from God's perspective (Rev. 2:7). We will have no need of the sun, for the light of God's glory will replace our concept of time (Rev. 21:23). Indeed, "the time of the end" can be read as "the end of time" (Dan. 12:4,9). There will be "time (Gk. *chronos*, the idea of time) no longer" (Rev. 10:6). The image of Dan. 2 is destroyed together by the Lord's return; each metal in some sense exists at his coming. Rather than meaning that each of those empires must have an end time revival, this may be teaching that the whole concept of human history and time will be ground to powder by the advent of the Kingdom. One day, when we are then with the Lord, will be like a thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8)- there will be no comparison between our present view of time and what will then be. Even in the Millennium, the plowman shall overtake the reaper (Am. 9:13)- which may refer to the collapsing of time, rather than just being a figure of fecundity. Before people pray, they will be heard (Is. 65:24- although this is our present prayer experience too, Mt. 6:8). Our focus should therefore be more on the *quality* and *nature* of the Kingdom life, rather than the mere eternity of it.

- At the frontier of scientific investigation, modern physics has discovered that 'time' varies; time warps have been linked to the nature of matter in the material cosmos. Consider some of the conclusions of Paul Davies in his book *God And The New Physics*:

"The revolution in our conception of time which has accompanied the theory of relativity is best summarised by saying that, previously, time was regarded as absolute, fixed and universal, independent of material bodies or observers. Today time is seen to be dynamical. It can stretch and shrink, warp and even stop altogether at a singularity. Clock rates are not absolute, but relative to the state of motion or gravitational situation of the observer...Modern instruments are so sensitive that even the Earth's gravitational timewarp can be detected by clocks in rockets...Time really does run faster in space, where the Earth's gravity is weaker. The stronger the gravity, the stronger the timewarp...There is no universal present moment...One inevitable victim of the fact that there is no universal present moment

is the tidy division of time into past, present and future. These terms may have meaning in one's immediate locality, but they can't apply everywhere...time is not simply there, but is itself part of the physical universe. It is "elastic" and can stretch or shrink according to well-defined mathematical laws which depend on the behaviour of matter. Also, time is closely linked to space, and space and time together express the operation of the gravitational field. In short, time is involved in all the grubby details of physical processes just as much as matter".

To these ideas may be linked the discovery that the universe is expanding, growing outwards from a beginning of matter which we would understand as the creation of Gen. 1:1. This would suggest that the meaning of time has likewise changed; before creation as we now know it, time as we now experience it simply didn't exist. The connection between space and time also explains why if time is collapsed at the judgment, space likewise will be.

- William Barclay (*New Testament Words*) has a very interesting section on the word *aionios*. He cites examples in contemporary literature where it is used not of indefinite continuance, but simply of that which is beyond time. "To attach eternity to the created was impossible. So He (God) made time as a moving image of eternity...the essence of the word *aionios* is that it is the word of the eternal order as contrasted with the order of this world...the word can be properly applied to no one other than God...the life of God". This helps us understand how 'eternal punishment' is not in fact punishment of unending continuance. And yet eternal punishment is set as the antithesis to eternal life (Mt. 25:46); this itself shows that "eternal" is not to be understood as unending continuance. For the wicked will not be punished for ever- they will die and cease existing. The Lord Jesus *is* eternal life (1 Jn. 5:20); this alone points us to see "eternal life" as more a description, a quality of life, rather than indefinite continuance. Those who "seek for glory, and honour, and immortality" are granted eternal life, as though "eternal life" comprehends all these things for which they seek (Rom. 2:7).

- During the judgment upon Egypt, "at Tehaphnehes also the day shall withdraw itself" (Ez. 30:18). This will occur when Egypt comes to know the Lord through His judgments (Ez. 30:19)- and this can only refer to the last days. So again, it would seem that some sort of collapse of time will occur during the judgment period.

- The way in which we are seen by God as if we are already saved on account of our being in Christ is also explicable by appreciating His timelessness. Rom. 8:29 says that the whole process of our calling, justification and glorification all occurred at the foundation of the world. In God's eyes, those of us in Christ are already saved and glorified. The Lord spoke of "other sheep I have" (Jn. 10:16) when at that time we never existed. Likewise in God's eyes there was only one resurrection, that of the Lord Jesus. The resurrected Lord is compared to the sheaf of firstfruits (1 Cor. 15:20), as if those in him rose with him and were glorified together, in God's eyes. Perhaps Jesus had this in mind when he said : "I *am* the resurrection". Of course in real time there is a gap between the Lord's resurrection and our own. To God, this gap is unimportant, in some sense it doesn't even exist. And to the eye of faith at a believers' funeral too. This explains why Paul so often speaks of the resurrection as meaning the whole process of resurrection, judgment and glorification (e.g. Rom. 8:11), and why he speaks of the dead being resurrected incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:42-44,52), and writing as if they presently exist (e.g. Heb. 9:15 "are called" rather than 'were called'). Indeed, the NT speaks of the whole resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus as if it were one event- even though there was a gap between them (Acts 2:32,33; 5:30,31; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; 1 Pet. 3:21,22); and the Lord Himself speaks of how Messiah would suffer and enter into glory (Lk. 24:26),

apparently skipping over the mechanics of the resurrection. And this is how our glorification is spoken of- there will be a resurrection and judgment, but the focus is not always upon them. It explains how Paul saw the trumpet blast as the signal of both the call to judgment (1 Thess. 4:17) and also the moment of glorification (1 Cor. 15:52). And yet God actually saw us as saved right from the beginning of the world; He purposed, and effectively it was done. Perhaps this is the hardest thing our faith has to grapple with. "Knowing the time, that for us, the hour already is to be aroused out of sleep" and be resurrected (Rom. 13:11 YLT) may mean (contrary to the implication of the AV) that for us who are with God now, the time of resurrection and salvation is now with us, and therefore we should live lives which answer to this fact. The day of salvation is in that sense *today* (2 Cor. 6:2 Gk.). So sure is God's word that it is as if the concept of a delay between its utterance and the fulfillment is something not to be considered. Thus "the vision" is an ellipsis for 'the fulfillment of the vision' in Hab. 2:3. Although our day by day spirituality fluctuates, God is beyond time. He sees us either as an essentially good tree bringing forth good fruit, or as essentially bad (Mt. 7:23). Let's try to adopt this perspective in how we view the daily failures of our brethren, our partners, our children...

- Bible students have long recognized a 'prophetic perfect' tense in Hebrew, whereby the future is spoken of as having already happened. This not only reflects the utter certainty of God's words coming true, it also reflects God's way of looking at issues without time, in the sense that God is beyond time. Thus when He told Abraham that He *had made him* (not 'will make you') a great nation, this reflected the way that God already saw Abraham as a father of many. Things which don't yet exist for us do *actually* exist for God (Rom. 4:17). The Law was a *shadow* of Christ (Col. 2:17) even when Christ didn't physically exist. Yet a shadow implies the real existence of the object. The Law reflected God's knowledge of the Lord Jesus; to Him, the Lord did in that sense pre-exist, although we know that literally He didn't. Likewise Levi was seen by God as paying tithes whilst he was still as it were within Abraham's body (Heb. 7:9,10), and the dead believers are likened to spectators in a stadium, cheering us on as we race the race of this life (Heb. 12:1) ⁽²⁾.

- There are some passages which imply the Lord Jesus was somehow conscious during His three days in the grave. Evidently this was not the case. And yet the resurrection loosed the birth-pangs of death, Peter said (Acts 2:34). Those three days are likened to labour, in the Lord's case bringing forth life through death. Yet He was dead and unconscious. But to the Father, He saw things simply differently. Sometimes God speaks from His timeless perspective, at other times His words are accommodated to us. Likewise from the Father's perspective, the spirit of Christ went and preached to the people of Noah's day at the time of His death. Yet this didn't happen in real time in such a way.

- It is difficult to understand the Biblical descriptions of the pillars of fire and cloud that accompanied Israel. Ex. 13:21 says that there was a pillar of cloud in the day time and a pillar of fire by night. But at the time of the Exodus, there was a pillar of cloud for the Egyptians and a pillar of fire to give light in the night for the Israelites (Ex. 14:20,24). Could this mean that the meaning of time was collapsed at this time? It was night for the Israelites but daytime for the Egyptians? Is. 42:16, amidst many exodus / Red Sea allusions, speaks of how God makes the darkness light before His exiting people. The many Johanne references to the Lord Jesus being a light in the darkness for His followers would then be yet more elaborations of the idea that the Lord Jesus is the antitype of the Angel that led Israel out of Egypt (Jn. 8:12; 12:35,46). Num. 9:21 says that the pillar of cloud was with the Israelites at *night*, and sometimes it was taken up in the night and they therefore had to move on. Does

this mean that there were times when the meaning of time was collapsed during their journey, and the night was made as the day (perhaps Ps. 139:12 alludes to this experience)? When Yahweh came down on Sinai, He was enveloped in a *cloud of fire*- suggesting that there was no day and night for Him (Ex. 24:15-17; Dt. 5:22). Yahweh's theophany to Ezekiel included a similar feature of cloud, glory and fire together (Ez. 1:4), as it will in the future (Is. 4:5)- perhaps another indicator that time will be collapsed around the time of the Lord's return.

- For the elects' sake, the days to the second coming *will be* shortened (Mt. 24:22); but the Lord also said, perhaps in the same sentence, that the days *have already* been shortened (Mk. 13:20). This alone shows that God conceives of time in a radically different way to how we do. The shortening of time in a sense hasn't take place, but in another sense it has. There can therefore be no trite explanation of how God can hasten the second coming in accordance with our prayers, and yet also have a set time to favour Zion.

- Greek (unlike Hebrew) uses tenses in a very precise way. There are some real problems in understanding exactly why the Lord changes tenses so often, e.g. in Jn. 7:33,34: "Yet a little while am I with you, and then I go unto him that sent me. Ye shall seek me, and shall not find me: and where I am [we would expect: 'Where I will go / be'], thither ye cannot [not 'will not be able to'] come". He saw Himself as both with the Father, already glorified, and yet also still in mortal life. Another example is in the way He speaks of how the faithful *are* equal to the Angels, *being* the children of the resurrection (Lk. 20:35,36- in the context of explaining how 'all live' unto God)- we would rather expect Him to speak of how the faithful *will be* equal to Angels, *will be* resurrected etc. But He pointedly speaks in the present tense. It must have raised a few eyebrows amongst His more thoughtful hearers.

- There are some real difficulties in understanding the record of creation. There can be no doubt that we are intended to understand the Genesis account as referring to literal 24 hour-days. But there are problems with this- e.g. there appears to be a longer period than a few hours required for Adam to name all the animals, find them unsuitable, long for a wife, be provided with Eve... One explanation may simply be that time *felt* different; it all took 24 hours of our time, but time then had a different meaning.

- "The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies" (Ps. 58:3) is not true in real time. But for timeless God, this is His perspective on them. Likewise in other cases He expresses His timelessness in ways which men can only understand as predestination.

- Ez. 32:30, Rev. 6:10 and some other passages give the impression that the dead are somehow alive. And yet we know from an impregnable array of Bible passages that the dead are unconscious. These 'difficult passages' are surely giving us a window on God's timeless perspective. Apart from the death state, there are other examples of where future things are spoken of as having already happened (e.g. Ez. 39:29). God's future actions are simply spoken of as having already happened (e.g. Ez. 32:18). Living believers are called "martyrs" even before they are killed, because God foresees that they will be killed (Rev. 11:7).

Prophecy

Because God is beyond time, His prophecies appear to jump around in time. They only appear disjointed to us who read them with a background insistence that everything must be chronological. Thus the tenses change freely throughout Isaiah 53. And throughout Isaiah,

prophecies of the Kingdom are often introduced by the rubric "in that day"; and yet the preceding context is often quite different (e.g. Is. 3:7,18; 4:1; 5:30; 7:18,21; 10:20,22; 11:10; 12:1; 17:9; 19:6; 22:20,25; 25:9; 27:13; 28:5; 29:18). It makes an interesting exercise to go through Isaiah 9 and decide to which time each verse applies. Some of the verses are quoted in the NT and given specific fulfillments. They refer to Isaiah's day, the Assyrian invasion, the birth of Jesus, the beginning of His ministry at age 30, and to His future Kingdom. And yet the verses aren't presented in this order; they move from one to the other at ease, with no linking rubric or explanation. Likewise Daniel's prophecies seem to have a big hiatus in their fulfillment (Dan. 2:34; 8:23; 9:24; 11:39); and Zechariah is another good example. Many attempts to understand prophecy, not least the book of Revelation, have fallen into problems because of an insistent desire to see everything fulfilling in a chronological progression, whereas God's prophecies (Isaiah is the classic example) 'jump around' all over the place as far as chronological fulfillment is concerned. And this principle is not only seen in Bible prophecy. The historical records in the Old Testament tend to be thematically presented rather than chronologically (Joshua is a good example of this); and the Gospel records likewise. It especially needs to be recognized that in line with so much OT prophecy, neither the Olivet prophecy nor its extension in the Apocalypse can be read as strictly chronological. Thus Lk. 21:8-11 gives a catalogue of signs, and then v. 12 jumps back to the situation before them: "but before all these things..." (21:27,28; Mk. 13:10 are other examples).

These principles are all brought together in the way Peter interprets Joel 2. The comments in brackets reflect the interpretation which Peter offers later in his address. He gives each part of it a fulfillment not in chronological sequence with what has gone before: "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel [i.e. you are seeing a fulfillment of this prophecy before your eyes]: I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy [fulfilled by the apostles after Christ's ascension]...and I will shew wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath [the miracles of the Lord Jesus during His ministry]...the sun shall be turned into darkness [the crucifixion], and the moon into blood [also referring to an unrecorded event at the crucifixion?], before that great and notable day of the Lord come [the second coming; or the resurrection?]; and it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved [fulfilled by the crowd accepting baptism on the day of Pentecost]" (Acts 2:16-21).

Not only do the prophecies 'jump around' in time. Often Scripture alludes to or quotes other Scripture which may seem out of context, if we insist on seeing everything from our viewpoint of time. Thus Lk. 19:40 quotes Hab. 2:11 concerning the stones of apostate Israel crying out, and apparently applies it to the acclamation of faithful men. Matthew particularly seems to quote Scripture which is relevant to the Lord's second coming as applying to His first coming. Indeed, the way the NT quotes the OT apparently out of context is a sizeable problem. There are times when we may quote or allude to the words of a Bible passage quite out of context, just because the words seem appropriate. And it seems the NT sometimes does just the same. Search and try as we may, the context seems just inappropriate. This may be explicable by understanding God to have the ability to take words from one time-context and insert them into another, in a way which to us is not contextual. *We* have no authority to do this; but *He* can. *He* can speak as if "the resurrection is past already"; but for us to do so is to deny the Faith.

Our difficulty in accepting God's view of time is in my view reflected in the obsession some have with the continuous-historic view of the book of Revelation. It is insisted by some that prophecy be fulfilled in a linear way. Chapter 1 verse 1 of prophecy X has to be fulfilled on

such a date; chapter 1 verse 2 ten years later; chapter 1 verse 3 has to be fulfilled five years after that. Not only is this view obviously unworkable when it comes to interpreting many Old Testament prophecies; but it assumes that God, the author of prophecy, thinks and writes with our view of time. Gerhard von Rad writes powerfully about this: "The question of the specific way in which Hebrew thought understood time and history brings us to an area of great importance for the correct understanding of the prophets. Earlier exposition was quite unaware that there was a problem here, and uncritically assumed that its own Western and Christian concept of time also held good for Israel...the attitude of Western man to linear time is, generally speaking, naive; time is seen as an infinitely long straight line on which the individual can mark such past and future events as he can ascertain. This time-span has a mid-point, which is our present day. From it the past stretches back and the future forwards. But...this concept of absolute time, independent of events, and, like the blanks on a questionnaire, only needing to be filled up with data which will give it content, was unknown to Israel" (3). God is outside of time as we know it, and so we shouldn't assume that His prophetic word is so neatly linear, or continuously historic, simply because this is how *we* tend to think of time. Because the Bible was written by God, it reflects God's view of time. Hence Jack Sasson notes: "Hebrew prose style allows nonsequential episodes to occur simultaneously" (4). Grasping this steers us away from trying to interpret God's prophetic word in a continuous historic sense.

God's patience with Israel (and us too) was partly because even in the midst of their perversions, He saw the day when they would be obedient. Thus He mixes criticism and judgment of them with visions of their future glory. Hos. 14:8 exemplifies this: "Ephraim shall say [in the time of her future repentance], What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard him and observed him [this is God's comment: He observed Ephraim as she would be, even at Hosea's time, while she was yet sinning]. I am like a green fir tree [these are the words of Ephraim]. From me is thy fruit found" [this is God's comment: He imputed fruit to the otherwise prickly and not very fruitful fir tree]. Our patience with each other, not least those we know well, will be enhanced by a bit more timelessness: not reacting to the words and immaturities of each other as they are uttered at this point in time, but looking ahead to what they (and we) will one day mature into.

Conclusions

Although God is outside time, this mustn't lead us to conclude that He is somehow static and unfeeling; He reveals Himself as accommodating Himself to men to the extent that He has feelings of joy at the moment of our repentance (consider the Father rushing out to the returning son) and sorrow and anguish at the times of our apostasy (consider the Almighty "rising early and sending" the prophets). Although He is outside time, yet He limits His omniscience (as He evidently limits His omnipotence). It could even be that although He *could* see every possible future and foresee our behaviour well before our birth, He somehow ignores this possibility. This is why He is described as being disappointed at Israel's level of response to His love, shocked at their sins, surprised at their perversions (e.g. Jer. 19:5; 32:35).

All this may sound rather philosophical. I'm sorry if it does. Because we are dealing here with an essentially practical issue, relating to the very essence of faith; the ability to see God's promises as He sees them, as already fulfilled, to see our prayers as He sees them, i.e. as already answered; and ourselves just waiting in faith for the day of physical realisation of

them. This is what day-by-day faith is all about.

Notes

(1) See Alan Hayward, 'The Judgment Seat: An Unresolved Problem', *Watchman* Vol. 5 No. 9, September 1995 and subsequent correspondence; also Alan Hayward, 'Be wise on words', *Gospel News* November / December 2000.

(2) These points are taken from A.P. Launchbury, *Beyond Our Time: Metachronology In The Bible* (Epsis, 1995).

(3) Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965) pp. 99-102.

(4) Jack Sasson, *Jonah* (London: Doubleday, 1990) p. 137.

6.2 The Limitation Of God

I recall how impressed I was when I first heard the phrase 'Divine ecology'. The idea is that all aspects of God's purpose somehow work together for good, even if in the short term it seems there is something not in order or out of balance in the way God is working. If we overanalyse one aspect of God's purpose or workings with men, we can get an unbalanced picture; God may seem, e.g., too soft, or too hard. We need to see the different parts of His purpose in the wider picture and how they all work together to achieve the complete fulfilment of His purpose in us. Because we are too finite to comprehend the whole complex system, there are some aspects of His ways which appear to us unbalanced, but ultimately, this is not the case. I say all this because I want to focus on just one aspect of God's dealings with us: the way in which He gives us unlimited freewill to serve Him.

We need to understand this within the context of predestination; the sovereign will of God at work to achieve His will without the input of any man. We learn, I suggest, the fact that many things we do which seem to advance God's purpose, e.g. preaching and prayer, are primarily for our benefit, rather than being absolutely essential for the fulfilment of God's will.

Consider, in a preaching context, how the faithful overcome by the blood of the lamb- by what is done for them- and also by the word of their preaching, as if the act of preaching and witnessing against a hostile persecuting system was what helped maintain their faith (Rev. 12:11). And because of this, Paul encouraged Timothy to take heed "to thy teaching...for in doing this [i.e. preaching] thou shalt save both thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16 RV). Having true doctrine is related to "speaking the truth", "dealing truly" (Eph. 4:13-15 RVmg.) with each other- as if the sensitive, heartfelt preaching of truth should result in our own truthfulness. We continue professing / confessing our hope "that it waver not" (Heb. 10:23 RV). It doesn't waver for us, exactly because we preach it.

Paul Tournier in *The Meaning Of Persons* perceptively comments: "We become fully conscious only of what we are able to express to someone else. We may already have had a certain intuition about it, but it must remain vague so long as it is unformulated" (1). This is why anyone involved in preaching, public speaking, writing or personal explanation of the Gospel to someone else will know that they have gained so much from having to state in so many words what they already 'know'. And in the course of making the expression, our own understanding is deepened, our personal consciousness of what we believe is strengthened, and thereby our potential for a real faith is enhanced. Tournier's observation is validated by considering the record of the healed blind man in Jn. 9. Initially he says that he doesn't know

whether or not Jesus is a sinner, all he knows is that Jesus healed him. But the Jews force him to testify further, and in the course of his witness, the man explains to them that God doesn't hear sinners, and so for Jesus to have asked God for his healing and been heard...surely proved that Jesus wasn't a sinner. He was sinless. The man was as it were thinking out loud, coming to conclusions himself, as he made his bold witness (Jn. 9:31,33).

The parable of the sower leaves us begging the question: 'So how can we be good ground?'. Mark's record goes straight on to record that the Lord right then said that a candle is lit so as to publicly give light and not to be hidden. He is speaking of how our conversion is in order to witness to others. But He says this in the context of being good ground. To respond to the word ourselves, our light must be spreading to all. The only way for the candle of our faith to burn is for it to be out in the open air. Hidden under the bucket of embarrassment or shyness or an inconsistent life, it will go out. We will lose our faith if we don't in some sense witness to it. Witnessing is in that sense for our benefit. When the disciples ask how ever they can accomplish the standards which the Lord set them, He replied by saying that a city set on a hill cannot be hid (Mt. 5:14). He meant that the open exhibition of the Truth by us will help us in the life of personal obedience to Him.

Total Freedom

This said, let me outline the thesis: God can do anything, He is omnipotent. But He chooses to limit His omnipotence in order to allow man total freewill. Therefore effectively, how far God will fulfil His purpose depends upon how far we are obedient to Him. Of course, God can act quite independently of us; He has the sovereign right and ability to act as He likes, and achieve His objectives how He likes. But it seems that God chooses to limit His ability to do this. We have complete freewill, and God works with us individually in proportion as we work with Him. We have genuine choice, not only as to whether to serve God, but how and on what level and to what extent we serve Him, within the salvation we experience in Christ. Indeed, the world has no freedom; men are slaves to sin, mastered by their own pride and lies. In Christ, we have experienced the gift of freedom (Rom. 5:15-18); "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is free" (2 Cor. 3:17). Indeed, the extent of our liberty is such that we must use it carefully lest we offend others (1 Cor. 8:8- e.g. the kind of thing we spend our money on, how far we indulge in 'relaxation'...). This "liberty" in which the NT so frequently exults (Lk. 4:18; 1 Cor. 10:29; Gal. 2:4; 5:13; James 1:25; 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:16) will be fully revealed in the freedom of the Kingdom: "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). As it will be then, so now: we will not be free to do what we like morally, but within the context of God's covenant, we are free, totally and utterly free, in our service of Him. God doesn't see us as robots serving their maker; He sees us as His partners, His sons, His friends, even the willing, freely persuaded bride of His Son (2). But as the Master Chess player He builds our limitations into His total game plan. For example, God uses our weaknesses and experience of moral failure for the furtherance of His purpose. Thus a man's marriage out of the Faith is sometimes used to bring a woman to the Faith (not that this justifies it). Somehow God is never beaten; man can do nothing against the Truth, only for it (2 Cor. 13:8). He wasn't beaten when Moses failed to sanctify Him; He sanctified Himself through His judgment of that failure: "Ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them. This is the water of Meribah; because the children of Israel strove with the LORD, and he was sanctified in them" (Num. 20:12,13). Somehow God's word never returns unto Him void, somehow the lost sheep is always found. These are not just expressions of the essential hopefulness of the Father and Son (although this in itself is something to be truly

inspired by); these are statements which reflect the way in which within God's scheme of working, everything works out to His glory.

The final judgment will be of our works, not because works justify us, but because our use of the freedom we have had and exercised in our lives is the basis of the future reward we will be given. Salvation itself is not on the basis of our works (Rom. 11:6; Gal. 2:16; Tit. 3:5); indeed, the free gift of salvation by pure grace is contrasted with the wages paid by sin (Rom. 4:4; 6:23). And yet at the judgment, the preacher receives wages for what he did (Jn. 4:36), the labourers receive hire (s.w. wages) for their work in the vineyard (Mt. 20:8; 1 Cor. 3:8). There is a reward (s.w. wages) for those who rise to the level of loving the totally unresponsive (Mt. 5:46), or preaching in situations quite against their natural inclination (1 Cor. 9:18). Salvation itself isn't given on this basis of works; but the nature of our eternal existence in the Kingdom will be a reflection of our use of the gift of freedom in this life. In that sense the judgment will be of our works.

Notes

(1) Paul Tournier, *The Meaning Of Persons* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) p. 22.

(2) This is the thesis of Karl Barth, *The Gift Of Freedom* (John Knox Press, 1960) pp. 74-79.

6-3 The Inconsistency Of God: Bible Paradoxes

What follows is admittedly rather complex- at first reading. But please persevere. Because every honest Bible student, every sincere follower of God, will find themselves faced with Bible paradoxes and contradictions which can be extremely worrying; until we have a framework upon which to hang them and within which to understand them.

What I want to put to you is that God is very often inconsistent- to our human eyes. Indeed, the closer we analyse the Bible, the more we meditate upon God's ways, the more evident it becomes that contradictions and paradoxes are woven throughout the fabric of God's self-revelation to us. Of course, there are some apparent paradoxes and contradictions which can be easily resolved. But there are others, I suggest, which simply cannot be resolved by us. Exactly why God has revealed Himself in this way is hard to completely understand. But perhaps one simple reason is that He wishes to teach us the extent to which His ways are higher than ours; He wishes to instil into us a far deeper spiritual humility, a deeper sense that as a dog is to a man, so is a man to God. The word 'acceptance' is absolutely vital in all this. A dog *accepts* his dependence on his master, he loves his master, but he is aware that he simply has no real handle on how to comprehend his master's actions. If God is *not* inconsistent, then it follows that God must always appear consistent to human eyes. This would mean that God was somehow bound to act and explain Himself in a way that was neat and tidy in our human terms. It seems that this is what we would rather have; a God that was a super-man, a man like us who was just super-powerful. But God is God, and not a super-man. Therefore His ways and thoughts *must* be intrinsically higher than ours; as far above ours as the heaven is above earth (Is. 55:9). And if we seriously accept this, it is apparent that God is going to act in ways which are totally and inexplicably inconsistent to our eyes; not just ways which are *hard* to reconcile, but ways which are *irreconcilable*. And therefore there are Bible paradoxes. Not least is this shown in the mystery of the salvation of man which He

wrought in Christ. The woman of Tekoah realised some of this when she spoke of how “We must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again...yet doth [God] devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him” (2 Sam. 14:14). Her point was that as God in some sense breaks His own laws, e.g. that sin leads to permanent death, so surely David likewise could have the same spirit of grace and bring about the salvation of someone rightly appointed to death. This explains the many purposeful paradoxes and apparent contradictions within the book of Ecclesiastes. Mark Vincent has well observed: “They are part of the way of things “under the sun”; they are not puzzles to be “solved” by a crusade of reconciliation...God’s ways are ultimately inscrutable to human view. There will always be things that we cannot fully understand...for the Preacher tells us that we “shall not be able to find it”” (‘Yes...But....’, *Tidings*, Vol. 62 No. 5 p. 178).

The statements in the first two columns following could each be supported by many Bible verses and doctrines. These have not been added because it is not the purpose of this study to analyse the issues themselves, but rather the principle of contradiction.

Principle 1

1. People are predestined to either be in the Kingdom, or not to be. We are not just predestined to be called, i.e. to be given the opportunity; some are predestined to achieve the image of Christ in their lives. Others stumble at God's word, because they were ordained to do so.

Principle 2

God finds fault with those who do stumble at His word, and He is pleased with the obedience of the righteous. In other words, there is freewill.

Comment

Normally we try to explain this by saying that God's predestination takes into account our freewill decisions. But not only is this never taught in Scripture; this theory makes the concept of predestination meaningless. Paul tackles this problem in Rom. 9; and he doesn't start talking about freewill. All he says is that it is not for us to question God if He finds fault with someone He has predestined to destruction. And in the context, Paul is arguing that the fact there is this inexplicable predestination should humble us, as it should have humbled Israel, who were predestined to God's favour *not* because of their own freewill efforts to be obedient.

2. Adam was to die in the day he ate the fruit.

No man can redeem his brother, or bear the

But he didn't. This is one of the most well known Bible paradoxes.

But Christ, as a man,

This is one of redemption's finest mysteries. No theory of atonement can ever explain the paradox of

iniquity of another (Ez. 18:20).	acceptably bore our iniquity.	redemption.
3. Nineveh would be destroyed in 40 days from Jonah's preaching; regardless of whether it repented.	God changed His mind. This didn't happen.	God's word is presented to us as always true and reliable; which it is, ultimately.
4. God's purpose is unchanging; He reveals Himself, and we must accept that what He says will happen. God said He would bring the Israelites out of Egypt, and lead them to the land of Canaan.	Human prayer and behaviour can change God's expressed purpose. Another Bible paradox. God brought them out of Egypt and destroyed them in the wilderness, just as they feared; He changed His purpose with them half way through (Num. 14:34 AVmg.).	God's purpose is presented to us as a solid rock; which it is, ultimately. Surely here and in nos. 2 and 3 above, God is asking us to believe that His word and purpose <i>are</i> sure from His perspective, although in human eyes His word and purpose may appear most variable.
5. There is a fixed date for Christ's return, arranged by God from the beginning, after certain things have happened.	It seems Solomon could have been the Messiah, if he had continued in faith; Christ perhaps would have established His Kingdom in the first century, had Israel accepted him. Many passages suggest that Christ's coming can be hastened by our prayers, our growth in spirituality as a community, the world-wide spreading of the Gospel, and Israel's repentance- among others.	Here particularly is one of those Bible paradoxes which defies reconciliation.
God answers prayer as a result of the fact that we believe and as a token that we are acceptable before Him (1 Jn. 5:14 etc.)	But there are examples of where God answers the prayers of those who don't believe with a full faith, and even of those who later will be condemned (Zacharias; the believers praying for Peter's release; Mt. 7:21-23)	The relationship between faith and answered prayer is not so simple as it appears in some passages. God is working with us at a higher level than simply responding to our words as a token of His acceptance of our faith.
6. God hates divorce; He only allowed it for Israel "for the hardness of your hearts". Under the Law of Moses, God forbade His	But God divorced Israel, His wife, because she was unfaithful. Yet He asks her to return to Him and re-marry. He breaks His own	This sounds like God saying 'Do as I say, not as I do'. We grow up expecting our parents, our school teachers, our

people to re-marry the wife they divorced.

law, committing what He described as "abomination", in order to show His love for Israel. Likewise, the law taught that the firstborn was to have a double portion above his brethren. But we are made joint-heirs with Christ, the firstborn (Rom. 8:17). This is yet another paradox of grace.

bosses to be consistent, to be living examples of the behaviour they expect from us. And we feel we should do likewise when we become parents, teachers, bosses...but God is only *like* a Father to us in some ways. He is God, not man; so He won't be consistent as a human father should be.

God's laws are absolute, and He warns from examples of previous disobedience.

Yet He makes concessions to human weakness (see 2.7). Having reminded Israel of how they sinned with the Midianites, He allows them to keep unmarried Midianites as wives (Num. 31:16,18).

Such is His softness towards us, and more essentially, His earnest desire to save men who may not 'make it' on the basis of straight obedience. Again, Bible paradoxes abound in this area.

7. David murdered, committed adultery and even the deadly sin of presumption (2 Sam. 12:9 cp. Num. 15:31). Yet these were overlooked by God *as if* they were 'surface' sins; the real man David was accepted by God and held up as a wondrous example to all the faithful.

Uzzah's sin in touching the ark is recorded in such a way as to suggest that he was trying to help God; he loved God, in his own way. Yet God destroyed him, apparently, for one sin. Moses likewise was barred from the land for one sin. The record of Eli paints him as a nice old boy who basically loved God, although (like most parents) he was a bit soft on his kids. But God rejected him for this.

Of course we could reconcile these two columns by saying that God knows the heart; as indeed He does. But my point is that these records are presented in such a way as to invite the observation, on a human level, that God is not consistent. We are *assuming* that God knew that Eli and Uzzah were very wicked compared to (say) David or Jacob, and so that was why He was very hard on them. But this is only guesswork. Isn't it better to do as God intended, and accept that this is a contradiction within God's self-revelation?

Likewise Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all had a very human side, full of these 'surface' weaknesses (if indeed such things exist). Yet they are held up as heroes of faith.

8. Many of the faithful had more than one wife; many of them behaved in a manner inconsistent with God's standards of marriage. Thus Abraham is presented as having almost a casual

Elsewhere God is extremely critical of any marital inconsistencies.

Are we really to believe that sometimes the same behaviour is seen by God as a serious sin, whereas at others He overlooks it, treating these things as (apparently) 'surface sins'? Surely God is a God

relationship with his slave-girl Hagar because he and his wife didn't think God's promise of a seed was going to be fulfilled through Sarah.

of principle, and His principles are true for all time? Yet His grace and understanding is such that the way He deals with men must sometimes leave us with a sense of paradox as we examine it.

9. Our salvation is by pure grace; the more we mature spiritually, the more we see that there is absolutely nothing which we can do to attain our own redemption. We are saved by grace, not our works, nor by any acts of obedience to a set of commands (see Rom. 1-7 in the RVmg.).

Jesus said: " If ye love me, keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15), alluding to Moses' statement that God would only save Israel if they shewed their love for Him by keeping the Mosaic commandments (Ex. 20:6). Works and acts of obedience *are* important; e.g. baptism.

God will not justify the wicked (Ex. 23:7); and He hates those who do so (Prov. 17:15 cp. 24:24; Is. 5:23)

But God justifies sinners by grace.

10. Israel have been rejected as God's people; " Ye are not my people" , He clearly told them. Paul appears to quote this out of context in Romans. In the same section, he seems to get things twisted when he talks of how the bad, wild tree has been grafted into the good one; it's done the other way round. These designed inconsistencies are surely to show that the meaning of grace can only be understood in terms of contradiction and paradox, when we try to express it in human terms.

Yet in another sense, Israel have not been rejected, due to God's 'illogical' level of love for them: " How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee up, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together" (Hos. 11:8).

His grace and judgment of sin are all linked together within His character: " I have given the love of my soul into the hand of her enemies" (Jer. 12:7).

But the very fact that God did form and make Israel is the reason God gives for appealing to them to receive His ever-available mercy (Is. 43:1; 44:2;

This apparent contradiction shows how God's love and grace towards His people defies even His own stated purpose; the love of God cannot be presented to us without the use of contradiction and paradox. We as human beings simply lack the paradigms to handle the love of God for us. Therefore there have to be Bible paradoxes.

The way these passages all occur within Isaiah encourages us to connect them. He will not have mercy on them, He will not pity them (as Ezekiel often says)- but He does.

"He that made them will not have mercy on them, and he that formed them will show them no favour"

(Is. 27:11)

God said He would destroy Israel in Egypt (Ez. 20:8). But He didn't.

God swore that He would destroy Israel in the wilderness (Ez. 20:21).

God would punish Israel at the hand of the Babylonians according to their sins, proportionate to them (Ez. 7:4,9; 5:11; 8:19; 9:10).

If God says He will punish someone for their sins after they have had space for repentance, then He will.

The wound of Israel was incurable- said Yahweh Himself (Jer. 30:12).

All Judah would be destroyed (Jer. 44:11).

Israel were the branches which were lopped off.

The fig tree would never

49:15)

" But I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted" (Ez. 20:9)

God 'withdrew His hand', He took back this promise (Ez. 20:22).

When Israel *were* punished by the Babylonians, Ezra (9:13) realized that they had *not* been punished proportionate to their sins.

In Rev. 2:21,22 Jezebel was given space to repent but didn't, therefore judgment was pronounced; but even then, *if* she repented, she wouldn't be punished.

But Yahweh healed the incurable (Jer. 30:17).

But the same chapter speaks of a remnant that would not be (:14,28).

But they were to be grafted back on to the living tree (Rom. 11)

Is. 40:2, again in the context of Israel's punishment by the Babylonians, says that their judgment had been double what it ought to have been; and yet Ezra says it was *less* than the promised proportionate recompense for their sins. Here we have the utter, inconsistent grace of God; almost taking guilt for punishing them (cp. how God likewise takes the blame in Is. 54:6-8, as if He had forsaken Israel as a sweet innocent young wife). The way God restored double to Job at the end has echoes of how a thief had to restore double (Ex. 22:2-4)- as if God in His love for Job wished to show Himself as having been somehow 'guilty' for taking away from Job what He had?

This is simply the eagerness of God for human repentance.

This is the Bible paradox of God's love of Israel and desire for their redemption.

This is an apparent horticultural blunder. A dead, rejected branch can't get life by being tied on to a living tree. But in the miracle of Israel's

bear fruit (Mk. 11:14).

But Israel will blossom and bud and fill the earth with fruit (Is. 27:6); hence the fig tree bearing fruit when it has been condemned never to bear fruit is such a dramatic sign (Lk. 21:29,30.)

latter day redemption, this is how it will be.

The Lord spoke His words about Israel's future budding with full knowledge that He (and several OT passages) had condemned her to eternal barrenness. He knew, however, the paradox of grace.

God promised that even if Israel sinned, He would never break His covenant with them (Lev. 26:44; Jud. 2:1).

But He did (Zech. 11:10 cp. Jer. 14:21), as witnessed by the termination of the Law of Moses, which was the basis of His covenant with Israel. His love creates yet another Bible paradox.

Israel broke the covenant by their disobedience (Lev. 26:15; Dt. 31:16 and many others). God therefore broke His part of the covenant. Yet God made His promises concerning the unbreakable covenant because He chose to speak in words which did not reflect His foreknowledge that Israel would sin. The apparent contradiction is resolvable by realizing that God did not set His mind upon Israel's future apostasy when He made the 'unbreakable' covenant with them. And yet the paradox still ultimately stands; that He broke His covenant with them when they sinned. He worked through this punishment in order to establish an even more gracious new covenant.

God said He would not spare or pity Israel in pouring out His judgments on them. He even warns them not to think that He is merely threatening, giving yet another warning ("the sounding again of the mountains" in echo), but that He is deadly serious (Ez. 7:7, 4, 9; 5:11; 8:18; 9:10; Jer.

But God did pity Israel at the time of judging them (s.w. Ez. 36:21; Mal. 3:17,18).

Joel (2:17) realized that God has the capacity, in His grace, to change His stated purpose at the last minute, and therefore he exhorts the priests to ask God to "spare" them when He pours out His judgments; although He had said that He would not do this.

13:14; 21:7).

11. Christ was fully like us, our representative and example, an inspiration to us in our hour by hour battle with the flesh.

God will not let His Name be polluted by His people (Is. 48:11; Ez. 20:9).

The orthodox idea of ransom payment substitution is wrong. Christ didn't give His blood to purchase us in a substitutionary sense.

Yet Christ was God's son, He was more than a "mere man", He evidently had some "bias" (in the words of Robert Roberts) towards righteousness which we don't have ⁽¹⁾.

But God polluted His people (Is. 47:6). They did pollute His Name (Jer. 34:16; Mal. 1:7)

But to whom did Christ pay the price of our redemption? Not to God (or else it would have been substitution); not to the devil, as orthodoxy wrongly supposes.

God's manifestation in Christ was and is a "mystery" (1 Tim. 3:16). Yet without doubt we are intended to take comfort and inspiration from Christ's humanity; i.e. from something we accept and believe, but which appears contradictory.

God invites us to see His efforts to stop His Name being polluted as somehow defeated by the extent of Israel's pollutions. This theme comes out clearly in Ezekiel: they polluted Him, but He strove lest His Name should be polluted. Here is the extent of freewill which God gives man to sin- and also the extent of the hopefulness of God. It's as if He didn't imagine they would pollute Him as much as they did.

On one level, the atonement can be logically explained. On another, it cannot be ⁽²⁾. The veil, an eloquent symbol of the flesh of Jesus, was made of mixed fibres, something which was otherwise forbidden under the Law. This perhaps reflected how the Lord's nature and the atonement God wrought through Him was and is in some ways contradictory, to human eyes.

12. On the Sabbath, the priests profaned the Sabbath.

"Whatsoever soul it be that doeth any work [in

No work was to be done on the Sabbath.

But God in the prophets complains that *His people* don't keep the Sabbath.

The Lord (Mt. 12:5) said that the priests "profaned" the Sabbath; He didn't say that because they kept the spirit of it, that was O.K. By using a

the sabbath], the same soul will I destroy from among his people" (Lev. 32:30)

He didn't cut off the individuals as He threatened. Behold the Bible paradox.

word as extreme as "profaned" He seems to be even emphasizing the point.

This isn't to say that God says but doesn't do. It's just that His grace and patience is beyond His law.

13. God imputes His righteousness to men; He counts them as if they are righteous, even though they are not.

Personal righteousness and obedience is vital for salvation.

Salvation is by both obedience and by grace, whereby we are counted as obedient even though we are not. God is so sensitive to human effort to be spiritual that it seems He may exercise His prerogative to overlook other failures; although there are many examples of where a man spiritual in many ways is rejected because he failed in just one other area (e.g. Eli).

Thus He speaks of the reforms of David, Hezekiah and Josiah as being so thorough when in fact they overlooked basic things like the keeping of tabernacles (Neh. 9:17)

The keeping of the feasts was a vital sign that a man was in covenant with God.

14. God cannot be seen.

Moses saw God.

God speaks as if He died, and therefore Israel was left as a widow (Is. 54:4,6).

But God cannot die.

God can't by nature forget.

God forgets our sins.

It is quite possible to understand this as an Angelic manifestation. But in keeping with what we are seeing of the 'inconsistency' of God, could it not be that God did actually concede to the humanity of Moses, and actually come down to earth and let Moses see His back parts?

God wants to somehow save Israel from the shame of the fact He divorced them for their unfaithfulness. He goes to the extent of apparently denying His very nature to do this.

He will insult His own nature to show us the extent of His forgiveness. He can even limit His omniscience.

15. Scripture interprets Scripture. Yet this leads to the conclusion that the beast in Revelation is a symbol of Arab opposition to natural Israel in the last days.

The Bible is inspired by God. Therefore every detail is correct and significant.

Scripture interprets Scripture. Yet this leads to the conclusion that the beast in Revelation is a continuation of the Roman empire in a religious form; i.e. it refers to the Catholic church persecuting the believers throughout history.

Sometimes the Bible is very vague. Under inspiration, Paul seems to have forgotten the exact quotation, or to have been deliberately vague, when he speaks of "one in a certain place testified" (Heb. 2:6). There are times when the Spirit uses very approximate numbers rather than exact ("about the space of four hundred and fifty years", Acts 13:20 cp. 1 Kings 6:1). The reference to "seventy" in Judges 9:56 also doesn't seem exact. Seven and a half years (2 Sam. 2:11) becomes "seven years" (1 Kings 2:11); three months and ten days (2 Chron. 36:9) becomes "three months" (2 Kings 24:8). And 1 Kings 7:23 gives the circumference of the laver as "thirty cubits", although it was ten cubits broad. Taking 'pi' to be 3.14, it is apparent that the circumference would have been 31.4 cubits; but the Spirit says, summing up, "thirty".

It is hard to reconcile these two interpretations. Yet both are Biblical. Bible-minded brethren just can't agree with each other on prophecy. Why? There is no paradigm of thinking which will draw them towards the same conclusions; the simple fact is that God's sure word of prophecy can be taken more than one way, although the subsequent interpretations appear to be mutually contradictory.

Surely this is to show that God is God, not man. His word is not contradictory, but in ensuring this, God does not sink down to the level of a man who wanted to write a faultless book, carefully ensuring that every figure exactly tallied. He has a spiritual culture much higher than this. And this is behind the many Bible paradoxes which we meet.

These Bible paradoxes or 'inconsistencies' all have their 'explanations'; explanations which sometimes I have given. Yet all those 'explanations' somehow lack the ring of truth; there is a sense of 'getting round' the problem rather than satisfactorily explaining it. It has to be said that bad feeling has often occurred amongst us over many of the above contradictions. Brethren are convinced that their perspective is the Biblical one, and they cannot understand how other brethren can find Biblical support for an opposing idea. What I am suggesting is that these kind of things simply cannot be resolved by any amount of human words or

reasoning, They are Divinely created Bible paradoxes, and surely the key is to recognize them for what they are, to appreciate our inability to reconcile them; and to learn an appropriate humility in our dealings with our brethren, and above all with our God who is so far beyond our comprehension.

Acceptance

Acceptance of our inability to resolve these inconsistencies is surely what God wants. Yet acceptance is a concept increasingly foreign to our age; every problem *must* have its resolution, our understanding *must* be capable of comprehending everything we come into contact with. We live with the sense that we are highly logical, rational creatures. Yet we are far from logical in spiritual terms. We have the peerless love of Christ behind us, and the matchless hope of the eternal Kingdom in front of us. And yet we sin, we are indifferent, we turn away from the glory of these things, like Israel we effectively say that we don't want to hear. Each sin is the utmost statement of our total illogicality. We know, we perceive, we understand so much (relative to the man next to us in the bus); yet we simply will not apply the majority of this knowledge to our lives. We live under an illusion of logicity. We are ultimately *illogical* creatures. Surely the purpose of God's (apparent) inconsistency is to shatter our perception that we are ultimately rational and logical. We are not. We need to learn to *accept* that we have no sense of what is true logic; God's reasoning, His logic, is not ours.

It seems to me that God's word and His ways being stamped with this (apparent) inconsistency is the greatest proof that God is God, that the Bible is His word. Recently I was talking to a leading Russian mathematician in a Moscow hotel. He said that his study of mathematics had taken him outside the realm of the consistent and logical, and had persuaded him not only that there is a God, but of man's smallness. We might think maths is a logical, pure science. After all, $2 + 2 = 4$, not 4.1. or 5. Yet the closer you study it, the more you see a designed inconsistency. As a 15 year old studying for my Maths O-level, I struggled (and still do) with the idea that parallel lines meet at infinity. If they are parallel at the start, surely they are after 10 kilometres, and surely they are however far you go. But no. Mathematically, they meet- at infinity. The *acceptance* of this 'inconsistent' principle is at the root of a number of mathematical formulae- without which (e.g.) man would never have got into space. And so it is with God's self-revelation in the Bible paradoxes. There is a *designed inconsistency* there which must be accepted, just as there is in mathematics, which is in itself proof that God is God, not a man; that He is there, in all His moral and intellectual splendour and magnificence, and that His word to us is His word, not man's word.

God's grace itself, His thirst for fellowship and relationship with us, is in itself beyond the legalism of $2 + 2 = 4$. Grace isn't like that. Even within God's own law, there are indications of God's ultimate flexibility, His willingness to weight the ultimate algorithm of Divine judgment of sin in our favour- simply because He loves us and wants us. The command "You shall not kill" in Ex. 20:13 must be understood in the context of a situation where the same Law also commanded certain sinners to be put to death within the community, and at times Israel were Divinely commanded and enabled to kill others outside of the community. We have to look, therefore, for a more specific meaning for this commandment- and it seems it is speaking specifically of blood revenge, killing the person who murdered one of your relatives. According to Num. 35:25-28, if the murder was unintentional, i.e. manslaughter rather than murder, then the person could flee to a city of refuge lest he be slain by the avenger of blood. There is no guidance for the avenger of blood in these 'cities of refuge'

passages; rather is there the assumption that he might well attempt to take revenge even for manslaughter, and in this case the unintentional murderer should flee from him into a city of refuge. But clearly enough, this was not God's will- for "You shall not kill". But such is God's grace that He built into His law a recognition that His people would fail. This isn't what we would expect of a $2+2=4$ God, where broken commandments are to be punished and period. In this case, we see here a tacit recognition even within the Mosaic Law that the commandments- in this case "You shall not kill"- wouldn't always be obeyed, and therefore extra legislating was added to enable this situation to be coped with. This isn't only an example of God's sensitivity to human sin and weakness of hot blood [although it is that]. It's an insight into how the very structure of His law is such that He understands human weakness, and is eager to ensure that it hurts others as little as possible. No more human 'god' would have dreamed this up. This grace has the stamp of the ultimately Divine, and any attempt to understand it within the frames of literalistic, legalistic analysis are doomed to failure.

Hard questions

Perhaps we should leave it there. But I am repeatedly (and I mean repeatedly) asked the following questions by newly baptized brethren and sisters:

1. God says He is a God of love, that He wants to save men. Yet so many live and die without being given even the chance of knowing His plan. According to the Bible, they will stay dead with no second chance.
2. Babies and young children die, including those of believers. According to the Biblical principles of resurrection, judgment and the need for baptism, they will remain dead. Yet how can we reconcile this with a sensitive God of love?
3. The Bible teaches that we should separate from those who leave the Faith or teach false doctrine. But some Christians won't do that. So in order to separate from those who are in the wrong, we also have to separate from those who are more or less believing what we believe, but who won't separate from what is wrong. Surely it's wrong not to break bread with those who are also in the one body of Christ? Yet it's also very wrong to allow the yeast (leaven) of false doctrine into the body; this means separating from those who let themselves be influenced by it.

All these are fair questions. No answer is completely satisfactory. Because of our refusal to accept the apparent inconsistency of God, we can be driven to unBiblical doctrines; e.g. that there will be a 'second chance'. Or we end up making assumptions (e.g. this child died because knew ultimately it wouldn't accept the Faith) which are pure guesswork and almost an insult to God's omnipotence. We simply must not throw away our understanding of basic Bible doctrine; nor must we lose our appreciation of the love and grace of God. The *only* way- to my mind- to cope with these questions is through appreciating the principle of the inconsistency of God; to recognize the need for *acceptance* of what appears humanly impossible to understand. The grace of God, our redemption through the death of a perfect man...these things *can* be understood, on one level (and they can be misunderstood, too). Because there *is* so much misunderstanding, we have rightly given emphasis to what the *correct* understanding should be. But ultimately, in fundamental essence, the issues of the atonement and the saving grace of God are beyond us. Sometimes God seems to play on this fact, in that He makes statements which are evidently paradoxical. Thus Jer. 30:16 says that

He would punish Israel for their sins at the hand of their invaders, and *therefore* these invaders would themselves be destroyed. God's love for Israel is such that even in their guilt He still avenges them. And the only way to really explain such love is to use Bible paradoxes and apparent contradiction.

Fellowship

The issue of fellowship is an especially vexing Bible paradox. We are commanded that we must preserve the unity of the one body of Christ, and fellowship within it. Yet to fellowship with error is serious indeed; Israel were condemned because they allowed those outside the covenant to partake of the sacrifices which symbolised their covenant with God (cp. the breaking of bread; 2 Chron. 23:19; Is. 26:2; Ez. 44:7 cp. Rev. 22:14). The problem is that we can't tell who exactly is in the body of Christ. It is true, both Biblically and from the Christian experience, that if we take a 'soft' attitude to fellowship, reasoning that we must accept anyone into fellowship, then we will end up losing any concept of Biblical, Christ-centred fellowship. We know there is one body, but there are invisible limits to it. In this lies the problem. Therefore if we say 'I will fellowship anyone, because I have a Biblical duty to do so', we will end up fellowshipping with anyone who is willing to fellowship with us. And the yeast of false doctrine and immoral behaviour will inevitably affect us, so that we lose the Faith. Yet if we focus instead on the Scriptures that teach we must separate from false teachers, we end up needing to also separate from those who tolerate false teachers, without themselves being apostate. And so we will very easily get into a mind-set which results in endless subdivision and hunting out of false teachers and those willing to tolerate them. Anglo-Saxon Christians have agonized, really agonized, over this issue. It cannot be denied that we must separate from that which is false. The Gospel is fundamentally a call to separation, a deliverance from what is false, as Israel were delivered from Egypt. In some sense, our redemption, our eternal destiny, depends upon this. Yet our salvation also depends upon showing the softness, the love, the patience, which we will stand in need of at the judgment. For as we judge, so will we be judged. The attitude of the Lord Jesus towards us in that day will be proportionate to our attitude towards our brethren in this brief life.

The balance between these two 'columns' of Bible paradoxes is hard indeed. It seems that in the Lord Jesus alone we see the perfect fusion of " grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14); in Him alone mercy and truth met together, in His personality alone righteousness and peace kissed each other (in the words of the beautiful Messianic prophecy of Ps. 85:10). Somehow it seems that we both individually and collectively cannot achieve this. We are either too soft and compromise and lose the Faith, or we are too hard and lose the spirit of Christ our Lord, without which we are " none of his" (Rom. 8:9). The result of this is that whenever the Truth is revived, that community is in a sense born to roll downhill; after two or three generations the Truth is lost. Either they destroy themselves through bitter subdivision, or they compromise with error and lose the Faith. Perhaps it is God's plan that no one community should hold the Faith through many generations; perhaps this is one explanation of the paradox within Bible teaching about fellowship. But perhaps the 'contradiction' is there to teach us - or try to teach us- the need for us to rise up to the challenge of showing " grace and truth" in our thinking and judging, even though we cannot fully achieve it; to realize our tragic inability in this, to recognize that within our limited nature this must be an unsolvable paradox. And thereby we should be led to appreciate more the beauty and the wonder of the way in which these two concepts are linked together in the Father and His Son, and to yearn more to perceive and enter into the glory of God's Name, which totally incorporates these two humanly opposed aspects (Ex. 34:6,7; Rom. 11:22).

Notes

(1) "It is sufficient to believe that Christ was the word made flesh, that according to the flesh He was the seed of David...these are the fruit-producing facts of the case. They are inducive to reverence, love and comfort. But when we are asked to define "how" as a matter of literal, scientific, metaphysical process this dayspring from on high hath visited us, we are at once in the region of the incomprehensible...for not only can we not know, but even if we could, it would be of no practical value. *It is not the comprehension of Divine modes, but the doing of His will that commends us to God.* We cannot know the Divine modes of working...we believe Jesus was God manifest in the flesh; we know not how; by the Spirit truly...but this does not define the process, which is incomprehensible to man" (Robert Roberts, *Seasons Of Comfort*, 1915 ed., p.213).

(2) William Barclay also notes and discusses the unresolved contradictions surrounding the NT use of the Greek word *lutron* / ransom payment (*New Testament Words*).

6-3-1 Appendix: The Love of God in Hosea

The words of God as recorded in Hosea- both through the acted parable of Hosea's love life, and in actual statement- are passionate and contradictory. The love of God in Hosea is a classic example of Bible paradox. God speaks with a raw anger rarely seen elsewhere in the prophets; and yet He says the very opposite of those things, in the love that He has towards her. And it's not that God uttered words of judgment and then, years later, when Israel repented, softened His attitude. No, within the very same prophecy, God changes His position. In the midst of free-flowing wrath, He remembers mercy. This shows for one thing His passion as a personal being. Further, it shows that we can legitimately see within our own personal relationships a real reflection of the feelings of Almighty God. There is within every valid relationship an element of love/hate, patience/frustration, anger and yet also the tenderest love. And so it really was and is in God's relationship with Israel. His love, patience and tenderness are, however, the dominant emotion; and it is these which are brought together in that wonderful final chapter of Hosea. There as we read, once we perceive what is going on, we feel caught up in the passion of God's love for His people. He has expressed the love and anger, the justice and grace, the truth and mercy, throughout the book. And now He pours out that love, contradicting His former angry judgments, picking up the words He has used and turning them right around. He has told them He won't love them any more. And now, He concludes- that He will love them freely. He would give them the valley of Achor, symbol and epitome of their miserable failure toward Him, a place best forgotten in their history, as a door of hope. And she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, when she came up out of Egypt (2:15). And so as you cough and hack your way through the routines of this monotonous life, know that there is a God above who passionately watches for your every move towards Him, who woos you to Him, as He seeks to allure Israel back to Him (2:14). When you decide or don't decide to make that effort to get up earlier to pray more, to read, to meditate; when you weigh up whether or not to give something of 'yours' to Him; He is there watching as it were on the edge of His seat. This is the thrill of a living relationship with Him.

Even within the space of a few verses, God says one thing in judgment and then appears to change it: "I will utterly take them away...yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea" (1:6,10), i.e. the Abrahamic promises would still be fulfilled to them. This is the love of God in Hosea.

The key verse in all this paradox of the love of God in Hosea is perhaps 11:9.

Exactly because God is God and not man, He will not punish His people according to what He had said He would do. His “repentings were kindled together” (11:8), alluding through the same Hebrew words to how Joseph’s innermost being “did yearn upon his brother” (Gen. 43:30), in prophecy of how God would accept Israel in the last days. And chapter 12 explains how God’s relationship with Jacob, who brought God to change His judgment concerning him, is the pattern for us all- for in those incidents, “there he spake with us”.

Consider the ‘contradictions’ in God’s statements about His beloved woman Israel. They indicate if nothing else that He is a passionate God, with deep feelings. And the wonder of it all is that these are the feelings of God Almighty towards His tiny creatures who crawl this earth. This is just how important He has allowed us to be for Him.

“I will break the bow of Israel” (1:5)

I will
break
the
bow
and
sword
of
Israel’s
enemies
and
save
Israel
(2:8)

“I will no more have mercy upon Israel” (1:6)

“I will
show
mercy
unto
her
that
had not
obtained
mercy
...in
[God]
the
fatherless
[Israel]
findeth
mercy”
(2:23;
14:3)

“I will utterly take them away” (1:6)

Israel
will ask
God to
“take
away”
[s.w.]
their
sins,

"I will not be your God" (1:9)

"She is not my wife, neither am I her husband" (2:2)

God would "return" or "reward" Israel for her doings (4:9)

and He
will
(14:2)
"Turn
thou to
thy
God...w
ait on
thy
God"
(12:6);
"I that
am the
Lord
thy God
from
the
land of
Egypt"
(12:9;
13:4);
"return
unto
the
Lord
thy
God"
(14:1)
Yet
Israel
are
encour
aged to
return
to her
husban
d, i.e.
God
(2:7);
He
longs
for her
to call
Him
"husba
nd"
again
(2:16)
God
would
return
[s.w.]
the
captivit
y of
Israel

(6:11);
"I will
not
return
[s.w.]
to
destroy
Ephrai
m: for I
am God
and not
man"
(11:9);
"mine
anger
is
turned
away
[s.w.]
from
him"
(14:4)

Both Israel and Judah had sinned equally; therefore "Judah also shall fall with them" (5:5). The judgments to come upon both of them are paralleled (5:12; 6:10,11). God would be "as a lion" to devour both Ephraim and Judah (5:14)

Yet
other
passag
es state
that
Judah
was
more
faithful
than
Ephrai
m and
was as
yet
undefile
d
(11:12)

God remembered every one of Israel's sins (7:2)

He will
not
remem
ber the
fact
they
worship
ped
Baal
(2:17)

"They shall return to Egypt" (8:13; 9:3), and be buried in Memphis (9:6)- although this never happened

"He
shall
not
return
into the
land of
Egypt"

"They shall reap the whirlwind" (8:7)

(11:5)
A
repenta
nt
Israel
will
"reap in
mercy"
(10:12)

"They shall not dwell in the Lord's land" (9:3)

"I will
place
them
[s.w.
dwell]
in their
[own]
houses
[dwellin
g
places]
"

(11:11)
; "I will
yet
make
thee to
dwell
[s.w.]"
(12:9)

God would destroy Israel's children and walk away from them and forget them (9:12)

God
will
never
"forget"
Israel
(Is.
49:15)

God would slay every single man of Israel, so that there would not be a man left (9:12)

He
never
did this

"I hated them" (9:15)

God
loves
Israel
with an
eternal
love,
and
hates
their
enemie
s Esau
(Mal.
1:3).
He will
"love
them
freely"

"I will drive them out [s.w. divorce] from mine house" (9:15)

"I will love them no more" (9:15)

"My God will cast them away" (9:17; Is. 54:6); the same Hebrew word occurs when God says He would "reject" Israel (4:6)

(14:4).
In
place of
hatred,
He will
show
them
compas
sion
(Is.
60:15).

Accordi
ng to
the
acted
parable
of
Hosea's
life, he
never
divorce
d his
wife
but
loved
her to
the
end.

"I will
love
them
freely"
(14:4)

Even
when
Israel
were to
be in
the
land of
their
enemie
s as
punish
ment
for
their
sins, "I
will not
cast
them
away"
[s.w.]
(Lev.
26:44).
God

"I will not enter into the city" (11:9)

will not
cast
away
Israel
(Is.
41:9).
Only if
Heaven
can be
measur
ed will
God
cast
away
Israel
(Jer.
31:37).
God
has not
cast
away
His
people
(Rom.
11:2)
But the
enemie
s of
Israel,
manifes
ting
God's
judgme
nts, did
enter
into the
city.
The
Hebrew
words
for
"enter"
and
"city"
occur
togethe
r in
several
passag
es
describi
ng this
(2
Kings
25:2;
Jer.
32:24,2

9;
44:2;
52:5;
Dan.
9:26;
Joel
2:9).
The
promise
that
they
would
not was
surely
uttered
in
emotio
nal
passion
?

Assyria would be their King, not God (10:3; 11:5)

Judah
has
God as
her
king
(11:12)

God would give them up to their enemies and they would go to Assyria (9:3)

God
would
not
'give
up' or
deliver
Israel
to her
enemie
s
(11:8)

God would destroy / devour them (7:13; 8:14; 10:8; 13:8)

God
would
not
destroy
them
(11:9)

In similar vein, Mic. 2:9 clearly states that God would “take away my glory for ever”; yet Ez. 48 and other passages picture the glory of God returning to the temple from which it had departed. One can find these kinds of things all over the Bible. They are profound witnesses to the depth of God’s passion for us. We live in a passionless age. Within our community, there's a culture of well-speak arising, which masks a legalism and disregard of the person and the individual. The well-speak culture whilst of course good in a sense, leads to a community and people lacking in any passion, obsessed with keeping a status quo, and that will never grow. Judging *how* something is said / presented rather than **WHAT** is said or done appears typical of what is the case in the world at large. Passion, emotion, genuine feeling, hot blood, are all somewhat despised. But these are very clearly the character traits of the God in whose image we seek to be. And they are brought together beautifully in the love of

God in Hosea.

The Ultimate Resolution

The way God through Hosea speaks to His people verges at times on what appears to be abuse. Having threatened her with murder, death by starvation, slaying her kids with thirst, being stripped naked and raped before her lovers, He then speaks to her in terms of tenderest love and hopefulness for the future relationship. Outbursts of violence [verbal or otherwise] followed by tenderness is the classic pattern of the abusive husband. Cases of domestic violence and male abusers of women repeat this pattern time and again- it's a classic (1). Now why would the God of all love and true tenderness, cast Himself in this role? It seems to me that God is trying to express to Israel by this hyperbole that He understands just how they will see Him; just how hard it is for them to believe / trust in Him in that they think He's being abusive [although He isn't]; that He takes more 'guilt' than He ought to in it all; but that in the very end, "I will love them freely", and the Gentile world will ever know that. God lived in hope she would see the point, He hoped through the hope of Hosea that 'Gomer' would say "I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better with me than now" (Hos. 2:17). But Gomer / Israel would not; and so the Lord picked up the idea and puts it in the mouth of the returning prodigal son in Lk. 15:17. *We* in our daily repentances, in our coming to the Lord, are the ones who *do* touch the heart of God with joy, in seeing through the paradoxes and coming to see that God *is* in the end, love. Our struggling with these paradoxes is partly because of our Greek rather than Hebrew thinking. Greek thinking involves 'step logic', whereby you reason in a series of logical extrapolations. But Hebrew tends to reason through placing 'blocks' of ideas are put in opposition to each other, or 'dialectic', in order to come to conclusions. That's why we can read of God hardening Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh hardening his own heart (Ex. 7:3; 8:15). Or God being abusive to Israel, and then wonderfully loving. To Greek, step-logic thinkers, that's a worrying contradiction- only because they don't pick up the way that Hebrew reasoning involves these kinds of statements being put in opposition to each other, so that through the dialectic process we come to understand what is meant. And what is meant here in Hosea is ultimately that God *is* love, love beyond all reason, for the unloving and unresponsive, and that His love will find the ultimate way.

(1) See L. Walker, *The Battered Woman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) pp. 55-70 for further analysis.

6.4 Fearing God

Should we fear God? For some time I answered this frequent question along these lines: 'Fear is a kind of idiom for *respect*, we must respect God as children do a Father, but we shouldn't be fearing God in the sense of quaking at the knees'. But analyzing this question more deeply, I'm not sure this is quite right. God is only *likened* to a Father, but this doesn't mean that in every sense we should treat Him *just* as a child treats a Father. God also likens Himself to a slave owner who must be not only honoured but feared: "If then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear?" (Mal. 1:6).

There are times when our Bible study leads us to a conclusion we just don't want to accept; and the idea of fearing God is one of them. The New Testament uses the Greek word *phobos* for "fear" - and from it comes the word 'phobia'. We have to remember that the New

Testament would have been read and heard by those who knew Greek; God chose words which were in current usage at the time. It seems that in the first century, *phobos* meant fear, real fear- not just respect (for which there is another word). Their idea of *phobos* was based on how it was used in earlier, classical Greek; and there, *phobos* meant real fear. For example, Homer associates *phobos* with "panic-stricken flight" (*Iliad*, 9.2). And Biblically, *phobos* means real fear rather than merely respect. It is used of men in rigid fear in the presence of Angels (Lk. 1:12,65; 2:9; Mt. 28:4), or in the aftermath of the death of Ananias (Acts 5:5,11).

The Hebrew *yare* likewise means both fear / dread, and also reverence / worship. It is used for literal fear in Is. 8:12,13: instead of fearing the Assyrian invaders, Israel were to be fearing God. Knowing the enveloping mercy of God should lead to a real fear of a God so gracious (Ps. 5:7). However, obedience to God's commands would lead to a fear of Yahweh's glorious and fearful name (Dt. 28:58); not the other way round, whereby fear of God leads to obedience. God's character is not just partly severe, partly gracious. His grace and His judgment of sin are wonderfully interconnected within His character. Thus destruction comes from Shaddai, the fruitful, blessing one (Is. 13:6); and the meek, harmless Lamb has great wrath (Rev. 6:16,17). And yet, fearing God's judgment and righteousness is not in itself a bad motivation. It may not be the highest motivation, but in practice, because we so often understand no other language (to use a school teacherly phrase), the real fear of God is a necessary motivation. Knowing the "terror of the Lord" (a phrase used in the OT with reference to coming judgment), Paul persuaded men to accept His grace (2 Cor. 5:11). Noah went into the ark (cp. baptism) from fear of the coming flood (Gen. 7:7), as Israel crossed the Red Sea (again, baptism) from fear of the approaching Egyptians, as men fled to the city of refuge (again, Christ, Heb. 6:18) from fear of the avenger of blood, and as circumcision (cp. baptism) was performed with the threat of exclusion from the community (possibly by death) hanging over the child.

We live in a world and a brotherhood increasingly under the influence of 'happy-clappy' music and emphasis on love. Whilst there is nothing wrong with such emphasis or music in itself, there is a very real possibility that we can be influenced to relate to God without any sense of fear. And yet there is repeated Biblical emphasis on the urgent need to be fearing God. A true fear of God is the motive for so much. It has been observed: "*Phobos* is the source of Christian effort (Phil. 2:12). The Christian must work out his own salvation with *phobos*, fear, and trembling. The sense of the judgment which he faces, the sense of the goal which he may miss, the sense of the crucial importance of life and living, the sense of the necessity of in some way seeking to deserve the love of Christ, all combine to fill the Christian with an awed wonder and a trembling of eagerness, and a passionate effort" ⁽¹⁾ . Sometimes a piece of writing captures the real spirit of truth; and this, to my mind, is one such. The words bear repeating: "...the sense of the judgment which (the believer) faces, the sense of the goal which he may miss, *the sense of the crucial importance of life and living*... all combine to fill the Christian with an awed wonder and a trembling of eagerness, and a passionate effort" . "*The crucial importance of life and living*" - it's a fine way of putting it.

Biblically, *phobos* is the motivation for a pure life (1 Pet. 3:2; 2 Cor. 7:11), for humility in our dealings with each other (Eph. 5:21), for accepting the Gospel in the first place (2 Cor. 5:11). It must be remembered that the Gospel is not only good news, but also the warning of judgment to come on those who reject it (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38-40). The good news is *so* good that a man can't hear it and decide not to respond- without facing judgment for his rejection of God's love and Christ's death. There are many who know the Gospel (e.g. by

being 'brought up in the Faith') but who calmly walk away from the call of the cross. I would suggest that they need more reminding than it seems they are given of the fear of God, the tragic inevitability of judgment to come, the sense of desperate self-hate and bitter regret that will engulf men then, the sense of no place to run... . Paul used " the terror of the Lord" , the concept of fearing God, to persuade men who had rejected his beseeching (2 Cor. 5:11). I write all this with the knowledge that it will not go down well with some. But I think it has to be said; if we have heard the call, we have been called, we are responsible before God for every moment and every action and every thought; we are not our own, we are bought with a price, the Lord who bought us would fain have us for His own. We will each one bow before the glory of God in the face of His Son; and more than that, we should be doing so now.

Yet there is, of course, another side of the coin. We are saved by grace, already, we are elevated to the heights of heavenly places on account of being in Christ. A perfect love casts out fear (1 Jn. 4:16,18), fear is associated with bondage rather than the freedom of sonship which we enjoy (Rom. 8:15). Yet all this can in no way erase the very clear teaching of many other passages: that we ought to fear God, really fear Him. What's the resolution of all this? It may be that *ideally*, we are called to live a life without any fear in the sense of *phobos*- in the same way as we are asked to be perfect, even as God is (Mt. 5:48). Yet the reality is that we are not perfect. And perhaps in a similar way, we are invited to live a life without *phobos* , but in reality, it is necessary to have it if we truly realize our weak position. We ought to be able to say with confidence that should Christ come now, we will by grace continue to be in His Kingdom. Yet in the same way as we always assume a future, so we inevitably look ahead to the possibility of our *future* apostasy; as we grow spiritually, there is an altogether finer appreciation of the purity of God's righteousness. The risk of rejection, the sense of the future we may miss, and the faint grasp of the gap between God's righteousness and our present moral achievement, will *inevitably* provoke a sense of fear in every serious believer. And yet fearing God, unlike fear on a human level, is a motivating and creative fear. Our fear of and yet confidence with God is a strange synthesis. The Lord Jesus will rule, or shepherd (Gk.) His enemies with a rod of iron (Rev. 2:27). He can somehow both shepherd and crush at the same time. Our relationship with Him is a reflection of these two aspects of His character.

Notes

(1) William Barclay, *New Testament Words* (London: SCM, 1992 Ed.).

Footnote:

A Criticism Of Evangelical 'Christians' By An Evangelical

" Where the Puritans called for order, discipline, depth, and thoroughness, our temper is one of casual haphazardness. We crave for stunts, novelties, entertainments; we have lost our taste for solid study, humble self-examination, disciplined meditation, and unspectacular hard work in our callings and in our prayers. The hollowness of our vaunted biblicism [*a fine phrase!*- D.H.] becomes apparent as again and again we put asunder things God has joined. Thus, we concern ourselves about the individual, but not the Church, and about witness but not worship. In evangelizing, we preach the gospel without the law, and faith without repentance, stressing the gift of salvation and glossing over the cost of discipleship. No wonder so many who profess conversion fall away!

In teaching the Christian life our habit is to depict it as a path of thrilling feelings rather than of working faith, and of supernatural interruptions rather than of rational righteousness; and in dealing with Christian experience we dwell constantly on joy, peace, happiness, satisfaction, and rest of soul, with no balancing reference to the divine discontent of Romans 7, the fight of faith of Psalm 73, or any of the burdens of responsibility and providential chastenings that fall to the lot of a child of God. The spontaneous jollity of the carefree extrovert comes to be equated with healthy Christian living...while saintly souls of less sanguine temperament are driven almost crazy because they cannot bubble over in the prescribed manner. Whereupon they consult their pastor, and he has no better remedy than to refer them to a psychiatrist" .

6.5 The Humility Of God

The aim of our lives is God manifestation. As such, each of the characteristics God is developing in us is in some way a reflection of the glory of His own character. Humility, therefore, is one of His characteristics- because we are asked to develop it. The difficulty of humility doesn't seem to be appreciated by us very deeply, either collectively or individually. Yet to the Lord, humility was the very *epitome* of righteousness (Mt. 5:5 cp. Ps. 37:29), as Malachi saw pride as the epitome of wickedness (see the parallelism in Mal. 4:1). There is a telling parallelism in Zeph. 2:3 which equates Yahweh God of Israel with humility: " Seek ye Yahweh...seek meekness" . Pride is somehow ingrained in the very fibres of our nature. And yet even human observation has concluded that the sign of true greatness is in humility. The greatest exhortation to humility is surely in reflection on the humility of God, His humbling of Himself from His physical and moral heights in order to reach out into our tiny lives, and bring us eventually to the heights of His nature. David recognized this when he spoke of God's salvation: " with thy meekness thou hast multiplied me" (Ps. 18:35 AV mg.); and elsewhere he realizes that the majestic highness of Yahweh is *because* He humbles Himself to behold the things in Heaven (the Angelic system) and on the earth (Ps. 113:4-6). Our efforts to upbuild each other, our outreach into the world, should all be reflecting this same humble devotion.

The Lord Jesus took a child and placed him in a circle of rough fishermen. Whilst humility isn't a natural characteristic of children, we are asked to take as it were a snapshot of that child in that situation, looking at the ground, pining away inside himself. The Lord said that the child had " humbled himself" (Mt. 18:4)- showing that He didn't see children as naturally humble. But as he stood (or sat, Mt. 18:2 Gk.) in the middle of the circle, the impishness and immature self-assertion was driven out, and in a moment the child was humbled. That child in that situation, the Lord said, represented the true disciple; and it represented Himself, the Lord of glory. It seems to me that the Lord was standing next to the child, identifying Himself with it, in the middle of the circle of disciples. *In the very same context, a few verses later* the Lord spoke of how He was *in the midst* of the disciples (Mt. 18:20). There is no doubt He saw that humbled child as the symbol of Himself, possibly implying that He Himself had been progressively humbled, from one level to another [\(1\)](#). Yet in Lk. 9:48, the Lord goes further: the child represents not only the believers and their Lord, but also *the Father* (Mt. 18:5; Lk. 9:48). The humble surroundings of the Lord's birth, the way the exalted Lord of life and glory appeared from the tomb dressed like a working man (whilst the Angels, far inferior, had shining white garments), the way during His life He spoke in such a way that reflected His lack of formal education (Jn. 7:15)- all this shows a humble, super-human Father. And His Son was and is the same. Indeed, Lk. 2:12 RV (cp. Is. 7:11,14) says that *the* sign would be that the Son of God would be laid in a cattle trough; this was to be the extraordinary indication that God Himself was involved in this wonderful birth.

The humility of the Lord Jesus is a reflection of the humility of God His Father. He spoke of Himself as the sower, who sleeps (in His death) and then works night and day (His present Heavenly labour for us) so that the seed should bring forth fruit- " he knoweth not how" (Mk. 4:27, with allusion to Ecc. 11:1,5,6). Despite all things having been revealed unto Him, and the Spirit unmeasurably given to Him, He had the spiritual and intellectual humility to openly recognize that our spiritual growth and ultimate salvation is a mystery to Him. It was the Father alone who gave the increase.

The Lord Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. It is wrong to think that the Lord was only humble in His ministry, but will return with almost bitter indignation. This is not so. He girded Himself and served His men in the days of His flesh (Jn. 13:4); and He will do *exactly* the same again, in the glory of His Kingdom (Lk. 12:37). That same essential humility of God and Jesus will be with Him; He won't have changed. It is His fundamental, eternal characteristic. The fear of God lest Israel would not attain the promised land ("lest peradventure..." , Ex. 13:17) shows His humility, in being so concerned for the salvation of petty man; and that characteristic likewise will be His, right up to and through and beyond the day of judgment.

The more we begin to even faintly grasp the height of Yahweh's holiness and spirituality, the more we will be awed by His humility in dealing with us. It requires humility from Him to even behold the Angels (Ps. 113:6). And yet He lets them discuss His will and come up with their own schemes for executing it, many of which he rejects as somehow inappropriate (2 Chron. 18:17-20). The way God does not issue directives and expect robot-like execution of them, the way He suspends or changes His plans in accordance with human response, the way He sometimes allows men to live on a lower level than the ideal levels which He teaches- the depth of His humility is hard to plumb. Doubtless Job 4:17-19 is using exaggerated language to make the point that the fact God deals with humans is marvellous, because the Angels are fools compared to Him: " Shall mortal man be more just than God?...Behold, he put not trust in his servants, and his Angels he charged with folly. How much less in them (men) that dwell in houses of clay...?" . Yet Angels have God's nature, they are totally sinless. And yet in the exaggerated Hebraism of Job, God cannot trust them because they are fools. This shows that it isn't just sin that separates from God; to be without sin even by nature does not mean that we are on His level. Job came to deeply marvel at this fact, struggling to accept that despite God's highness, He tests us and meditates upon us every moment of our lives: " What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him?...that thou shouldest visit him every morning, and try him every moment?" (Job 7:17,18). These words became the basis of the thoughts of the Lord Jesus as prophesied in Ps. 8:4: " What is man, that thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that thou visitest him?" . Like Job, the Lord learnt from the depth of His own inner struggles about the moral greatness of the Father. So even God's own Son, peerless and spotless lamb of God that He was even in mortal nature, recognized that such was God's moral splendour that He was surprised that during His mortality, God was so intensely interested in Him. If God's intense interest is a concession to Angels and to His own Son during the days of His flesh, how much more to us. And yet the wonder of this is hard to grasp, because we perhaps lack the appreciation of both the highness of and the humility of God which we should have.

The earnestness of God's desire for our redemption leads Him to this extraordinary humility. The way He allowed Himself to be so hurt by the crucifixion of His Son is an example of this. It is dimly prefigured in the pain of Abraham for Isaac, and the weeping of Jacob for Joseph, a grief which nobody else could enter into, both on receipt of the news of his supposed death, and also when he finally falls on Joseph's neck and weeps for him (Gen. 46:29; note how Joseph tragically reciprocated this by weeping on the face of his dead father, in prototype of the mutuality between Father and Son). Often the prophets denounce Israel's sins and then God makes an appeal to them in the most humble of language, at the very time when He could have taken the high ground of moral principle and demand. Hag. 2:14,15 is an example: "so is this people, and so is this nation before me...and now, *I pray you*, consider..." . Likewise Hos. 5:12 likens God to a moth eating up Ephraim- after having denounced them for the grossest whoredom. Is. 61:11 compares God to soil- the ground, from

which He made man. Further, God reveals Himself to us as a God who has passion, and whose passionate decisions often lead Him to great pain- He represents Himself as the jilted lover in Hosea, a 'man' who loved a woman so so much that it 'ruined' Him. Time and again we read of the "great wrath" of God against Israel; and yet His own word uses those same two Hebrew words to comment that a man of "great wrath" is always getting into expensive trouble (Prov. 19:19). This, if you like, is the price God pays for having feelings and emotions and making emotional decisions. God's zeal to persuade men of His grace brings Him to the most remarkable statements:

- Not least are those which liken God to a young man hopelessly in love with a woman (Israel) who was really no good, a man who took the blame when it was undoubtedly her fault (Is. 54:6,7), grieving that she wouldn't return to Him (Am. 4:8 etc.). " I am broken with their whorish heart...I am crushed" (Ez. 6:9; Jer. 8:21 NIV). God likens Himself to a broken man because of Israel's fickleness. He went through the pain of the man who knows He has been forgotten by the woman he still desperately remembers (Hos. 2:13). He allowed divorce only for the hardness of man's heart (Mt. 19:7); yet God speaks as if *He*, with all His morality and justice, was responsible for the divorce (Jer. 3:8), when in fact it was Israel who had broken the marriage contract by their unfaithfulness. But in His grace, He as it were took the blame. The Hebrew word translated " zeal" in the context of God's zeal for us (Is. 9:7) really means the jealousy which flares up in a man for a woman (the same word is in Num. 5:14,15; Prov. 6:34; Song 8:6 etc.). That jealousy burning like fire (Ps. 79:5) is His passion for us His people. He is a jealous God in His zeal for us; and therefore any other relationships with the things of this world cannot be contemplated by us. That zeal of God will be poured out upon us at the second coming, resulting in a consummation with Him as the wife of His covenant (Is. 42:13,14; 64:1). This is a figure which would be unseemly for a man to devise. But this is His passion for us, which the humility of God drives Him to use; and surely it will one day be revealed. To use this very figure of a man in love and consummating his relationship in marriage is so apparently inappropriate that it reflects the humility of God in even considering the use of it. We are God's heritage, His reward / wages (Heb.), His recompense for all His labour for us (Ps. 127:3 Heb.).

- God's 'home' in the wilderness was a tent made of goats' hair, exactly the kind of tents made by nomads; and not an elaborate awning. He 'dwelt' even then in a humble home, just as He did later in the poverty of His Son, and just as He does to this day, in both material and emotional poverty of human lives.

- " Come now, and let us reason together, saith Yahweh. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as snow" (Is. 1:18). This is extraordinary indeed. God is seeking to persuade men to accept the forgiveness available in the blood of His Son. And He asks us to do this work for Him, to reflect this aspect of His character to the world, with that same spirit of earnest humility: " As though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). No wonder in the context Paul says that we should *therefore* watch our behaviour and attitudes. The fact men turn away from God's *beseeking*, His *praying* that they will accept His grace, is surely the greatest tragedy in the whole cosmos, in the whole of existence. Little wonder we should *look diligently* lest any man fail, or (Gk.) fall away from God's grace (Heb. 12:15) on account of bitterness in the ecclesia.

- In the same context of God lowering Himself to plead with a proud and apostate Israel: " Thus saith the Lord, the Holy One of Israel...concerning the work of my hands *command ye me*. I have made the earth and created man upon it: I, even my hands, have stretched out the

heavens, and all their host have *I commanded*" (Is. 45:11,12). Note the two uses of "command" and "hands" . God commands the stars, His hands created them; but *command ye me* concerning my works, and I will answer you. We can *command* God and His *hands* will answer. The humility of the creator shows He is the creator.

- Balaam was clearly intended to see a similarity between his God and his ass, who had faithfully been there for him all his life long, and had never been unreasonable to him. The humility of God was not ashamed to compare Himself to the humble beast of burden, ridden, used and abused by His people (Num. 22:30).

- Being generous to the poor is likened by Prov. 19:17 to lending to the Lord; and He will repay that 'debt'. There are countless ways in which God's word could tell us that what we give to the poor, we will somehow receive back from God. But God chooses to use this figure- thus indicating His own solidarity with the very lowest of society, and how God feels in the debt of those who are for them. It's of course only a figure, but God surely shows His humility by using it.

- The way in a sense God allows Himself to be beaten in the short term, His purpose apparently frustrated, His power to save limited ⁽²⁾ by the weakness of man...all shows His greatness. Jacob through prayer and allowing himself to be humbled is described by the Spirit as *prevailing* against the Angel (Hos. 12:4). This is why prayer is sometimes likened to wrestling and struggle against God. The way men like Abraham and Moses reasoned with God and changed His stated purpose indicates the condescension of God to us. The way He hears and responds to human prayer is humility itself. David realized this: " Bow down thine ear to me" he prayed, recognizing that it was through His humility that God hears human prayer (Ps. 31:2). W.E. Vine comments that when the Lord talks about us 'asking' the Father for things (Jn. 15:23), He uses a Greek word which means the asking of an *inferior* (i.e. God) to do something for a *superior* (i.e. us). Greek scholars have also pointed out that some phrases in the Lord's prayer show a remarkable lack of etiquette and the usual language of petition to a superior; literally, the text reads: " Come Thy Kingdom, done Thy will" . Is this part of the " boldness" in approaching God which Paul speaks of? That God should encourage us in this (although He also encourages us in reverential fear of Him) reflects something of His humility.

- Because of God's enthusiasm for human response to His ways, the exalted language in which He describes believers, even in their weakness, is a further essay in His humility. The way the Father runs to the prodigal and falls on his neck in tears is a superb essay in this (Lk. 15:20). Thus God " delighted" in Solomon (1 Kings 10:9)- translating a Hebrew word meaning literally 'to bend down to'. It's used about men in love (Gen. 34:19; Dt. 21:14; 25:7), and about Jonathan's deferential attitude to David (1 Sam. 19:2). We have mentioned that David especially recognized this humility of God. In 2 Sam. 22:26 he uses an unusual word to describe how God is " merciful" to His faithful people. The word only occurs elsewhere in Prov. 25:10 concerning 'bowing the neck' in shame or reverence. And this is what the Hebrew means: to bow the neck. This, David recognized in his time of spiritual maturity, was what God does in response to those who shew a truly spiritual attitude to their brethren.

- God grieved over the carcasses of those wretched men whom He slew in the wilderness for their thankless rebellions against Him their saviour (Heb. 3:17). The apostle makes the point: With *whom* was He grieved?" . Answer: with the wicked whom He slew! A human God or a proud God would never grieve over His victory over His enemies. Even in the fickleness of

Israel's repentance, knowing their future, knowing what they would subject His Son to, " His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel" (Jud. 10:16). He delays the second coming because He waits and hopes for repentance and spiritual growth from us. But He praises the faithful for patiently waiting for Him (Is. 30:18; Ps. 37:7). Here we see the humility of God's grace.

- The Lord Jesus reflected the Father's humility. He spoke of how He would come forth and serve us in His Kingdom (Mt. 20:28). How this prediction will exactly be fulfilled is a subject for our reverential meditation.

- That Almighty all-wise God could inspire 1 Cor. 1:25 is another example: "The foolishness of God... the weakness of God". In Jer. 14:21 we find something wonderful: "Do not abhor *us*... do not disgrace the throne of thy glory". *We*, weak humans, are paralleled with the throne of God's glory.

- The fact God will ultimately come and live on tiny planet earth with us His beloved people is the ultimate outworking of His humility (Rev. 21, 22 and see *God: The Final Reality*). The reason why space is so deep and huge may simply be because God wants to show us His humility: in that although He is so far from us, He will come to us, such an infinite distance in human terms, and live here with us. And this Almighty, so distant God... describes Israel as " a people near unto Him" (Ps. 148:14)- using the very word elsewhere translated " near of kin" or " kinsman" . This is *how* close He comes to His people.

- In order to reveal Himself to men, God uses the principle of manifestation through men. The very fact that He should allow mere men to manifest Him, even to bear His Name when they were weak (Jn. 10:35), to allow men to be baptized into His Name (with all the spiritual immaturity we have at the point of baptism)- this all shows a wondrous humility. So close was His manifestation in men like Moses (for all his short temper at times) that God speaks of how Moses brought Israel out of Egypt, when it was evidently God who did so.

- God is so willing for our repentance and salvation that He almost debases Himself in order to achieve it. But this does not mean that He compromises Himself or offends the basic majesty of His character and Being. There are times when He doesn't 'rush in' and correct error or judge sin just to vindicate Himself. The fact He does *sometimes* denounce false teachers is in itself an act of humility for the Almighty, who will always be vindicated even if He says nothing.

- The rainbow is to remind men of the essential salvation and patience of God. And yet He describes it as reminding *Him* of His promise of salvation (Gen. 6:9)- as if He might forget.

- The order of things in the list of essential doctrines in Eph. 4:4-6 is marvellous: " One body" (us) comes first, and " One God" comes last. Behold here the humility of God.

- The parables contain elements of unreality in order to make a point. Lk. 14:31 speaks of a King coming in judgment upon another King who only has half the army which he has. The more powerful King is of course God. But we are likened to a "king" also, on His level in that sense, who has only half His strength. This is altogether such an under estimate of the Father's physical and moral superiority to us!

A relationship with a God like this really ought to humble *us*. He, the Almighty, has asked us to humble ourselves so that we might walk with Him, as if He is so far beneath the petty pride

of man (Mic. 6:8 mg.). This really ought to humble us. The whole purpose of the Gospel is to bring down the mountains of human pride and lift up the valleys of those who lack any self-respect (Is. 40:4), thereby making an equality of attitude amongst God's people. The vision of the Kingdom in Is. 2:2-4 was used as an appeal for *humility* amongst Israel (2:10-12). We have been clothed with God's righteousness (Is. 61:10; Rev. 3:18), and therefore we should be clothed with humility too, as our response to this (1 Pet. 5:5). Above all, the finest essay in the humility of the Father and His Son is seen in the birth, life and death of the Lord. The birth in a manger, no rooms in the inn, growing up in a small town in despised Galilee, the naked shame of the crucifixion (Heb. 6:6 Gk.), Mary thinking the resurrected Son of the Highest was the gardener... the way God Himself 'dwelt' in the ark, a small wooden box only a metre or so broad and high. This is the humility of God. Our experience of the humility of God will surely bring us to reflect it within the very fibre of our being.

Notes

(1) This is what Phil. 2:4-9 teaches, suggesting that in His mind the Lord worked down and down, until He came to the final humility of the cross. Likewise Heb. 2:9 describes how Christ was "made lower" than Angels- the same Greek word is translated "decrease". He was decreased lower than the Angels "by the suffering of death"; perhaps because previously the Angels had been subject to Him, but in His time of dying he was 'decreased' to a lower position?

(2) See *The Limitation Of God*.

6-6 The Unity of God

There is no doubt that one of the major aims of Christianity is to develop a mind which is fixed upon the Lord Jesus. Yet because of the nature of God manifestation, this means that in some ways we have to consider both God, with whom Christ was and is one in spirit, and also the body of Christ; for we are also one with Christ, as He is one with God (Jn. 17:21). Thus the act of breaking bread is not just a statement of our relationship with the Lord Jesus (although of course it is that); it has meaning in terms of our relationship with God too. It is a re-affirmation of our covenant with Him, fulfilling the types of some of the Mosaic sacrifices, which spoke of a man's relationship and commitment to God the Father. So whilst we must ever grow in our appreciation of the unity between Christ and the Father, the supremacy of God's manifestation in Him, we must not let this drive out our awareness of both the Father and our brethren and sisters, the body of Christ.

I want to consider the teaching of Mark 12:28-31. Jesus was asked which was the first (i.e. the most important) commandment; we would expect Him to just recite one of them, and to say 'Well, there you are, that's my answer; that's the first one, either numerically, or in terms of importance'. But in reply to this request to name just one of the ten commandments, He actually quotes two of them. "Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Now notice this bit) There is none other commandment greater than these ". There is no greater command (singular) than these two . So Jesus saw those two commands as one, the greatest, most important principle of our life before God. Yet He begins by speaking of the unity of God as expressed in His memorial Name, Yahweh your elohim, and says that this is what will lead to us loving God with all we have, and also to our loving our neighbour as

ourselves. The Lord is saying that if we really appreciate this idea of the unity of God, that Yahweh is our God, then we will therefore love God, and also our neighbour. So what does it mean, to love our neighbour as ourselves? In the context of the Decalogue, the neighbour of the Israelite would have been his fellow Israelite, not the Gentile who lived next door to him. The command to love our neighbour as ourselves is elsewhere given an equivalent under the new Covenant: to love our brother or sister in the ecclesia as ourselves. Gal. 5:14 and James 2:8 quote this command in the context of ecclesial life.

So to love God and Christ is to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is because of the intense unity of God's Name. Because our brethren and sisters share God's Name, as we do, we must love them as ourselves, who also bear that same Name. And if we love the Father, we must love the Son, who bears His Name, with a similar love. The letters of John state this explicitly. If we love God, we must love our brother; and if we love the Father, we must love the Son. This is why we must honour the Son as we honour the Father (Jn. 5:23); such is the unifying power of God's Name. So the Father, Son and church are inextricably connected. Baptism into the name of Christ is therefore baptism into the Name of the Father, and associates us with the "one Spirit" (Mt. 28:19; Eph. 4:4). In the same way as we cannot choose to live in isolation from the Father and Son, so we cannot separate ourselves from others who bear the same Name. The Scribe well understood all this: "There is one God...and to love him...and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mk. 12:32,33). Those whole offerings represented the whole body of Israel (Lev. 4:7-15). The Scribe understood that those offerings taught that all Israel were unified together on account of their bearing the same Name of Yahweh. We must love others who bear that Name "as ourselves", so intense is the unity between us. In some ways, we should lose the sense of our own human personality; we should somehow be able to have the same spiritual interest in others (for this is true love) as we do for ourselves. So this sense of true selflessness which we would dearly desire is connected with an appreciation of the doctrine of the intense unity of God and of His Name, and of the glorious principle of God manifestation.

By sharing the one Name, we are one together. 1 Jn. 3:23 associates believing on the Name with loving each other; and in Jn. 17:11 Christ prays that God will keep us all as one through His own Name. If you get hold of one of the Bible analysis programs on a computer, you can find all the places where God's Name is associated with unity. There are so many of them. Quite often God's Name is connected with His being "the Holy One" (Is. 29:23; 47:4; 54:5; 57:15; 60:9; Ez. 39:7). God being the Holy One is a further statement of His unity ⁽¹⁾. Of course, we are speaking of ideal things. False doctrine and practice, the uncertainty of knowing exactly who carries God's Name, these and many other limitations of our humanity make it hard to achieve the unity which this theory speaks of. But the unity we do achieve is a foretaste of the Kingdom; unless we love this idea of unity, we will find ourselves out of place in the Kingdom. "In that day there shall be one Lord, and His Name one" (Zech. 14:9). It may well be that Eph. 4:4-6 is alluding back to this verse; this passage inspires us to keep the unity of the Spirit, because here and now "there is one body, and one Spirit...one Lord...one baptism, one God"; in other words, Paul is saying that the unity of the Kingdom, as spoken of in Zech. 14:9, must be found in the ecclesia of today.

It's so easy to write these words, to read of these things. But do we really believe that we, and our brethren, do really bear this glorious and fearful Name? If we do, we will be meeting with them as far as possible, travelling to meetings, thinking of them in our daily work, writing to them, fervently praying for them, doing all we can to mend breaches between us, overcoming

the selfishness of indifference, loving our brethren as we do ourselves. Now here is something to rise up to, to shake us out of the polemics, the academics, the spiritual indifference, which can come to fill much of our spiritual lives. All the fullness of God dwelt in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:9); "and of his fullness have all we received" (Jn. 1:16). God's fullness, the full extent of His character, dwelt in Christ, and through His Name which speaks fully of that character, that fullness of Christ is reckoned to us. And so, in line with all this, Eph. 3:19 makes the amazing statement. And it is amazing. We can now "be filled with all the fullness of God". Let's underline that, really underline it, in our hearts. We can be filled with all the fullness of God. Filled with all the fullness of God's character. Our poor, small, limited minds try to rise out of their spiritual squalor to get a handle on this.

There is a clear connection between this idea of the fullness of God, and Ex. 34:6, where God proclaims His Name to be "Yahweh, a God full of compassion", grace and His other characteristics (see R.V.). So by bearing God's Name, we have His fullness counted to us. As Christ had the fullness of God dwelling in Him in a bodily form (Col. 2:9), so the church, as the body of Christ, "is (Christ's) body, the fullness of him (God) that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:22,23). So you see the intensity of our unity; we are the very body of Christ, He exists in and through us (although of course He still has a separate personality). Likewise, the fullness of God is in Christ and thereby in us. We are not just one part of God's interest, our salvation is not just one of His many hobbies, as it were. He only has one beloved Son; He was sent to this earth for our salvation. The fullness of God, even though we scarcely begin to comprehend it, dwelt fully in Christ, and is counted to us. We really should have a sense of wonder, real wonder, at the greatness of our calling. How can we be so indifferent to it? How can we be prepared to enter so little into the depths of these things, when God's word is so full of His self-revelation, that we might know His Name. Ps. 91:14 implies that our love of God is expressed in seeking to appreciate His name:

"Because he hath set his love upon me therefore will I deliver him:

because he hath known my name I will set him on high".

To know Him is to love Him, and to want to be like Him; there is something compulsive and magnetic about who He is. The knowledge of God elicits quite naturally a merciful spirit (Hos. 6:6). To "learn righteousness" is the result of beholding [after the pattern of Moses] the majesty of the Name (Is. 26:10). And so Is. 46:5-9 appeals for Israel to repent simply because God really is God; they were to "remember this" that they already knew, and "bring it again to mind" that God is really the great eternal, and His Name is as it is. And they that know His Name will put their trust in Him, day by day, as we cough and hack our way through these few years towards His eternal Kingdom. Then God will be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), through the full expression of His Name. But Eph. 1:23 says that right now, all the fullness of God fills "all in all" in the church; in other words we should now be experiencing something of that total unity which will then be physically manifest throughout all creation.

The intense degree to which God's Name really is called upon us is brought out in Is. 64:4. There we are told that no man has perceived "O God, beside Thee" what has been prepared for the saints. These words are quoted in 1 Cor. 2:9,10 concerning us, with the wondrous statement that God has revealed these things to us by His Spirit. Yet Is. 64:4 says that only God alone knows these things. But Paul says that they are also known by us, through God's Spirit. So through our association with the one Spirit, the one Name of Yahweh, what is true of God Himself on a personal level becomes true of us. Such is the wonder of the way in

which His fullness dwells in us. God's Name alone is Yahweh (Ps. 83:18), yet this Name is now called upon us.

Such was the Lord's unity with us then that He personally carried our sins, He was so deeply connected with us and our sinfulness that He had to offer for His own salvation "that it might be for us". Bro. Roberts goes on (in *The Blood of Christ*) to make the point that it is impossible to separate Christ from the work He came to do; there was no effective division between the work He did for Himself, and that which He did for us. The same spirit is found in the encouragement to the Christian husband to sacrifice himself in every way for the wife's salvation. It was shown by the good Samaritan (cp. Jesus) risking his own safety to save the wounded man of humanity; the shepherd stumbling about in the dark mountains looking for the lost sheep of the church; and also by Moses, when he was willing to risk his own salvation for that of others (Ex. 33:32). He really understood the spirit of unity which we are speaking about. He wanted to see God's glory, whether it was manifest in him or others was to some degree irrelevant. This is a great challenge for us. Our attitude to rejection at the judgment should be that if we personally cannot glorify God's Name, then we hope for rejection and destruction, as quickly as possible. We should wish to see our brother saved every bit as much as we wish for our own salvation; this is loving our neighbour as ourselves.

We have spoken of theory. We have looked to the heights of idealism. After reading this you will, in a few hours, at most, be back in the real world of sin and failure, of apparent inability to attain even the smallest ideals. But the very height of these things should itself be like a great crane, to lift us up from our lowness. We can capture some sense of this "all in all" presence of God in our lives, we can grapple with our own self-centredness, the Truth really can permeate our thinking- if we let it, if we do our part to saturate our thinking with His word, to fill our lives with behaviour patterns and habits which allow us to live out this unity of which we have been speaking.

Notes

(1) Perhaps Jesus was referring to this in Jn. 17:11: "Holy Father, keep through thine own Name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one ". In this case, Jesus is implying: 'Help them to be one, so that they might all come together with me as well in the Name of the Holy One of Israel'.

6.7 God: The Final Reality

An Exposition Of Revelation 21, 22.

Mystery is a feature of false religion. To ease and justify our natural inclination towards unbelief, we tend to take refuge in the idea that spiritual things are a mystery. I want us to think about the reality of God. I don't want to repeat here what I've often said and written about the fact that God is a personal, corporeal being; He is not an intangible essence drifting about in space ⁽¹⁾. God is real, and He should be a reality in our lives. We should have a real concept of relationship with Him now, and be able to look forward to a future relationship with Him. He shouldn't be a 'black box' in our brain which we label 'God'.

The reality of God slipped away from Israel, and all that happened to them is likely to happen to us, individually and communally. After their return from Babylon, the Jews translated the Old Testament into 'Targums', written in Aramaic. These chose to substitute the phrase "the word of God" for the inspired descriptions of God as a personal being. The following are a few of many examples:

Hebrew Text

Targums

Ex. 31:13. The Sabbath "is a sign between me and you."

"Between my word and you" .

Deut. 9:3. "God is a consuming fire."

"The word of God is a consuming fire"

Isa. 48:13. "My hand laid the foundation of the earth."

"By my word I have founded the earth"

Early Christianity was likewise corrupted by Gnosticism, which reflected Eastern philosophy in which spirit was regarded as essentially good, and matter as evil. This false philosophy resulted in the rejection of God as a material being. The idea that God *is* a personal being was once clearly proclaimed as fundamental by many Christian writers ⁽²⁾ . But now it seems we place little emphasis upon this. And as Israel made God more and more abstract, mentally distancing themselves from Him, so we, too, can distance ourselves from the reality of the Father.

The final chapters of Revelation describe our ultimate destiny, and they have a lot to say about our relationship with God. You may have noticed that most expositions of Revelation tend to skip over these last two chapters; as we read them twice a year, perhaps we, too, would rather gloss over them as altogether too fantastic to get to grips with. But we are called to high things, things which God surely wants us to at least try to enter into.

Revelation 21 and 22: The Second Coming

The first question we need to tackle is whether the events of Rev. 21 and 22 occur at the start or finish of the Millennium. Well, let's present the conclusion before giving the evidence: these chapters refer to the position at the start of the Millennium. Consider the strong evidence:

- Revelation of the situation after the Millennium would surely be inappropriate, if not impossible, for us to receive in this dispensation.
- The context of Revelation 21 and Revelation 22 is set in chapter 20. The earth and heaven flee away when Christ sits on the throne, "and there was found no place for them" (20:11). This is almost quoting Dan. 2:35 concerning the establishment of the Kingdom⁽³⁾ .
- In place of this heaven and earth, a new heaven and earth appear in Revelation 21:1. This is the language of Isa. 65:17 and 2 Pet. 3:13 concerning the second coming.

- In this context, John sees " the bride, the Lamb's wife" (Revelation 21:2,9). The church is only a bride at the time of the second coming, seeing she marries Christ at the marriage supper.
- At this time, " God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death" , sorrow etc. (Revelation 21:4). The church will not be afflicted by these things during the Millennium; this must refer to Christ's return. Likewise the gift of the water of life (Revelation 21:6) is at the judgment at the second coming.
- The idea of former things (e.g. death, tears) passing away in 21:4 is one of many connections in Revelation 21 and Revelation 22 with Isaiah's prophecies of the second coming (Revelation 21:4 = Isa. 60:20; 65:19; Revelation 21:25 = Isa. 60:11,20).
- Revelation 21:7 speaks of the time when the faithful believer will receive his inheritance. This surely refers to the judgment at the second coming (Matt. 25:34).
- Revelation 22 has a number of connections with Revelation 21 which would indicate that we are to see Revelation 22 as also referring to the start, rather than the end, of the Millennium (e.g. Revelation 22:14, 21:27; 2:7). " The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2) is another obvious example.
- " They shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 22:5) is the language of Dan. 7:18,27 concerning the judgment at Christ's return.

The Literal Presence of God

Now I want to analyze some verses in these chapters which seem to teach that God Himself, in person, will descend to earth with Christ. This might sound altogether too incredible. But think about the idea.

The King Himself (= God) comes to see the guests at the wedding of His Son (= Jesus; Mt. 22:11). " The tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Revelation 21:3). " God himself" here either means God Himself or God manifest in Christ. Some years ago in our community there was a tendency to over-stress the humanity of Christ. Then the pendulum swung the other way; now, I'd suggest, we're taking the concept of God manifestation in Christ too far, to the point where the wonder of Christ's personality is obscured and one almost makes Christ a puppet of the Father ⁽⁴⁾. " God himself shall be with them" seems to me an odd way of describing Christ's second coming. God will " be their God." I would just about be willing to concede that this might apply to God manifest in Christ - but for one significant fact: this Revelation 21:3 is packed with O.T. allusions which explicitly refer to God the Father.

Old Testament Allusions

" The tabernacle of God" being God's people; He being our God; God living and walking with us, is evidently alluding to Lev. 26:11,12 and Ex. 29:45,46 concerning the ultimate blessings of the covenant after Israel's final repentance. The shadowy fulfilment they have had in the past through God's manifestation in an Angel doesn't mean that these promises can and must only be fulfilled by some form of God manifestation. Surely Revelation 21:3 is

saying that at the second coming the principle of God manifestation will change in that God will personally be with His people. Because we have so far lived under the paradigm of God manifestation, let's not think that it's not possible for God to personally be with us. Let's really try to be broad-minded enough to take this on board.

God promised Abraham that through Christ, His seed, blessing would come on people from all nations, with the result that God would be the God of Abraham's multitudinous seed: "To be a God unto...thy seed...I will be their God" (Gen. 17:7,8). The seed is Christ, and the "God" is Yahweh. Let's not confuse them. Now in Revelation 21:3 this fundamental promise is alluded to; God Himself will be our God then; we will see Him and have a personal relationship with Him. This would mean that this idea of personally being with God is a fundamental part of the Gospel preached to Abraham.

"God Himself" is difficult to refer to God manifestation in Christ. Long ago John Thomas urged us to settle for the simplest interpretation of a passage if it was supported by other verses. The other references to "God himself" are to Yahweh personally, rather than to Christ: Isa 45:18; Jn. 5:37; 16:27; 2 Cor. 5:18,19; Eph. 1:5. Indeed, those N.T. references seem to point a difference between "God himself" and Christ. So isn't it lack of spiritual vision - perhaps even of faith - that makes us wriggle against the idea of God Himself, in person, living with us?

The idea of God Himself dwelling with men in the tabernacle (temple) of the new city of Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2,3) is a clear reference to Eze. 48:35, which says that the name of Jerusalem in the Millennium will be "Yahweh is there". These ideas doubtless also have reference to Yahweh's promise to David to build an eternal house for Yahweh's Name.

Let's pause to stress something. The promises to Abraham and David (i.e. the New Covenant) and those found in the Old Covenant, are all alluded to here in Revelation 21:3. This would indicate that the ultimate fulfilment of God's plan is to have a full personal relationship with us for eternity. Now that's something to really chew on.

The City And Temple

Revelation 21:2,3 describe a new city and temple coming down from Heaven at the time God Himself descends. This city and temple is evidently that of Eze. 40-48 - chapters few of us have difficulty in understanding literally ⁽⁵⁾. The tabernacle, upon which the temple was based, was a pattern, or reflection, of things in Heaven itself (Heb. 9:23), i.e. "the temple which is in heaven" (Rev. 14:17). The structure and furniture of the tabernacle was an "example and shadow of heavenly things" (Heb. 8:5); "the holy places made with hands...are the figures of the true...the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man" (Heb. 9:24; 8:2). For this reason we read in Revelation about the Jewish feasts being kept in Heaven ⁽⁶⁾; of a heavenly incense altar, holy place, most holy place, incense etc., with the Angels acting as the priests. Thus Priests and Angels are both called 'Elohim'. There was a clear understanding by many Jews that the layout of the tabernacle on earth was a direct reflection of the physical organization in Heaven ⁽⁷⁾.

It is stressed in Heb. 9:24; 8:2 that this Heavenly temple was made by God not by human hands. The Kingdom of Christ is symbolized as a stone cut without hands (Dan. 2:44). Likewise Abraham looked forward to the Kingdom in terms of a city "whose builder and maker is God"; and God, we are told, has prepared that city for Abraham and his seed (Heb.

11:10,16). The coming down of that city/temple from Heaven in Revelation 21:3 is the fulfilment of Abraham's hope. The city/temple from Heaven has foundations (Revelation 21:14), just as Abraham expected (Heb. 11:10). Surely Abraham was looking forward to the literal realities described in Eze. 40-48. So I suggest that we read the account of the new city/temple coming down with some element of literalism about it - although, of course, there is much symbolism too. There is no hint that the temple of Eze. 40-48 is built by human labour; it appears on the scene straight after the Gogian invasion and the judgment of Eze. 37-39. If it literally descends from Heaven, a lot of practical problems are solved ⁽⁸⁾

Throughout Revelation 21 and 22 there is a distinction made between God and "the Lamb". This further suggests that the references to "God himself" are *not* to God manifestation in the Lamb, but to Yahweh Himself. "They shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads" (Revelation 22:4) indicates that "his face" and "his name" refer to the same being. The Name which will be in our foreheads will be that of Yahweh, the Father, not Christ (Rev. 3:12; 14:1). Therefore it is *His* face which we will see. Of course there is *some* reference here to 'seeing' in the sense of understanding, which is how we see the Father now. But then our fuller mental comprehension of the Father will be reflected in our physical vision of Him. Is. 25:6-9 speaks of how God's people will enjoy a feast in Jerusalem at the Lord's return, the veil will be withdrawn from their eyes, all tears will be wiped away, and then "It shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God...this is Yahweh". There is a parallel between physically seeing God and having the veil of our present incomprehension removed. The fuller understanding which we will then have will be reflected in our literal seeing of God.

The Son's present relationship with the Father includes physical sight and proximity (Christ's physical relationship to the Father is referred to in Hebrews several times). And His present relationship will then be shared with us. Let's not just see these relationships in purely abstract terms. Job, in the depths of depression and intense abstraction, could look ahead to the wonder of seeing God's face (Job 33:26 NIV). God dwells in light (1 Tim. 6:16), and this new city will have light from God, through Christ (Revelation 21:11,23; 22:5) - because Yahweh Himself will be there. Perhaps some of the intensity of that light will spread out to the surrounding world (Revelation 21:24), so that the nations call Jerusalem the place where Yahweh is (Eze. 48:35). The utter literality of all this was perhaps emphasized to John, when he was told: "Write: for these words *are* true and faithful" (Revelation 21:5). The almost fantastical description of God Himself wiping away all the tears that are *in* (Gk.) the eyes of men...this really is true and faithful.

God And The Judgment

In the context of the judgment seat, we are told that God the Father will be revealed then (1 Thess. 3:13; 1 Jn. 3:1,2). That the *Father* will then "appear" separate from the Son would add weight to the idea that Yahweh will physically appear then. This is the scenario of Dan. 7:9-13 where "the Ancient of days" sits enthroned at judgment (see Dan. 7:9 RV), and the Son of man comes before him with the clouds of Heaven (cp. Lk. 21:27). At the judgment, Christ will confess the names of the faithful "before my Father" (Matt. 10:32,33) - as if they are both there. Christ will confess us before the Father and the Angels (Rev. 3:5), surely alluding to Dan. 7:9-13. The Father *Himself* will reward men at the judgment in the sight of others (Matt. 6:4,6). Again, note that "the Father Himself" refers elsewhere to God Himself. Then, at the day of judgment, we will finally come to God.

Perhaps all this is a challenge, intellectually and spiritually. Perhaps it's how you've always seen it. But we will each meet the Father, *our* Father. He is our Father. Elihu encouraged Job to trust God, because one day he would see Him at the judgment (Job 35:14). Of all the endless trivia which fills our brains now, the wonder of these things is utterly eternal.

Notes

(1) See *Bible Basics* Chapter 1.

(2) John Thomas, *Phanerosis* p.25-27, 32,33; *Eureka* I p.95-98; Robert Roberts, *Christendom Astray* p.118-121; *Is There A God?* p.149; Percy White, *The Doctrine Of The Trinity* p.129-132; Dawn Booklet No.1 p.12; Dawn ('Light') Bible Correspondence Course p.12 (All available from CAT, 49 The Woodfields, South Croydon CR2 0HJ England).

(3) Rev. 20:11 appears to be an amplification of 20:4.

(4) Taken too far and misunderstood, the concept of God manifestation can lead the weaker Bible student to think there is little wrong with the 'Jesus is God' and Trinitarian position.

(5) The objection that God cannot live on earth amidst a mortal population is analyzed in some depth in *The Last Days* Ch. 31 (2nd Ed.).

(6) This idea is clearly developed throughout G. & R. Walker, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*.

(7) See *Midrash Rabba, Numbers* Vol.1.4.13.110 (Soncino Press, 1961): "The position of the terrestrial Sanctuary corresponds with that of the heavenly Sanctuary and the position of the ark with that of the heavenly throne". Likewise Leon Nemoy, ed. *The Midrash on Psalms* (Yale University Press, 1959), p.386: "The sanctuary below is the counterpart of the sanctuary above".

(8) The differences between Ezekiel's temple and that of Revelation 21,22 are reconciled- to some degree- in *The Last Days* pp. 342-351 (2nd Ed.).

6-8 The Restless God

In our hard times and weak moments, there's the tendency to think that the skies are made of steel and God looks the other way, some sort of indifferent, as He awaits the day of judgment when He will open our books and consider what we've been up to in this life. This couldn't be further from the reality. Because God is God and we are but men and women, there inevitably has to be some appropriate 'distance' placed between God and man. But don't let that distance fool us into thinking that God's distant from us personally. The God who in one sense is so 'far' repeatedly urges upon us His 'nearness', His attention to every micro event in our lives, and His unbelievably active involvement in our lives. It seems He even works out for us a large number of possible futures, knowing as the master chess layer that if we decide X then events Y and Z will then occur; if A, then events B- K. Man is not alone. You are not alone, I am not alone; "For I am with you". God is with us for us in His Son. Of course, we must draw near to Him (Ps. 73:28); and yet He is already near, not far from every one of us (Acts 17:27). David often speaks of drawing near to God, and yet he invites God to draw near to him (Ps. 69:18). Yet David also recognizes that God "is" near already (Ps. 75:1). I take all this to mean that like us, David recognized that God "is" near, and yet wished God to make His presence real to him. Truly can we pray David's prayers. So often, prayer is described as coming near to God (Ps. 119:169 etc.)- and yet God "is" near already. Prayer, therefore, is a way of making us realize the presence of the God who is always present. God's people are told to "keep not silence" in their prayers to God (Is. 62:6). But the same Hebrew word is translated "Give Him no rest" in the next verse (Is. 62:7). Insofar as the voice of prayer is never silent world-wide, so far God is never, in that sense, at rest. The extent of His activity for us is simply *huge*. Just consider all the apparently insignificant details added in to

God's plan for making Saul king: "Then you shall go on from there farther and come to the oak of Tabor. Three men going up to God at Bethel will meet you there, one carrying three young goats, another carrying three loaves of bread, and another carrying a skin of wine. And they will greet you and give you two loaves of bread..." (1 Sam. 10:3,4). One of this, two of that, three of those... why such detail? It's the same question as to why is the cosmos so vast, the range of plant and animal life on earth so huge and varied. Perhaps in Saul's case all the detail was necessary in order to try to build faith in him, and to demonstrate for all time the capability of God to have micro level involvement and control in human experiences.

The Man Will Not Be In Rest

The lovely story of Ruth speaks of our redemption. Her "kinsman redeemer" [Heb. *Go'el*] was the "mighty one", Boaz. We find this word especially used in Isaiah's prophecies to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, urging them to return from that Gentile land to Judah, and take the Gentiles with them. They had the impression there in Babylon that God had somehow forgotten them. The book of Ruth appears to have been written up [perhaps in Babylon] in order to encourage them to return- after the pattern of Naomi and Ruth returning to the land and being redeemed by their *Go'el*. But this *Go'el* is none less than God Himself. So many passages in Isaiah allude to the Ruth story: "I Yahweh am your Saviour and your redeemer [*Go'el*], the *mighty one* of Jacob" (Is. 49:26). Judah were urged in Is. 55:6 to call upon God "While He is *near*"- the same Hebrew word translated "kinsman". The servant songs go on to explain how Yahweh could become our kinsman through His Son, our representative, of our nature. Judah in captivity were likewise encouraged by Jeremiah to return to the land- with full allusion to Ruth: "Turn again, O virgin of Israel, turn again to these thy cities... for the Lord has created a new thing in the earth: a woman shall compass a man" (Jer. 31:21,22). This refers to the way in which Ruth summed up the courage to 'go after' Boaz, to present herself to him for marriage- reflecting the spiritual ambition of all those who seek redemption and restoration in Christ.

And so likewise the statement that God will not "rest" for Zion's sake (Is. 62:1) must be understood in the context of the faithful at that time urging God *not* to "be still" [same Hebrew word translated "rest"] for His people (Ps. 83:1; Is. 64:12). This is an allusion to Boaz not being at rest until he had redeemed Ruth and Naomi. God is *not* at rest, He is *not* distant from us; and yet His people in Babylon felt that He was. It's no wonder that we are tempted to feel the same. Yet we must give Is. 62:1 it's full weight- God is answering the complaint of His people by stating that no, He will never rest for them. In this same context we read that He that keeps Israel will "neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:4). The fact that *God* will never 'hold His peace' for His people's sake (Is. 62:1) means that *we* should likewise not 'hold our peace' for them (the same Hebrew is used in Is. 62:6). In our prayers for them, we are to give God no rest (Is. 62:7). And so the connection between Is. 62:1 and 6 socks us with an amazing challenge: *His* restless activity and concern for His people should be ours. It *must* be ours, if we are His children. Being bored from having 'nothing to do' just isn't part of the believer's life; His huge activity, the endless surging of His Spirit, is to be replicated in us as we too seek the good of others. If this connection is firmly established between His activity and ours, His Spirit and ours... then quite naturally we will seek to maximize our time for Him and be minimalists in the hours we spend upon the things of this life. As He never slumbers nor sleeps in His restless activity and thought for His people, so we shall likewise be in the Kingdom age; and our desire to be there is not because we fancy an eternal tropical holiday with palm trees blowing in the mind, but because we wish to be more closely aligned with His activity, with His Spirit, and not be held back by the limitations of our

current natures.

Ongoing creation

The cosmos hasn't been created, wound up by God as it were on clockwork, and left ticking by an absent creator. There are many Bible verses which teach that God is actively, consciously outgiving of His Spirit in the myriad things going on in the natural creation, every nanosecond He is sensitive to the needed input from Him- and He gives it. The Lord Jesus defended working for His Father on the Sabbath because "My Father works hitherto, and I work" (Jn. 5:17). "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your Heavenly Father feedeth them" (Mt. 6:26)- God consciously feeds the birds with their every mouthful. "If God so clothe the grass of the field. . . shall He not much more clothe you?" (Mt. 6:30). In the same way, God individually and consciously cares for each blade of grass. Fundamentally, they do not grow so much as a result of chemical combination or photosynthesis, but due to the conscious care of God using such processes. - One sparrow " shall not fall on the ground without (the knowledge of) your Father" (Mt. 10:29). God is aware of the death of each bird- He does not allow animals to die due to their natural decay (the clockwork mechanism) without Him being actively involved in and conscious of their death. Again, Jesus shows how God's knowledge and participation in the things of the natural creation must imply an even greater awareness of us. "The very hairs of your head are all numbered. . . ye are of more value than many sparrows" (Mt. 10:30,31). God "makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Mt. 5:45). God consciously makes the sun rise each day- it isn't part of a kind of perpetual motion machine. Hence the force of His promises in the prophets that in the same way as He consciously maintains the solar system, so He will maintain His Israel. Ps. 104 is full of such examples: " He waters the hills. . . causes the grass to grow. . . makes darkness (consciously, each night). . . the young lions. . . seek their meat from God. . . send forth Your Spirit (Angel), they are created" (not just by the reproductive system). There are important implications following from these ideas with regard to our faith in prayer. It seems to me that our belief that the world is going on inevitably by clockwork is one of the things which militates against faith. To give a simple example: we may need to catch a certain train which is to leave at 9 a.m. We wake up late at 8:30 a.m. and find it hard to have faith in our (all too hasty) prayer that we will get it, because we are accustomed to trains leaving on time. But if we have the necessary faith to believe that each individual action in life is the work of God, then it is not so hard to believe that God will make the action of that train leaving occur at 9:30 a.m. rather than at 9 a.m. when He normally makes it leave. The whole of creation keeps on going as a result of God having a heart that bleeds for people. "If he causes his heart to return unto himself", the whole of creation would simply cease (Job 34:14 RVmg.). His spirit is His heart and mind, as well as physical power. Creation is kept going not by clockwork, but by the conscious outpouring of His Spirit toward us. In times of depression we need to remember this; that the very fact the world is still going, the planet still moves, atoms stay in their place and all matter still exists... is proof that the God who has a heart that bleeds for us is still there, with His heart going out to us His creation. And the spirit of the Father must be in us His children.

Angels

One insight beyond the [apparent] steely silence of the skies is to be found in the visions of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and Revelation. Don't just turn off when you read of monsters, cherubim, Angels and incense. Half close your eyes and see it all at the broad outline level. Quite simply, events here on earth are related to huge mega movements of Divine power in Heaven. The sky, the trillions of kilometers between Heaven and earth, are in fact no ultimate

distance. That's the simplest message of those visions. In Revelation we see the incense of human prayers arising into Heaven, resulting in Angels coming to earth, pouring out bowls, blowing trumpets, and major events happening on earth (Rev. 5:8; 8:3). Prayer is noticed; it brings forth quite out of proportion responses. The Angels discuss their plans for us in the court of Heaven, coming up with various possibilities of how to act in our lives, discussing them with God (1 Kings 22:20-22). They play some part in the whole process of our prayers. When we read that "Surely the Lord does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" (Am. 3:7), we might tend to take that as a statement of absolute principle that is obvious to all the Angels. But we find an Angel discussing with others: "Shall I hide from Abraham [who was a prophet] what I am about to do?" (Gen. 18:17). My point quite simply is that the Angels have more debate, expend more mental and physical energy than we surely realize, in order to operationalize things which we might consider to be standard and automatic in God's work with men. In our context, what this means is that when men reject the machinations and schemings of God's love, they reject an awful lot; and it grieves and disappoints Him, and appears tragic to those like the prophets who see things from His viewpoint. Dan. 10:2 records that Daniel prayed for three weeks, presumably for his people's restoration. In v. 12 Daniel is told by the Angel that "from the first day... your words were heard, and I am come for your words". So because of his prayer ("words" - perhaps put like that to emphasize the power of the 'mere' words uttered in prayer), an Angel was sent from God to give him the understanding he had asked for. His very first prayer for this was answered- but the actual answer came three weeks later. The reason for this was that the Angel had been withstood by the prince of Persia for 21 days (v. 13). Three weeks is 21 days. So Daniel's first prayer was answered, but it took the Angel three weeks to work out the answer in practice; but during this time Daniel kept on praying, although at the time it must have seemed to him that no answer was forthcoming. God wasn't silent- although Daniel may've been tempted to think so. His Angels were earnestly working out the answers during the apparent 'silence'.

Fatherhood

The Father restlessly watching for the prodigal's return matches the woman searching for the lost coin "till she find it" or the unusual shepherd who searches for his lost sheep "until He finds it" (Lk. 15:4,8,20). This involves God in huge activity- setting up providential encounters, nudging consciences through circumstance. The huge amount of 'work' is one thing; but the mental energy of concern and thoughtfulness is phenomenal beyond our comprehension. God rises up early seeking His people- rather like us somehow being able to wake up early in the morning without an alarm clock, because our internal clock is restlessly wanting to be up and on our mission for the day. In all this we are to manifest God- for we too are to seek and save the lost. In all this, I'm not so much saying 'We ought to be the more active, focused, better managers of our time'... as appealing to us to align our heart / mind / spirit with that of God. And quite naturally His priorities and passions for the lost become ours. We will have a life to live, rather than mere existence to be existed through until the time comes when old age forbids us frittering any more time online or completing the latest Sudoku. This is how a lost world spends its lostness; it is for us to go seek them.

Judgment Now

Let's quit forever the idea that God is somehow indifferent to human behaviour and experience now, and will only open the books and consider it all at judgment day. No. The essence of judgment is ongoing now; "we make the answer now". God's present judgment is often paralleled with His future judgment. Thus "The Lord *shall* judge the people...God *judges* [now] the righteous, and God *is* angry with the wicked every day...he *will* whet his

sword; he *has* [right now] bent his bow, and made it ready.” (Ps. 7:8,11-13). We are come *now* “to God the judge of all” (Heb. 12:23); God is *now* enthroned as judge (Ps. 93:2; Mt. 5:34 “the heaven *is* God’s throne”). We are now inescapably in God’s presence (Ps. 139:2); and ‘God’s presence’ is a phrase used about the final judgment in 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 24; Rev. 14:10. Hence “God is [now] the judge: he putteth down one and setteth up another” (Ps. 75:7) – all of which He will also do at the last day (Lk. 14:10). So “The day of the Lord is coming, but it is even now” (Mic. 7:4 Heb.). God isn’t passive to human behaviour- right now “To every matter there is a time and a judgment (*krisis*)” (Ecc. 8:6 RVmg.). He perceives our actions right now as critically important. And this should highlight to us the crucial importance of life and right living today. For God isn’t a God far off; ultimately the High and lofty one who inhabits eternity also inhabits the heart of the humble today. Prayer makes a difference; the words of prayer really do ascend to Heaven and are heard. Are we merely muttering the same trite phrases to God, half asleep as we drift into our nightly unconsciousness? Rattling off the same sentences over meals...? Several times we’ve seen that it is our serious prayer which makes Almighty God so restless for us. His restless, creative Spirit is to be ours. Not for us the mire of mediocrity, existence rather than life...

7.1 " I won't be in the Kingdom" : Doubt About Salvation

7-1-1 Doubt About Salvation

By God's grace, I firmly believe I myself will be. But very often (more often than you might think), a sincere, good living brother or sister (including some you'd be surprised at) says this or writes this to me. Whatever I reply, the response is something like, " Well, OK OK, but *I know* I won't be there" . Doubt about salvation is that strong with them. When we feel like this, we are in some ways unreachable, we make ourselves untouchable by any spiritual reasoning- because that's how we actually want to be. So what follows probably won't help anyone in the actual moments of spiritual desperation, but perhaps these ideas can be stored away against the rainy days of future unbelief. Perhaps you are newly baptized, and find the possibility of such doubt a mystifying prospect. But all of us who've trodden the Kingdom road for any length of time can assure you that there *will surely* come times of spiritual crisis and spiritual self-doubt on a deeply, deeply personal level, right inside the very core of your being. Those who haven't experienced these things simply haven't grasped the awfulness of their sins, haven't examined themselves very deeply, or taken their *personal* responsibility and relationship to God very seriously. In this fact alone lies a challenge for the spiritually self-satisfied. The danger for those who have known the Truth a long time, or from childhood, is to never have this sense of spiritual crisis, simply because they never seriously get down to thinking about their personal relationship with God. In this case we will just drift through life, with a false sense of spiritual peace. It's what we could call the stagnant pond syndrome: the pond looks wonderfully quiet and at peace, but when you examine it you see why it's so quiet and still- because there's absolutely no life in it at all. Those who agonize that they will not be in the Kingdom certainly don't suffer from the stagnant pond syndrome; their agony of doubt about salvation is a fair reflection of their seriousness about spiritual things.

None Of The Accepted Will Think They Ought To Be In The Kingdom

Those who " are first" in their own eyes, those who think for sure they will be in the

Kingdom, will seek to enter the Kingdom at the day of judgment, but be unable. Those who strive to enter the Kingdom *now* are "last" in their own spiritual assessment; and the first will be made last in the sense that they won't be in the Kingdom. Thus when those who will enter the Kingdom are described as thinking of themselves as "last", this must mean that they think of themselves now as being unworthy of the Kingdom, having great doubt about their salvation, but as "striving" to be there now, in their minds (Lk. 13:23,24). The likes of Samson died with a confession of unworthiness on their lips- in his case, that he deserved to die the death of a Philistine (Jud. 16:30)- but he will actually be in the Kingdom (Heb. 11:32). Ps. 36:8 says that God will "make us" partake of the blessings of the Kingdom of God. It reminds me of how the Lord Jesus said that in His Kingdom, He will "make us" sit down at a table, and He will come and serve us (Lk. 12:37), knowing full well that he who sits at meat is greater than he who serves (Lk. 22:27). It isn't so difficult to imagine this scene: the Lord of glory wanting us to sit down to a meal, and then *He* comes and serves us. He *will* have to "make us" sit down and let ourselves be served. Perhaps "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom" (Mt. 25:34) likewise suggests a hesitancy of the faithful to enter the Kingdom, seeing they have had such doubt about salvation. Perhaps this is typified by Joseph's revelation to his brethren; they slink away from him, and he has to encourage them: "Come near to me, I pray you" (Gen. 45:4). They absolutely knew that they ought to be punished and killed by him, and they obviously thought he would do it. Even years later, Joseph *wept* in frustration at their lack of full acceptance of his total forgiveness (Gen. 50:17). These scenes are so evidently typical of the future judgment seat of Joseph/Jesus.

The idea is that all those who will be in the Kingdom will feel that really we should not be there, we don't deserve it, and therefore Christ will have to almost make us go into the Kingdom. It's the same in the parables of Matthew 25, at the judgment Jesus will praise the righteous for doing so many good things, and then they will disagree with Him, they will say 'No, we didn't do that, really we didn't', and He will say 'Yes, in my eyes, you did'. It's the self-righteous, those who think they have done so much and therefore they must be in the Kingdom, who will be rejected. We must be like the man who wouldn't even lift up his eyes to Heaven but just said "God have mercy on me a sinner" - not like the Pharisee who said "I thank you that I am better than other men". The wording of all the Lord's parables reflects His deep grounding in the Old Testament. The idea of not being able to lift up the eyes to Heaven is a common Old Testament way of expressing guilt for sin; being able to lift up one's eyes suggests a faith in forgiveness (especially in the Psalms). It could be argued that the man who wouldn't lift up his eyes to God didn't have total faith that he'd been forgiven. He just confessed his sinfulness and hoped for mercy. And yet he was the one who was accepted, for all his doubting, rather than the man who thought he could lift up his eyes to God. And the Lord designed His parables and teaching to reflect His basic knowledge that such men would characterize all who will ultimately be in the Kingdom. He spoke of us all as a little flock, fearing it is *not* the Father's pleasure / will to give us the Kingdom (Lk. 12:32). In doing so, He was as ever drawing on the language of the OT. Joshua-Jesus encouraged Israel that Yahweh delighted / willed that they should enter the land (Num. 14:8); but instead, they were too caught up with doubts... doubt about salvation, about what they could eat and drink day by day, and the giants in the land. This is the very context in which the Lord was speaking- fearing "the nations of the world", doubting where food and clothes would come from, just as Israel did (Lk. 12:22-29). Yet the pleasure / will of Yahweh is that we should share His Kingdom, and that pleasure / will prospered through the cross (Is. 53:10).

I find these ideas a real challenge. We should believe that we really will, surely be saved ⁽¹⁾; indeed, that we are already saved, in prospect, and are in embryo already the Kingdom of

God. We shouldn't in that sense have any doubt about salvation. It's a terrible balance, between having faith that we will be in the Kingdom because Christ died to save us, and on the other hand having the humility, the *real* humility, to know we shouldn't be there. In fact, this is such an *acute* paradox that I would say it's one of those irreconcilable paradoxes which God has designed, and built in to our spiritual experience. *Real* humility doesn't come easy. It isn't remarking 'Of course, we're all sinners' in an offhand way.

It's easy to have an appearance of spiritual humility, but to cut down to the bone of the real thing is hard indeed. A warning really needs to be sounded about it. You must be able to think of examples in your own life. Here's one, a typical one, from my own; it's almost identical to a situation Dennis Gillett mentions in *The Genius Of Discipleship*: I once gave a series of studies to a group of brothers and sisters. A sister came up to me and told me it was the best thing she'd heard for a long time, these studies of mine had been her salvation, I was the only speaker who got through to her (etc.). I solemnly shook my head and said something like I really didn't think what I'd said was that good, and that there were lots of things I should have researched better, and that what I'd said was actually rather superficial, it didn't really get to the bone. Then I slipped away from her and went to the gents (after such a conversation), feeling I'd done the humble thing; and bumped into a brother there who I've had some differences with. He told me in that washroom that the talks I'd given were totally empty, it was a waste of time coming to hear them, and that I was misleading brethren and sisters by careless Bible study. Now all that hurt, really hurt. Yet in essence, all he said to me was what I'd said to the sister. And I realized (later!) that all I'd said to her was just surface humility. Indeed, perhaps it was worse than that: even spiritual pride dressed up as humility.

Ps. 119 reflects David's awareness that he didn't keep God's law as he should. The first four verses speak of the blessedness of the man who is obedient. But he laments: " O that *my* ways were directed to keep thy statutes! Then will I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments" (Ps. 119:5,6). He seems to be saying that when he feels he *is* obedient, it makes him feel ashamed because he realizes how far short he has come of obedience at other times and in other ways. He concludes this matchless psalm of praise for God's word with a seeming paradox: " I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments" v. 176). Yet often throughout the Psalm he remarks how he has kept God's law, and will thereby be justified (e.g. v.22). He expresses no doubt about salvation. The resolution of all this seems to be that we can know that we are obedient to the basic principles, and be comforted by this fact, whilst at the same time realizing how very far we come short of total obedience, and therefore how far we fall short of the spiritual blessedness which is attainable for us even now. Yet despite an agony as to his failures, David still had a remarkably open and enthusiastic relationship with God. The agony of his failures didn't take this away from him.

7-1-2 Self-Righteous Christians: The Evidence Of The Parables

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

The sinners / weak

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The self-righteous

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

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

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

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

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

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

Those who are materialistic and beat their fellow servants.

The man who owed 100 pence to his brother (Mt. 18:23-35), but nothing to his Lord (because the Lord counts him as justified).

The man who owed 10,000 talents to his Lord, but would not be patient with his brother who owed him 100 pence. He had the opportunity to show much love in return for his Lord's forgiveness, on the principle that he who is forgiven much loves much (Lk. 7:41-43).

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

The man who assumes he should have a respectable seat at the feast (Lk. 14:8-11). Remember that the taking of places at the feast represents the attitude we adopt within the ecclesia now.

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

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

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

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

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

The self-righteous Christian son who immediately and publicly agrees to do his father's work but actually does nothing. The Father's work is saving men. Note how in this and the above two cases, the self-righteous are rejected for their lack of interest in saving others (both in and out of the ecclesia) ⁽²⁾.

The king who realizes he cannot defeat the approaching army (cp. Christ and His Angels coming in judgment) because he is too weak, and surrenders.

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

The king who refuses to realize his own weakness and is therefore, by implication, destroyed by the oncoming army (Lk. 14:31,32).

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

It makes a good exercise to read down just the left hand column. These are the characteristics of the acceptable, in God's eyes. In the light of this, I reckon we are in for the shock of their lives at the judgment seat. Many who assume they are spiritually OK will find themselves hurled into the lake of fire. Sorry, but this is what these parables teach. This conclusion can't really be avoided. Some of those who think they won't be in the Kingdom feel this way because they compare themselves with other, over-confident, self-righteous Christians; such comparison among ourselves isn't wise (2 Cor. 10:12). Reading just the right hand column above (go on, do it) reveals all too many similarities with our congregations.

7-1-3 The True Christians Aren't Good People

The more closely we analyze the Bible heroes, the more apparent it is that they were shot through with weakness; and some of those weaknesses it seems they unsuccessfully battled with until the day of their death. I think of Jacob, always trusting in his own strength, being progressively taught to trust in Yahweh's strength. And yet right at the very end of his life, he lets slip a comment which would seem more appropriate to his earlier life: "Shechem...which I took out of the hand of the Amorite with *my* sword and with *my* bow" (Gen. 48:22). The wrongness of this attitude seems to be alluded to in Josh. 24:12, which says that God drove out the Amorites "but not with thy sword, neither with thy bow". And Ps. 44:3,6 also: "They got not the land in possession by their own sword...I will not trust in my bow, neither shall my sword save me". So Jacob, right at the end of his life, still hadn't completely overcome that besetting weakness of self-reliance. This is, of course, a dangerous road to go down. In no way can we be complacent about our urgent need for spiritual growth. But on the other hand, we will never reach the stature of Christ without righteousness being imputed to us. In this sense, true Christian believers aren't good people.

The lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons are held up in the NT as our examples. And yet those records are absolutely shot through with reference to the spiritual weakness of those men, and even the suggestion that as men they were not 'nice' people. They, the archetypical believers, aren't good people. Indeed, the records seem to juxtapose their weakness against the more humanly acceptable behaviour of the world around them. The whole business of Jacob obtaining the blessing from his slightly drunk father Isaac is almost comical; dressed up with skins, with his mum prodding him under the ribs saying "Go on, go on, it's my sin not yours"; Jacob must have been willing the old boy to hurry up, knowing as he did that Esau was about to come in with his meal. Yet this was the most Godly family on earth at the time. Consider further examples:

The household of faith

Abraham tells Sarah to say she is his sister, not his wife, and (by implication) let the Egyptians sleep with her rather than kill him. And straight after this, God blesses Abraham with riches (Gen. 12:11 - 13:2).

Abraham made the very same mistake with Abimelech of Gerar (Gen. 20:1-13); and it seems he did it many other, unrecorded times (Gen. 20:13).

Isaac does just the same with Abimelech (Gen. 26:7-11). And again, God blesses Isaac straight after this faithless, immoral incident (Gen. 26:12). Believers aren't good people!

Isaac's criticism of them seems unreasonably aggressive and paranoiac: " Wherefore come ye to me, seeing ye hate me?" (Gen. 26:27-29).

Abraham and Sarah doubt God's promise of a seed, and so Sarah pushes Abraham to have an affair with Hagar her servant. When Hagar gets (understandably) full of womanly pride at her conception, Sarah persecutes her and drives her out to certain death in the wilderness. True believers aren't good or nice people!

Sarah again tries to kill Hagar and her son Ishmael, apparently because of the teenage Ishmael mocking the baby Isaac. Whilst this incident is symbolic of the persecution of the righteous by the wicked (Gal. 4:29), this in no

The surrounding world

Pharaoh was attracted to her, and took her into his house. But he didn't sleep with her, and was willing to allow a period of time to elapse before marrying her, in order not to insult her dignity (cp. Dt. 21:13).

Abraham ought to have apologized to Abimelech. But instead Abimelech gives him a present (Gen. 10:14-16).

Again, Abimelech and his people do the honourable thing. The people of Gerar surely had the impression that the Abraham family were a faithless, unprincipled lot compared to themselves.

Truly could they reply: " we saw certainly that the Lord was with thee... we have not touched thee, and as we have done unto thee nothing but good, and have sent thee away in peace" .

God seems to take Hagar's side, He hears her affliction, He looks upon her, and makes a covenant with her (Gen. 16). Hagar believes God's promise to her, and praises Him for it. Sarah laughs at God's promise to her as being a joke (Gen. 18:12-15). And even worse, when she is reprimanded for doing this, she flatly denies she ever laughed.

God again justifies Hagar and takes her side against a rather unreasonable mistress (Gen. 21:12-20)- who is held up in the NT as our example, although, it is stressed, not in her weaker aspects (1 Pet. 3:6).

way justifies Sarah's behaviour.
And yet straight after this
shameful business, God blesses
Abraham in all that he does (Gen.
21:22).

Jacob, on a human level,
compares unfavourably to Esau.
He cruelly deceived his brother,
and all his life long hated him and
lied to him (consider 33:13-15).

Mal. 1:4 makes the point that
Edom (Esau) was zealous to
return and rebuild the ravaged
land which God had once given
him, whereas Israel wasn't.

Judah took a Canannite woman
and shamefully treated her (38:2)

Dinah goes downtown to have a
fling. She ends up sleeping with
the prince of Shechem. As a result
of this, her brothers trick the men
of Shechem into being
circumcised and then come and
murder the lot of them. Humanly,
the sons of Jacob, unrepentant as
they were (34:31), should have
taken the consequence of their
evil at the hand of the vengeful
surrounding tribes. But God, in
His grace, preserves them by a
miracle (35:5).

When Esau had the chance to take
vengeance on Jacob, he
wonderfully forgave him. He
never lied to Jacob.

And yet despite this, God says He
still chose to love Israel (Jacob)
and hate Esau. His behaviour in
this is an example of how He
saves by pure grace and not
works.

Esau took Canaanite women, but
married them and treated them
responsibly (36:2).

The Prince of Shechem didn't
rape her, and he didn't just discard
her. He could easily have just
taken her as his wife with no
more discussion with her family.
He did the honourable thing in
that he honestly wanted to marry
her, and would do absolutely
anything to enable this (Gen. 34).

It's often been observed that there are so many people in the world who are 'nicer', 'better' than we are. And in some ways, on a human level, this seems true. Christian believers aren't good people. And yet we have been called to salvation, not them. I would guess that the more reflective among the Abraham family had exactly the same thought. And yet God chose weak, apathetic Israel- not because they were righteous, but because they were predestined, unconditionally as far as we can understand it, to this calling. And the calling of spiritual Israel is no different. In the fact God called Israel to be His people we see the depth, the very essence, of salvation by grace, not works or committed righteousness. The desperate sinners, not the apparently righteous, are the ones God calls. Israel were warned that they were being given the land (cp. salvation) " not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thy heart...for thou art a stiffnecked people" (Dt. 9:5,6). These words are picked up in Tit. 3:5 and applied to the new Israel: " Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but

according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing (baptism) of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit" - by His grace alone.

Conclusions

Those who enter the Kingdom will genuinely, from the very depth of their being, feel that they shouldn't be there. Indeed, they shouldn't be. For Christian believers aren't good people. We are saved by grace alone. The righteous are "scarcely saved" (1 Pet. 4:18). The righteous remnant who spoke often to one another about Yahweh will only be "spared" by God's grace (Mal. 3:17). The accepted will feel so certain of this that they will almost argue with the Lord Jesus at the day of judgment that He hasn't made the right decision concerning them (Mt. 25:37-40). It's only a highly convicted man who would dare do that. Thus the Father will have to comfort the faithful in the aftermath of the judgment, wiping away the tears which will *then* (see context) be in our eyes, and give us special help to realize that our sinful past has now finally been overcome (Rev. 21:4). We will be like the labourers in the parable who walk away clutching their penny, thinking "I really shouldn't have this. I didn't work for a day, and this is a day's pay". Therefore if we honestly, genuinely feel that we won't be in the Kingdom, well, this is how in some ways the faithful will all feel. Although by the very nature of being in this state, just knowing this won't change how we feel. We won't think "Oh, I feel I'll be rejected, so, great, that means I won't be". But we must simply be aware that it is God's earnest desire to save repentant sinners. He will even bend His own laws to enable this. Consider how within His own law, it was an abomination for a man to re-marry the woman he had divorced. Yet this notwithstanding, God abases Himself in asking worthless Israel to re-marry Him (Dt. 24:4 cp. Jer. 3:1). Even though leaven was prohibited in offerings (Lev. 2:11), God was willing to accept a peace offering with leaven in it (Lev. 7:13). And for a freewill offering, He would accept a deformed animal (Lev. 22:23), even though this was against His *preferred principle* of absolute perfection in offerings. There was no atonement without the shedding of blood; and yet for the very poor, God would accept a non-blood sacrifice. This all reflected the zeal of God to accept fallen men. The relationship between Solomon and his bride in the Song is evidently typical of ours with the Lord. Yet she has major problems: he always addresses her directly, yet she always answers indirectly ("he cometh...he standeth...he brought me"), often with some awkwardness and sense that she is unworthy of his love, and that his glowing descriptions of her are exaggeration. She is depicted as in doubt, lost, asleep, uncertain, reluctant, moody, sometime in love with him sometimes not, in need of reassurance despite the greatness of his love ("let him kiss me...").

I can't help but end on a positive note. Believers aren't good people. But the Biblical evidence is that those who will be in the Kingdom basically love God, but really feel they shouldn't be in His Kingdom. There is much Biblical reason to believe that we should be positive about the fact we will surely be in the Kingdom. And yet the Biblical pictures of the judgment indicate that the accepted will not have grasped this aspect as strongly as they might have done. And this is exactly, exactly the position which I sense so many of us are in: not believing as strongly as we might the positive fact that we really will be in the Kingdom because we are in Christ, and yet experiencing answered prayer, basically holding on, albeit with a deeper sense of their unworthiness than of God's grace. These characteristics, which are clearly seen in so many of us, are the very characteristics of the faithful in the Biblical descriptions of the judgment. And therefore, many of us *will* be in the Kingdom of God. This isn't playing with logic or the semantics of Biblical exposition. Like Peter, I am "exhorting and testifying, that this *is* the true grace of God wherein ye stand" (1 Pet. 5:12).

Notes

(1) See Study 1.2 *The Problem Of Certainty*.

(2) See Study 4.1 *We're All Preachers*.

7.2 " It's OK in my conscience"

The unreliability of our conscience is discussed in *Self-Examination* (Study 3.5.5). In any case, our conscience is not going to jump out of us and stand and judge us at the day of judgment. There is one thing that will judge us, the word of the Lord (Jn. 12:48), not how far we have lived according to our conscience. We need to define 'conscience'. It seems to be used by many as effectively meaning 'our inner feelings'. Whether people live according to their inner convictions is not the standard of acceptability with God. We are warned time and again that the human heart is so deceptive that we do not know how evil it is (Jer. 17:9); it is the human heart (not a supernatural 'devil') which leads us into sin and temptation (Mk. 7:15, 21-23; James 1:13-15). Paul says that although he does not feel he has done anything wrong, this does not of itself mean that he is justified in God's sight (1 Cor. 4:4). We cannot, therefore, place too much importance on living according to our natural sense of right and wrong. This is the very error which has led some to interpret the Bible in the light of their own wayward desires, rather than allowing themselves to be taught by God's word. " It's OK in my conscience" is their only justification. They and many others give more credibility to what they perceive to be guidance coming from within them, than to God's word of Truth. The words of the Lord Jesus in Lk. 11:35 seem especially relevant: " Take heed that the light which is in you is not darkness" . " It's OK in my conscience" is indeed dark light.

And yet there is Bible teaching concerning the need to live in accordance with our 'conscience', and the joy which is possible for the believer who has a clear conscience (e.g. Acts 24:16; Rom. 14:18-22; 2 Cor. 1:12; 1 Jn. 3:21). This must mean, in the context, the conscience which God's word has developed in us- it cannot refer to 'conscience' in the sense of our natural, inbuilt sense of right and wrong; because according to the Bible, this is hopelessly flawed. The fact the " conscience" is " cleansed" by Christ's sacrifice (Heb. 9:14; 10:22) proves that the Biblical 'conscience' is not the natural sense of right and wrong within our nature; for our nature can never be 'purged' or 'cleansed', the believer will always have those promptings within him to do wrong. The cleansed, purged conscience refers to the new man that is created within the believer at baptism. This new 'conscience' is not just a sense of guilt which is invoked on account of not living an obedient life; it is also a conscience which positively compels us to do something, not just threatens us with a pang of guilt if we commit a sin. " It's OK in my conscience" is only acceptable when understood like this.

Thus when Christians claim to be 'conscientious objectors' to military service, we are not only saying that our conscience will prick us unacceptably if we bear arms; we are making a positive statement that our conscience, the new man that has been developed in us by God's word, compels us to positively live a life of love and non-resistance to evil, which compulsion in itself excludes us from taking life.

7.3 " I'm a hypocrite" : Christian Hypocrisy

7-3-1 Christian Hypocrisy

Any spiritually honest believer will feel like this sometimes; we examine ourselves, we consider the height and the implications of the first principles we profess, and we see a wide difference between them and our real, everyday life. Whether we are hypocrites in God's eyes or not, I can't judge. It may be that we are. But the following consideration of Heb. 11 gives encouragement that Christian hypocrisy was a common feature of past believers, and yet God sees through the hypocrisy to the good side of us, and counts that to us as the personality He sees.

There is abundant Biblical evidence that faith and the faith-motivated way of life are vital to our salvation. Heb. 11:1,2 defines faith in absolute terms; as the real mental vision of the invisible. This doesn't just mean occasionally achieving a vivid imagination of (e.g.) the future Kingdom, or the present bodily existence of the Lord Jesus. It means living, hour by hour, with these things actually existing in our mental vision. Without this faith, the apostle reasons, we cannot please God. He cites a whole string of Old Testament examples, and then goes on to say that we too, like them, are surrounded by this great cloud of faithful examples, and therefore this should inspire us to the life of faith, as it did them (Heb. 12:1).

Moments Of Faith

And yet, to a man, we have a sense of inadequacy; of a separation between their level of faith and our own; a sense of Christian hypocrisy. But a closer examination of those examples reveals a feature which crops up time and again. It's a feature which if it only occurred once, we might shrug it off. But it is there, time and again throughout Heb. 11. It's this: many of the examples quoted are moments in the lives of men when they did *not* show absolute faith, moments when their motives were mixed, moments when they had faith, but not without needing human qualifications. Examples will best show what I mean:

- Heb. 11:8 (Gk.) implies that *as soon as* God called Abram, he got up and left Ur. But a closer examination of the record indicates that this wasn't absolutely the case. It is stressed that both Abram and Sarai left Ur because "Terah *took* Abram his son...and Sarai his daughter in law" (Gen. 11:31). Abram had been called to leave Ur and go into Canaan. But instead he followed his father to Haran, and lived there (for some years, it seems) until his father died, and then he responded to his earlier call to journey towards Canaan. The Genesis record certainly reads as if Abram was dominated by his father and family, and this militated against an immediate response to the call he received to leave Ur and journey to Canaan. At best his father's decision enabled him to obey the command to leave Ur without having to break with his family. And yet, according to Heb. 11:8, Abram immediately responded, as an act of faith.

- Abraham's faith in the promises is repeatedly held up as our example (11:8,12,13 and elsewhere). Abraham "believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6) is quoted three times in the New Testament. But how *deep* was Abraham's faith? Straight after Abraham's profession of faith, God told him: "I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur...to give thee this land to inherit it". But Abraham then goes straight on to ask God: "Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (Gen. 15:7,8). And immediately before Abraham's oft quoted profession of faith, he had said: "Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless...behold, to me thou hast given no seed, and, lo, one born in my

house is mine heir" (Gen. 15:2,3). His faith in the promise of a seed was surely shaky at this time ⁽¹⁾. Did he not have something of our Christian hypocrisy? Yet, sandwiched in between these two expressions of his partial faith, Abraham rises within his heart to a level of faith which so pleased God. "He believed in the Lord" seems to refer to an attitude deep within Abraham's heart, as he gazed up at the stars and reflected in God's promise: "So shall thy seed be". God saw that, even if it was only a temporary peak, and was pleased with it; even though at the time, Abraham was weak in faith and even in a sense "ungodly" ⁽²⁾.

- "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come" (11:20). Yet the record of this in Gen. 27 doesn't paint Isaac in a very positive light. "Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob" (Gen. 25:28). The AVmg. seems to bring out Isaac's superficiality: "Isaac loved Esau, because venison was in his mouth". This seems to connect with the way Esau threw away his birthright for the sake of food in his mouth. Esau was evidently of the flesh, whilst Jacob had at least some potential spirituality. Yet Isaac preferred Esau. He chose to live in Gerar (Gen. 26:6), right on the border of Egypt- as close as he could get to the world, without crossing the line. And he thought nothing of denying his marriage to Rebekah, just to save his own skin (Gen. 26:7). So it seems Isaac had some marriage problems; the record speaks of "Esau his son" and "Jacob (Rebekah's) son" (Gen. 27:5,6). The way Jacob gave Isaac wine "and he drank" just before giving the blessings is another hint at some unspirituality (Gen. 27:25). Isaac seems not to have accepted the Divine prophecy concerning his sons: "the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23), seeing that it was his intention to give Esau the blessings of the firstborn, and thinking that he was speaking to Esau, he gave him the blessing of his younger brothers (i.e. Jacob) serving him (Gen. 27:29 cp. 15). Isaac didn't accept the sale of the birthright, and yet God did (Heb. 12:16,17). *And yet*, and this is my point, Isaac's blessing of the two boys is described as an act of faith; even though it was done with an element of disbelief in God's word of prophecy concerning the elder serving the younger, and perhaps under the influence of alcohol, and even though at the time Isaac thought he was blessing Esau when in fact it was Jacob. Yet according to Heb. 11:20, this blessing of Esau *and* Jacob (therefore Hebrews doesn't refer to the later blessing) was done with faith; *at that very point in time*, Isaac had faith. So God's piercing eye saw through Isaac's liking for the good life, through Isaac's unspiritual liking for Esau, through his marriage problem, through his lack of faith that the elder must serve the younger, and discerned that there was some faith in that man Isaac; and then holds this up as a stimulant for our faith, centuries later! Not only should we be exhorted to see the good side in our present brethren; but we can take comfort that this God is our God, and views our Christian hypocrisy in the same way as He viewed theirs.

- "God hearkened unto Leah, and she conceived", to which Leah responded: "God hath given me my hire because I have given my maiden to my husband" (Gen. 30:17,18). This is thinly disguised bitterness against her gracious creator. She was saying, sarcastically, that God had treated her like a whore as a reward for the fact she had encouraged her husband to commit adultery with her maidservant. Yet God saw through this (the bitterness of post natal depression?), through her recourse to using mandrakes to induce fertility... and God discerned the real faith in her. And this God is our God, who likewise bears with our Christian hypocrisy.

- "By faith (Moses) forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the King" (Heb. 11:27). But Moses *did* flee Egypt, because he feared the wrath of the King (Ex. 2:14,15). It seems that Moses had at best a mixture of motives, or motives that changed over time; yet God sees through his human fear, and discerns an element of calm faith within Moses as he left Egypt.

In similar vein, at the time of the burning bush, Moses seems to have forgotten God's covenant name, he didn't immediately take off his shoes in respect as he should have done, and it seems he feared to come close to God due to a bad conscience, and he resisted God's invitation for him to go forth and do His work (Ex. 3:5-7,10,11,18; 4:1,10-14) ⁽³⁾. And yet at this very time, the New Testament says that Moses showed faith in the way he perceived God (Lk. 20:37).

- Israel's deliverance through the Red Sea seems to be attributed to Moses' faith (Heb. 11:28,29; Acts 7:36,38). Yet in the actual record, Moses seems to have shared Israel's cry of fear, and was rebuked for this by God (Ex. 14:15,13,10). Yet in the midst of that rebuke, we learn from the New Testament, God perceived the faith latent within Moses, beneath that human fear and panic. He likewise sees beneath our Christian hypocrisy to what true spirituality there is in us.

- The Israelites who fled to the dens and caves in Jud. 6:2 are described as heroes of faith because of what they did (Heb. 11:38). And yet their domination by the Philistines was a result of their idolatry. They were idolatrous, and yet some had faith; and it was this faith which was perceived by God.

- Samson killed a lion, escaped fire and killed many Philistines by his faith (Heb. 11:32-34)- so the Spirit tells us. Yet these things were all done by him at times when he had at best a partial faith. He had a worldly Philistine girlfriend, a sure grief of mind to his Godly parents, and on his way to the wedding he met and killed a lion- through faith, Heb. 11 tells us (Jud. 14:1-7). The Philistines threatened to burn him with fire, unless his capricious paramour of a wife extracted from him the meaning of his riddle. He told her, due, it seems, to his hopeless sexual weakness. He then killed 30 Philistines to provide the clothes he owed the Philistines on account of them answering the riddle (Jud. 14:15-19). It is evident that Samson was weak in many ways at this time; the Proverbs make many allusions to him, the strong man ruined by the evil Gentile woman, the one who could take a city but not rule his spirit etc. And yet underneath all these weaknesses, serious as they were, there was a deep faith within Samson which Heb. 11 highlights. May the Lord likewise have mercy upon our Christian hypocrisy.

Notes

(1) Abraham's fear that he would be killed by Abimelech and his willingness to give Sarah a child by having a relationship with Hagar also seem to suggest a lack of total faith in the promise that he would have a seed.

(2) It may be that Abraham realized his own spiritual weakness at this time, if we follow Paul's argument in Rom. 4:3,5: " If Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory...(but) Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness...to him (alluding to Abraham) that worketh not, but believeth (as did Abraham) on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith (like Abraham's) is counted for righteousness" . Surely this suggests that Abraham felt *ungodly* at the time, unworthy of this great promise, and yet he believed that although he was ungodly, God would justify him and give him the promise, and therefore he was counted as righteous and worthy of the promise. There is certainly the implication of some kind of forgiveness being granted Abraham at the time of his belief in Gen. 15:6; righteousness was imputed to him, which is tantamount to saying that his ungodliness was covered. In this context, Paul goes straight on to say that the same principles operated in the forgiveness of David for his sin with Bathsheba.

(3) The spiritual weakness of Moses at this time is discussed in Section 9.

7-3-2 Sarah And Abraham

To my mind, there is one example which stands out most remarkably. The record seems to

anticipate this in the way the case of Sarah is introduced: " Through faith even Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed" (Heb. 11:11 RV). " Even Sarah herself" is clearly making a point, holding up a flashing light over this particular example. There is every reason to think, from the Genesis record, that Sarah not only lacked faith in the promises, but also had a bitter, unspiritual mind. The account alludes back to Eve's beguiling of Adam when it records how " Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai" (Gen. 16:2) in acquiescing to her plan to give her a seed through Abram marrying his slave girl. The whole thing between Sarah and Abraham seems wrong on at least two counts: firstly it reflects a lack of faith in the promise; and secondly it flouts God's ideal standards of marriage. Sarai seems to have recognized the error when she bitterly comments to Abram: " My wrong be upon thee" (16:5). Her comment that " the Lord hath restrained me from bearing" (16:2) would suggest that she thought she hadn't been chosen to bear the promised seed. Yet because of her faith, says Heb. 11:11, she received strength to bear that seed.

Hagar was so persecuted by Sarah that she " fled from her face" (16:6). God's attitude to Hagar seems to reflect a certain amount of sympathy for the harsh way in which Sarah had dealt with her. These years of bitterness and lack of faith came to the surface when Sarah overheard the Angel assuring Abraham that Sarah really would have a son. She mockingly laughed at the promise, deep within herself (18:15). Yet according to Heb. 11:11, she rallied her faith and believed. But as soon as Isaac was born, her bitterness flew to the surface again when she was Ishmael mocking. In what can only be described as unrestrained anger, she ordered Hagar and Ishmael out into the scorching desert, to a certain death (humanly speaking). Again, one can sense the sympathy of God for Hagar at this time. And so wedged in between incidents which belied a deep bitterness, lack of faith and pride (after Isaac was born), the Spirit in Heb. 11:11 discerns her faith; on account of which, Heb. 11:12 implies (" therefore"), the whole purpose of God in Christ could go forward.

Bitter Prophet

Sarah's screaming indignation can be well imagined. Consider which words were probably stressed most by her: " Cast out *this bondwoman* and her son: for the son of this bondwoman *shall not be heir* (just hear her voice!) with *my* son, even with *Isaac*" (Gen. 21:10). This is in harmony with her previous bitterness and aggression to Hagar and Abraham. Her attitude in implying that Ishmael was *not* the seed is gently rebuked by God in his subsequent words to Abraham concerning Ishmael: " He *is* thy seed" (Gen. 21:13). *And yet* Sarah's words are quoted in Gal. 4:30 as inspired Scripture! Here we see the wonder of the God with whom we deal, in the way in which He patiently bore with Sarah and Abraham. He saw through her anger, her jealousy, the pent up bitterness of a lifetime, and he saw her faith. And he worked through that screaming, angry woman to be His prophet. According to Gal. 4:30, God Himself spoke through her in those words, outlining a principle which has been true over the generations; that the son of the slave must be cast out, and that there must always be conflict between him and the true seed. Sarah in her time of child-birth is likened to us all as we enter the Kingdom, full of joy (Is. 54:1-4); and yet at that time she was eaten up with pride and joy that she could now triumph over her rival. And yet Sarah at that time is seen from a righteous perspective, in that she is a type of us as we enter the Kingdom. God's mercy to Sarah and Abraham is repeated to us daily.

The Discernment Of God

The way in which God chooses the good side of Sarah and recognizes it for what it is can be seen even more finely in 1 Pet. 3:4-6. Here sisters are bidden follow Sarah's example of

1. Having a meek and quiet spirit
2. Not outwardly adorning herself
3. Obeying Abraham
4. And calling him her " Lord" .

It can be shown that the Spirit in Peter is adopting an extremely positive reading of Sarah.

1. She isn't revealed as having a meek and quiet spirit at all; but presumably, God saw that *underneath* her anger and bitterness there was a meekness and quietness, perhaps especially seen as she grew older.

2,3. Concerning not outwardly " adorning" , the Greek text is alluding to the Septuagint of Gen. 20:16, which says that Abimelech told Sarah that he had given Abraham many silver pieces " that these may therefore be for thee to adorn thy countenance" [\(1\)](#). Abimelech is speaking sarcastically (note how he calls Abraham " thy brother" , referring to Sarah and Abraham's family relationship). It was a custom for married women to wear their silver pieces on their face (cp. Lk. 15:8). Presumably she had taken these off, in order to appear single and sexually available. Abimelech is saying: " I've given your so-called 'brother' Abraham 1000 silver pieces, so just make sure you wear them in future and don't lead any more men into sin" . And what does the Spirit comment? " Thus she was reprov'd" (Gen. 20:16). Her willingness to pretend she was single and not refusing the sexual advances of Abimelech can only be seen in a negative light *from the Genesis record*. She lacked continued faith in the promises of a seed, and she disregarded God's marriage principles for the sake of an all too convenient 'obedience' to her husband. It may have been that she regarded her inability to have children as partly his fault (cp. the deadness of Abraham's body, Rom. 4:19). The thing is, she had already shown enough faith to conceive (Heb. 11:11), and presumably the effect of this was seen in the physical rejuvenation of her body, which made her so attractive to men, although she was 90 years old. Both Sarah and Abraham had shown faith, she was living with her own body as the constant reminder of God's faithfulness, and yet in the incident with Abimelech she wavered and had to be reprov'd. Yet she is seen in a positive light by the Spirit; her lack of wearing ornaments, even though it was to show she was single, is commended; as is her obedience to her husband, even though she was reprov'd for this. The point is, like all of us, her motives were probably mixed. She *did* want to be truly obedient to Abraham, she *did* want to have a meek spirit rather than outward adorning. Her wrong motives surfaced, and were rebuked. But God saw deep inside her heart, and saw the good motives, and drags them out and holds them up as an example.

4. Sarah is commended for calling Abraham her " Lord" (1 Pet. 3:6). She is recorded as doing this in one place only: " Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?" (Gen. 18:12). She doubted God's promise; she is rebuked for this by the Angel. Yet in doing so, when she came to think of Abraham, in her heart she called him " my lord" . So in the midst of her lack of faith in one respect, she also had a commendable attitude to Abraham. All this, don't forget, was going on " within

herself" . God searched her thoughts, He saw her wrong attitudes there deep in her heart, and He saw what was commendable there too; and through Peter He drags this out and reveals it to us all as an inspiration.

" Thou God seest me..."

All this opens up a wider issue. There are many Bible characters who appear to behave wrongly, but are spoken of in later revelation as if they were righteous. Lot is a classic example. Why is this? Why, for example, is the Genesis record about Sarah so open about her weakness, but the New Testament commentary sifts through this and reveals the righteous aspect of her motives? Surely it's to show that God sees us very differently to how we appear on the surface, both to our brethren and even to ourselves. He knows every motive, He alone untangles our motives and thoughts; He sees what is truly behind our actions. It is not just that He has the power to do this if He wishes; He does it all the time. God is thinking of us and our inner thoughts and motives *every moment*. Every piece of body language reveals something, every thought.

Or consider Elijah. Here was a man of genuinely outstanding faith. He heard in the ears of faith the sound of rain, before he even formally prayed for it (1 Kings 18:40-42 cp. James 5:17,18). And yet, reading through the record, there is ample evidence that at the very same time as he showed such faith, he had a hardness and arrogance which was contrary to the spirit of the Lord Jesus. And Paul had the same feature (see Study 9.4). Samson's remarkable faith amidst a pathetically apostate Israel was marred by an insatiable desire for women. Although articulated in a more respectable way, David's fine spirituality was plagued with a similar malaise. Each of these men (and examples could be added) must have been smitten at times with a sense of hypocrisy. And yet ultimately, they won through in the battle of faith. The fact we may feel deep contradictions within our spirituality should not therefore, and cannot therefore, be shrugged off as an inevitable result of bearing human nature. Such contradictions are *deadly serious*. But the fact is, many who have endured them all their lives did eventually make good, in God's eyes.

Because of our nature, we are largely blind to our true spiritual selves. Because of this, the parables imply, the day of judgment will be such a surprise (e.g. Mt. 25:34-40). Both righteous and wicked will find that they are criticized and commended for things which surprise them. There are several indications that because of this, the rejected will begin to argue back with Christ (e.g. Mt. 7:22), until eventually they realize their errors, stop speaking (Mt. 22:12) and gnash their teeth in anger against themselves (Mt. 22:13). This should truly be a sobering thought to us all. We must strive, really, to examine ourselves, to know ourselves, to try to see our motives and actions a little more from God's perspective; because it is His perspective, not ours, which is ultimately important; and it is this lesson which the day of judgment will ultimately teach each of us. Contemplation of the death of the Lord Jesus is intended to stimulate our self-examination and self-knowledge. Those who saw it " smote upon their breasts" (Lk. 23:48), an idiom only used elsewhere for true penitence and realization of personal sinfulness (Lk. 18:13). However, the lesson of how the Spirit writes in Heb. 11, the lesson of how God perceives Sarah's thoughts, is extremely encouraging and positive. Sarah would have been seen as an angry, frustrated old woman. And in her honest moments, probably she recognized that this was all she was, and this in turn probably made her the more bitter. But God saw the good in her which she herself probably didn't recognize, and which her surrounding world almost certainly didn't see;

although He never revealed this to her during her mortal life.

So as and when we feel hypocritical, reflect on these examples of Sarah and Abraham and so many others. Remember too that it is a feature of our nature that we can believe and yet disbelieve at the same time. The father of the epileptic boy is the clearest example: "I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mk. 9:24). Some of "the Jews" and men like Nicodemus are described as believing, when it is evident that at the time they also harboured serious reserve. The disciples believed (Jn. 16:27; 17:8), and yet at the same time they disbelieved (Mt. 17:20; Lk. 24:25). They perhaps realized their half faith when they asked for their faith to be increased (Lk. 17:5). This is of itself shows that in practice, faith is not an absolute. Study 9 shows how several remarkable believers still had elements of disbelief and weakness in them, right to their dying moments. It is, sadly, only to be expected that we too have our hypocrisies now. This is not to preach complacency, rather an appreciation of what our nature and likely spiritual growth pattern is all about.

Notes

(1) Gesenius comments on this: "The LXX...gives the meaning correctly". See H.W.F. Gesenius, *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon* p. 407 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992 Ed.).

7.4 "I don't like Christians" : Christian Disillusion With Christianity

There is a very frequent trend observable amongst our community, particularly in areas where the majority of brethren and sisters were not brought up as Christians. It's like this: people learn the Gospel, and with joy are baptized. They rejoice that they have found a community who preach the true Gospel, and who have also been baptized. They join this group with high expectations, confident that everyone will be deep, committed believers, living the Truth to a high level. As time passes, the realization dawns that really this isn't the case. Christian disillusion with Christianity sets in. All of us fall seriously short of the ideals of the Truth which we claim to believe. And so disillusion sets in. The convert starts to fall out of love with the local Christian community. Everything about us becomes wrong and negative. Or a personality clash develops, and the convert finds it impossible to continue mixing with someone who knows God's truth, and yet is deeply flawed in character and behaviour. If we were an ordinary human society or church, these things would not hurt us so deeply. But we know that what we believe is the Truth, and doctrinally at least we have to say with Peter "Lord, to whom (else) shall we go?" . And therefore the fact that others know this same Truth but don't live it as we feel they should, therefore hurts us so much more. It's so much harder to live with what we perceive to be hypocrisy, when it comes to anything to do with the Truth. Christian disillusion with Christianity is so easy to become part of. Online fellowships of out of church Christians are developing... useful as they are, they are in some ways an escape from the burden of real, live Christian forbearance and fellowship which we each carry in Christ. The Lord doesn't semi-distance Himself from us; He is deeply involved with us in and through all our weaknesses and dysfunctions. And we should be the same.

In Mt. 21:32 the Lord told the Jews that they were even more culpable for not repenting at the preaching of John the Baptist because the publicans and sinners had done so; and they hadn't.

They should've changed their minds ['repented'] after they saw the publicans and sinners repent- so the Lord incisively observed and judged. The implication of that seems to me to be that we are intended to be inspired to faith and repentance by that of others. This is why the Christian life is intended to be lived in community.

Desert Islands

And so it is that at some time or other, every believer will go through the desert island syndrome of Christian disillusion with Christianity; the desire to push out on our own onto our private spiritual island, where we have our own relationship with God until the Kingdom comes. There is no doubt that we will all experience this. The problem- and it seems to be a growing problem- is that after a relatively short time, new converts become so discouraged by the community of believers that they try to do just this. They head off on their own, tenaciously clinging to the idea that they still accept the basic doctrines, they still have their own relationship with God, bitterly challenging any of us to dare doubt they believe; claiming that they can have a relationship with God without their brothers and sisters. And on the surface, it might seem they have a point.

Yet Christian disillusion with Christianity is one of the most common paths to spiritual disaster. Before we start on the Biblical perspective, let me make a rather human comment. Every brother or sister with any pastoral experience will comment that such individuals either lose their faith, or in wondrous, wondrous humility, come crawling back with their tail between their legs. Contrary to how we feel, we are all intensely social creatures. To walk totally alone is impossible in the long term. C.S. Lewis was driven to the conclusion: " I believe that in all men's lives at certain periods, and in many men's lives at all periods between infancy and extreme old age, one of the most dominant elements is the desire to be inside the local Ring and the terror of being left outside" [\(1\)](#). Sooner or later " the terror of being left outside" will lead most people to seek some kind of membership, in whatever sense, with one of the societies or communities (not necessarily a church) which does not have the Truth. The need for fellowship is brought out in so many passages- Christianity isn't intended as a religion which one can live alone. The whole essence of it is that we reflect the personality of Jesus to others, practicing as it were His love and care for those whom we've been given as our brethren. We may feel we have nothing to contribute, but positive fellowship with others within the body will draw it out of us. Prov. 20:5 comments that there is "counsel in the heart of man", but it's like deep water, and "a man of understanding will draw it out".

John's Logic

Biblically, it's impossible to have a relationship with God without relating with His children. Christian disillusion with Christianity isn't possible for a true Christian. This point is hammered home by John, writing as he was to ecclesias riven with factionism and accusation. The result of believing that Christ laid down His life for us, is that we lay down our lives for our brethren (3:16). All believers are the children of God. If we love God, we will love His children (5:1,2). God and His children, the believers, are inseparable. And yet within our human nature is the tendency to try to make a distinction between them. John was fully aware of this: " If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also" (4:20,21) [\(2\)](#). Loving our brother is therefore the litmus test as to whether we are " of God" , whether we

have " passed from death unto life" (3:10,14). It is simply impossible to claim to love God but politely disregard His children. It's not that we must love God *and also* our brother. If we love God we will love our brother, by loving our brother we love God. These things are axiomatic. The intimacy this implies between the Father and His sons is so deep. As those " in Christ" , all that is true of the Son of God, Jesus our Lord, becomes true of us. We share His relationship with the Father. It is impossible to love God without loving His Son, Jesus (Jn. 8:42); and 1 Jn. 5:1,2 is alluding to this, saying that this principle means that we can't love God without loving *all* His sons, those who are in Christ, the Son of God. Christian disillusion with Christianity is disobedience to this. If we think we can love God while disregarding His sons, we are making the same mistake as the Jews; they confidently thought they could love God and disregard His Son. And this faulty logic led them to crucify the Son of God. Latter day Israel will *turn* to the Lord their God, and part-and-parcel of this process will be the *turning* of the hearts of the fathers to the children (Lk. 1:16,17). When Israel earlier played traitor to their brethren, by doing so they broke their marriage covenant with God (Mal. 2:10); their attitude to their brethren was essentially their attitude to their Heavenly Father. Our God and our brethren simply can't be separated. Asa's broken relationship with God resulted in him 'crushing' the people at the same time (2 Chron. 16:10 Avmg.).

This truth is behind Paul's logic in writing to Philemon: "the faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints" (Philemon 5 RV). Because Philemon believes the Lord Jesus, he must believe what His brethren say. And so it is with us. In some parts of our community there is constant doubt of our brethren and suspicions as to their motives and words; and yet this, as with *all* attitudes we adopt to our brethren, is the mind we are showing toward the Lord Jesus Himself.

The Unity Of God

All too often, we know basic doctrine without believing it. If we *believe* basic doctrine, there will be some very practical results of this. There is one God. But this means so much more than saying " so, there's no trinity" . There is no trinity, but the fact I *know* there's no trinity doesn't of itself impact my way of life, until I *believe* in the total unity of God as I'm intended to. The Lord said that the first, the most important, of the commandments was that God is one Yahweh. He didn't see this as an abstract doctrine. He saw the doctrine of the unity of God as a command, it demands behaviour in response to it. Thus the command continues: " And (therefore) thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart...soul...strength...mind...and the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour ⁽³⁾ as thyself. There is none other commandment (singular) greater than these (two)" (Mk. 12:28-31). The Lord saw those two commandments as effectively one commandment; remember, He was answering the question about what was the greatest (singular) commandment. Christ saw the unity of God as part and parcel of the command to love our neighbour (in Christ) as ourselves. Why? Surely He saw that the facts that God's Name is one, and all His people are in some way *in* His Name, mean that we must love others in that Name as much as we love ourselves and as much as we love God. Now apply this to the phenomena of Christian disillusion with Christianity. We are *in* God, and God is one. So we are all one with each other. Loving our neighbour in Christ as ourselves is placed parallel with loving God with all our heart, strength etc. This means that the main drive of our service to God should be devoted to loving our brother, our neighbour. All those who are baptized into the Name must be loved as we love ourselves. This in itself sinks the possibility of a 'desert island' existence. We just can't live alone. We can't quit on the brotherhood if we want to love God. And this tough, far reaching conclusion comes from

knowing that God is one, and all in Him are therefore one.

The Unity Of Christ

The Lord Jesus is the one vine, we are the branches. Severed from Him, we can do nothing, we will bring forth no fruit (Jn. 15:5). He didn't say that He was the trunk and we the branches. He is the whole tree, the ecclesia. Abiding in Christ therefore means abiding with the rest of the branches. Abiding in that vine involves God's word abiding in us (Jn. 15:7). If we read and meditate upon the word and respond as we ought, we will remain in the vine. Those who storm out of the body (or, more to the point, *consider* doing so), insisting that they still read their Bibles and do good works, ought to seriously consider the implications of the Lord's parable of the vine. Severed from the vine, they can do nothing. Likewise the man under the Old Covenant who made his offering of, e.g. an ox, at a place other than at "the door of the tabernacle of the congregation" was viewed as having shed blood and therefore was to be cut off from the congregation (Lev. 17:3,4). The Law foresaw that there would be this tendency, to worship God away from the rest of the congregation. Those who did so were condemned in the strongest terms: their sacrifice of an animal was seen as the murder of their brother, whereas they would have seen it as an expression of their righteousness. "He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man" (Is. 66:3) refers back to this, making it parallel with idolatry and proudly refusing to let God's word dwell in the heart.

The same idea commonly occurs in the NT descriptions of each of us having been baptized into the body of Christ, with the result that we are each part of the Christ-body (Rom. 12:4,5). Our baptism was not therefore only a statement between us and Christ, but it was an entry into a relationship between us and the body of Christ. Christian disillusion with Christianity therefore implies a disillusion with Christ. Salvation involves us receiving "an inheritance among them which are sanctified" (Acts 26:18). It is *not* a purely personal matter. It is part of a shared experience, something we obtain a part in. Christ *is* His body. He doesn't exist separate from His body; for all existence in the Bible is bodily existence. And *we* are His body. He is us. Likewise we are the branches of the Christ-vine (Jn. 15). Because we are all in the one body of Christ, therefore we are intimately associated with the other parts of the body. As John realized the tendency of some to think they could love God without loving His Sons, so Paul tackled the same problem at Corinth. He reasons that "the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee...if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if they were all one member, where were the body?" (1 Cor. 12). He knew that some would want to go off on their own, and he shows that such behaviour would suggest that they alone were the whole body. He knew that some would think that they had no need of other parts of the ecclesial body; he saw that some would feel that they were so inferior to others that they had no place in the body. All these are reasons why believers push off on their own. But notice that Paul doesn't actually say 'the eye *shouldn't* say to the hand, I have no need of thee'; but rather "the eye *cannot* say to the hand..." . Although some may say or feel this, ultimately, from God's perspective, it's simply not valid. Christian disillusion with Christianity mustn't lead us to quit the body. The same logic applies to those who think that the body of Christ is divided; ultimately, there is one body, and from God's perspective this is indivisible. The divisions only exist in the minds of men. Those who say that they don't need fellowship with their brethren "cannot say" this, according to Paul. If they continue on this road, ultimately they declare themselves not of the one body of Christ; although I trust there are many brethren who have done just this who may still receive God's gracious salvation.

Many of those who ungraciously storm out of fellowship with the rest of the body, do so because they complain that other believers are weak, unloving, hypocrites, don't practice what they preach etc. And in many ways, their complaints are true (seeing that the Lord came to heal those who need a doctor rather than shake hands with the healthy). And again, Paul has a comment on this situation. He says that those parts of our bodies " that seem to be weaker...that we think are less honourable... the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty... with special honour" (NIV). The private parts of our bodies are the parts we are most sensitive to, although on the outside they seem weak and hidden. And so Paul reasons that the weaker parts of the ecclesial body should be treated the same. The Greek for " feeble" (1 Cor. 12:21) is used (notably in Corinthians) to describe spiritual weakness: Mk. 14:38; Rom. 5:6; 1 Cor. 8:7,10; 9:22; 11:30; 1 Thess. 5:14. And in some ways, we are all " weak" (1 Cor. 1:27; 4:10). Christian disillusion with Christianity is justified by *our* behaviour at times

But what of those who storm out? How many remain spiritually strong? Hardly any. Spiritual life is designed to be lived in community of some sort. And that of course is the gross error of casting a believer out of their spiritual community. "When Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:5). From where did Paul gain that mental energy, that 'pressure in the spirit' or mind, to witness as he should have been doing? From the presence of his brethren. If Paul needed his brethren, so do we.

The Indispensable Weak

So those we perceive (" that seem to be...that we think") to be spiritually weak in their external appearance, we should be especially sensitive towards. Significantly, the " sick" (s.w. " feeble") in the parable of Mt. 25:38-43 are the " least" of Christ's brethren, the spiritually weakest; and at the day of judgment, the rejected are condemned because of their attitude towards these spiritually weakest of Christ's brethren. The parable of the debtors splits the responsible into two categories; those who forgive their brother, and those who demand that their erring brother pays up what he owes, even though he can't possibly do so (Mt. 18:28). All of us who walk away from our annoying, spiritually weak brethren (as we perceive them) are playing with our salvation. The day of judgment will be a day of surprises for all of us. The rejected in the parable just can't believe that they would be rejected 'just' for being indifferent to the spiritually weak in the ecclesia.

Our attitude to the spiritually weak is a vital part of our salvation. Christian disillusion with Christianity ignores this at its peril. Thus " those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are *indispensable*" (1 Cor. 12:22 NIV); indispensable for our spiritual development and salvation. So we shouldn't be surprised if we don't like our brethren, if there are things which unbearably bug us about the community. This irritation, this clear vision of the weakness of our fellow believers, is a God-designed feature of our spiritual experience. If the day of disillusion and disappointment with the brotherhood hasn't come for you, it surely will do. But remember how *indispensable* this all is. Consider all the miserable complaints believers make about us: they gossip about me, they actually fabricate things as well as exaggerate, she stole from me, he disregards me, her son *swore* at me, would you believe it (I would); they don't ask me to speak, he's such a hypocrite, and do you know what she did... Let's say every word is true. These weak brethren and sisters who are doing all this are " indispensable" to the salvation of the one who suffers all this, *if* he responds properly. Just walking away from them is to effectively put ourselves outside the body. We *need* them, the Spirit says, we need

all the mud, the comments and the undermining and the upstaging and the betrayal, all at the most sensitive and hurtful points. The logic of all this is tough, really tough. And your wandering writer doesn't always face up to it himself, veteran as he is of all too many bitter disputes. But, brethren. This is the logic, this is the Spirit's voice. Surely we can all see the theory, clear as daylight. So.

Paul, as always, is our hero. For no other believer was tempted to be as anti-Christian as he was. The one who gave his life, his health, his career, his marriage, his soul, for the salvation of others. Only to have confidences betrayed, to be cruelly slandered, to be threatened, to be so passionately hated by his converts that some even tried to kill him and betray him to the Romans and Jews. He talks of how we must honour those who we think are "less honourable" (1 Cor. 12:23). He uses a word he earlier appropriates to himself in 1 Cor. 4:10 (AV "despised"). He's saying 'OK, if you think I'm so weak, so despised, let's say I am. But you should receive me, because I'm still in the body'. And to that there was no answer (and still isn't any) by those Christians disillusioned with Christianity.

God's Plan

To quit the brotherhood, or (more commonly) to effectively keep away from it whilst retaining a nominal membership, is to flatly contradict Paul's teaching that our patient continuance with our weak brethren is an *indispensable* part of our salvation. We cannot, we dare not, say that we don't need them. Not only so, if we do so, we are breaking apart the body. The body has been "tempered" by God together, there are just the right members in the body. The context of 1 Cor. 12 is primarily the ecclesia at Corinth, and only secondarily the world-wide body of believers. In our local contexts, God has provided the right fellow believers to be near us, so that we should develop. If we neglect to contact them, or if that contact is on a coldly formal, dutiful level, we will not be achieving the growth which God intends for us. Those other parts of the body are *indispensable* - Paul's word (in the NIV), not mine- for our eternal redemption. Christian disillusion with Christianity must be weighed in the light of this.

God has "tempered" the whole body together (1 Cor. 12:24). This is alluding to the way in which the unleavened cakes of flour were "mingled" or "tempered" with the oil (cp. the Spirit) in order to be an acceptable offering (Lev. 2:4,5; 7:10; 9:4 etc.). Paul has already likened his Corinthian ecclesia to a lump of unleavened flour (1 Cor. 5:7); he is now saying that they have been "tempered" together by the oil of God's Spirit. If we break apart from our brethren, we are breaking apart, or denying, that "tempering" of the body which God has made. It's like a husband and wife breaking apart their marriage, which God has joined together. It isn't only that we are missing out on the patience etc. which we could develop if we stayed in contact with our brethren. Our indifference and shunning of our brethren is actively doing despite to the Spirit of grace and unity which in prospect God has enabled His people to experience. The body "maketh increase of itself...unto the edifying of itself in love". By remaining in the body, we are built up from what every part of it contributes to the growth of the whole. To quit from our brethren is to quit from that source of nutrition and upbuilding. The earth in the sower parable represents various types of believers; and the Lord went on to say that the earth brings forth fruit "of itself". The community of itself brings forth spirituality in its members. Some of the most Spirit-filled brethren and sisters you can meet are those who have stuck at ecclesial life all their days, really struggled with personality clashes, with endless ecclesial storms and wrangles- but they've stuck it out. And thereby they have remained in touch with, and been moulded by, that Spirit of tempering together

which is so fundamental to the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the influence of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus results in a generous and positive attitude towards their brethren, seeing the undeniable good which there is in the body, rather than focusing on the negative. For this is without doubt how the Lord looks upon us; and this is how we, as his maturing people, must come to look on each other. Quite simply, we are all in the position of Peter as he stood before his Lord, eyes on the sand. He was asked 'Do you love me?', and when he said 'yes', he was told each time to go and care for Christ's brethren. If we love Him, we will love His brethren. For He is inextricably bound up with them. Christ is in them, and they are in Christ. Our attitude to Him is our attitude to them, and vice versa. It's simply so. Christian disillusion with Christianity is a disease we have to battle against and overcome.

Notes

(1) C.S. Lewis, *The Inner Ring* .

(2) The idea of not being able to "see" God must be understood in the context of how John uses the word "see" . It carries not only the idea of physical vision, but also of believing and understanding. If we can't love our brother, another human being who on some level we *can* comprehend; who then can we love God, who in this life we cannot comprehend? Yet John mentions in the same context that ultimately, we will see God (1 Jn. 3:2). Perhaps the implication is that seeing God in our brother and loving him, having a relationship with him, is the prelude to seeing God Himself and relating with Him eternally.

(3) The command to love our neighbour alludes to the command given to Israel. They were not told to love the tribes around them; loving their neighbour meant loving their neighbour in the camp of Israel (e.g. Lev. 18:20). And likewise the command for Christians to love their neighbour refers to loving others in Christ, the people of God, not the world around them.

7.4.1 Gossip In The Church

Our Community has many strong points, and many indications of real spiritual growth. But there are some practical areas to which we have all paid insufficient attention. One of these is the terrible human tendency to repeat rumour, to draw unsupported conclusions, and to get disaffected with others until we imagine untrue things about them which we then state to others. I am not innocent in this area. And neither are any of us (not that this fact in any way comforts me). Let's not pretend that any of us don't gossip. And let's admit that our ears *love* to hear gossip. "The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's innermost parts" (Prov. 18:8 NIV), i.e. we dwell on what we hear very deeply. This is one reason to interrupt a gossiping brother or sister before they go further; for the words of gossip will go deep down within us, and we will ruminate on them. *Gossip in the church is, sadly, a real sin amongst us.* If a community becomes full of gossip, allegation and counter-claims, very soon we will destroy ourselves. A house divided will fall. And don't think gossip is just words. Proverbs teaches that gossip stirs up dissension; but Prov. 6:12-14 parallels "a corrupt mouth" with winking with the eye, signalling with the feet, motioning with the fingers (NIV). Our body language is effectively gossip. A flick of the hands, the slight suggestion of a shrug of the shoulders, a certain glance in the corner of the eye...it all gives negative messages.

As gossip in the church spreads, it becomes distorted, sometimes horrendously. The result is that when the victim hears it, they inevitably become angry, and often feel that they cannot associate with their brethren and sisters if such things are thought about them. They are ashamed, angry because what was said was untrue, and they are tempted to become vindictive against those whom they hold to be responsible. In extreme cases, this can lead to resignation from the community. An offended brother is harder to be won back than a fortified city (Prov. 18:19). Over the past year as you read this, *this will have happened.* But

often the result is simply a decreased enthusiasm to attend the meetings, to break close contact with the brethren and sisters who ought to be our true friends. This results in a community which is cold and untrusting of each other, with every one of us internalizing our struggles, appearing righteous on the surface but never opening our hearts. *And this also is happening amongst us.* For all concerned, the process of gossip and counter-claiming all saps real spirituality out of us. We have enough wonderful things to contemplate: the supremacy of the love of Christ, far above our human knowledge; the sublime intricacy of God's word and character; the fulfilment of prophecy; the wonder of our Hope. These things ought to fill our thinking- and our conversation with each other. If they don't, and gossip in the church becomes the main diet of our conversation, *something is very seriously wrong with us.* We only have a few years *at most* (probably far less) to sort ourselves out before we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We need to be using every moment.

The Biblical Verdict

The Bible could not be clearer in its analysis of gossip in the church. It is like shooting an arrow from a secret place at a person (Ps. 64:4 RV). It is no coincidence that the word translated "devil" essentially means a false accuser, a slanderer (so it is translated in 1 Tim. 3:11; 2 Tim. 3:3). Slandering others is the very epitome of all that is wrong with the flesh. Strife amongst us comes from the expression of passive anger and pride (Prov. 28:25; 29:22); and strife is sown by gossip (Prov. 16:28). Therefore gossip is a way of expressing our anger and pride, no matter how nicely dressed up we make them. Or to put it in human terms, we pull a man down to make ourselves look taller. So be aware: our own frustrations, our passive resentments, the hurt we have experienced from others, all this if left to itself will result in a critical attitude towards our brethren, and will be expressed in gossip. Because gossip is such an epitome of the flesh, it is ranked along with sins like fornication, idolatry and murder in Ez. 22:9. There are passages in Jeremiah which describe slander and gossiping as being the reason why God condemned Judah (Jer. 6:28; 9:3-8). The soap operas of the world are full of this kind of gossip and intrigue; they glorify it. And the more we feed ourselves with these things, the more likely we will be to see gossip as just part of life. And yet let's not mistake the words of the prophets; it is seen as murder, because effectively it puts to death a man's relationship with his fellows. God *hates* the man who sows such discord among brethren through gossip in the church (Prov. 6:19). "The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly" (Prov. 26:22). That casual remark, that passing on of information under the guise of 'concern'- it was a body blow to the one you gossiped about, a blow so hard that it caused deep internal damage.

David took a strong view against slander- having suffered so much of it himself. He vowed to put to death, i.e. to set up the death sentence, for anyone caught privately slandering or backbiting against a neighbour (Ps. 101:5 Heb.). That's how bad are backbiting and slander, however quietly ("privily", the AV quaintly says) they're done. And of course the Lord shared this understanding, by teaching that hatred of our brother is in fact the kind of murder which carried the death penalty in Old Testament times.

Loving Our Neighbour

Proverbs is often a commentary upon the Law. The many passages there about gossiping are based upon just one passage, in Lev. 19:16-18: "Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people...thou shalt not hate thy neighbour in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise (frankly, NIV) rebuke thy neighbour...thou shalt not avenge nor bear any

grudge...but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" . The fact this passage is expanded upon so many times in Proverbs would indicate that gossip was as major a problem among the old Israel as it is among the new. But notice the fine psychology of the Spirit here: gossip in the church is related to having a grudge, to hating your neighbour in your heart, to not loving your neighbour as you love yourself (and we are *very* conservative about our own failings). When the Lord spoke about hating your brother being the same as murdering him (Mt. 5:22; 1 Jn. 3:15), he may well have been thinking of this passage in Leviticus. To hate your brother in your heart, to gossip about him, was and is as bad as murdering him. And this same connection between gossip and murder is made in the prophets (Ez. 22:9 cp. Prov. 26:22). But the Law provided a way out. If you had something against your brother, frankly tell him about his failure, *so that* you would not hate him in your heart. If we don't do this, or try to get someone else to do it, we will end up hating our brother in our heart and we will gossip about him.

The Lord Jesus more or less instated this command as relevant for His ecclesia (Mt. 18:15). The purpose of it is *not just* for the sake of the brother who has erred, it isn't just a polite protocol to follow; it is for *our sake too*, who have seen the weakness of our brother. *Unless* we talk frankly to him about it, between us *alone*, then we will end up hating him in our heart (even though it may not feel like that) and we will gossip about him. The frank raising of the issue with our brother is associated with loving our neighbour as ourselves. This is actually the opposite to what we would think; we would imagine that it would be more 'loving' to say nothing to our brother. But in this case, we will inevitably gossip about him and be bitter against him. The practice of true love will result in an open community in which we can frankly discuss with each other the issues which concern us, with love and not hatred in our hearts. This is the teaching of Lev. 19:16-18. No wonder the Proverbs expand upon it so much. And no wonder the Lord appropriated it as a ground rule for His ecclesia- there must be no gossip in the church.

Ps. 15:3 offers further commentary upon gossip in relation to our "neighbour": "He that...speaketh the truth in his heart. He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor receiveth / endureth a reproach against his neighbour" (Ps. 15:2,3 AVmg.). To gossip / backbite is paralleled with receiving gossip. To listen to it and accept it is as bad as to create it in the first place. The antidote is to have a mind that thinks of those things which "are true...lovely....of good report". We live in a world of conscious untruth and half truth. In our unshareable self, our inner thoughts and musings, let us seek to have only that which is *true* passing through our meditations. And then we will not want to receive a gossip against our brother, indeed by implication we will not 'endure' it, we will tell the gossipier to cease, and certainly not act upon it.

Like all sin, gossip in the church has a price attached to it. " Debate thy cause with thy neighbour himself (cp. Lev. 19:17; Mt. 18:15); and discover not a secret to another, for he who hears it may shame you, and you will never lose your bad reputation" (Prov. 25:9,10 AV with NIV). 'Gossip usually backfires on you', that's the message. And a reputation as a gossip is very difficult to shake off. It means that none of your brethren will want to be close to you. Remember that Prov. 20:19 was spoken within the context of the ecclesia of Israel, not the world generally: " A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much" (NIV). The New Testament equivalent to this may be the command to avoid those in the ecclesia who cause divisions and arguments (Rom. 16:17). The sin of gossip is not only because it upsets the victim, but because it upsets unity in the family of God. The Lord's agonizing death was so that we might be one; to upset that unity is therefore to undo what His cross was

intended to achieve. A talebearer is called one who flatters with his lips (Prov. 20:19). The motive for gossip is therefore for us to flatter or impress others, to make us look better because we have dragged others down lower. This is the Biblical analysis of the psychosis of gossiping. Words have more effect and hurt than we realize. A lying tongue wounds or crushes those it attacks (Prov. 26:28 RVmg.). This is the power of words.

The Hebrew word translated " talebearer" is a compound of the word for merchant or barterer; one who trades, in tales. The suggestion is that every gossip is traded for (i.e. provokes) another piece. And how many of our own conversations prove the truth of this! A gossip is made, and the other party to the conversation invariably says something which *they* also ought not to. Gossip in the church very quickly becomes a way of life, both in individuals and in the whole community. In Jeremiah's time, gossiping was associated with 'proceeding from evil to evil' (Jer. 9:3); it is part of a downward spiral of spirituality. Once gossip starts a quarrel, it's like water bursting out of a dam; soon the whole land of Israel will be flooded (Prov. 17:14 NIV). So it's best not to start it, not only for our own sakes, but because of the effect it will have on the rest of the body. Peter likewise points an antithesis between gossiping and receiving " the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:1,2). Real spiritual growth is impossible if we are taken up with gossiping; and this is true on the communal as well as individual level.

Prov. 17:9 says that seeking love by covering a transgression is the opposite of 'repeating a matter'. Think through this. It implies that we gossip, i.e. we repeat others's sins, because we chose not to cover their sin by forgiving it.

Practical Response

If you feel you have been slandered by gossip in the church, remember that almost every servant of God has been through this at the hands of those they counted as their brethren: Joseph, Moses, Job, David, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Paul, and above all the Lord Himself. Miriam and Aaron implied Moses (their own brother!) was immoral (Num. 12:1). The comment that Moses was the humblest man on earth is made in the very context of his enduring unjust criticism in a spiritual way (Num. 12:3). The way Paul commanded Timothy not to even *consider* a complaint against an elder unless another two or three had been eye-witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19) is proof enough that he expected elders to be slandered from within the ecclesia. The more you read between the lines of Paul's letters, the more evident it is that his very own brethren almost unbelievably slandered him. Thus the Galatians whispered that Paul still preached circumcision (Gal. 5:11), probably basing that nasty rumour on the fact he had circumcised Timothy. He has to remind the Thessalonians that he isn't preaching because he wants to take money and have relationships with women (1 Thess. 2:3-12). There were some wealthy women in Thessalonica who accepted the Gospel (Acts 17:4 Western Text), and no doubt gossip spread from this. We could almost conclude that being unfairly gossiped about is a characteristic of the true servant of God. Indeed, when Paul lists the things which confirm his apostleship, he not only lists his imprisonments and shipwrecks; he says that the fact he has been slandered is another proof that he is a servant of Christ (2 Cor. 6:8)! None of these men quit the community because they had been slandered. They stuck it out. And so must we. To quit because of gossip in the church will lead to us being eaten up with bitterness- which is a cancer, it will spread to every part of our spiritual lives and destroy us; and it will spread out of us into the whole ecclesia (Heb. 12:15). This has happened all too often. So *don't get bitter!* We must learn that God is our justifier, He is the One who counts us as being righteous. Our faith in this aspect of the atonement is never what it could be: that

here and now, God counts you as if you are completely righteous. Being slandered drives us to the realization that our own protestations of innocence are never enough, and thereby we learn something about the whole process of justification, and we draw closer to the Father and Son. If we run away, we are running away from the test which the Lord has given us in order to develop our faith in and love of Him. He will try to teach us the same humility another way; there can be no escape of the cross, if we are to be His.

If God is the only and ultimate judge, human judgment, gossip and criticism shouldn't mean so much to us. Jude 9 gives guidance about how to deal with slander and attacks from false brethren. Jude alludes to the well known Jewish legend, *The Testament Of Moses*. In it, the 'devil' slanders Moses, accusing him of having murdered the Egyptian and therefore being worthy of condemnation, and tries to drag Moses' body down to punishment. Jude points out that in the story, the Angel Michael doesn't indulge in justification but rather says that "the Lord rebuke thee". And may this be our pattern.

On a practical note, it has been suggested that a new convert should not be made an elder because he may fall into "the condemnation of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:6,7). *Diabolos* is often used in the pastorals in relation to gossipers (1 Tim. 3:6,7,11; 2 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 2:3). Gossip is the clearest manifestation of the 'devil' within our natures, and we should be aware of this. "The condemnation of the devil" may therefore mean that the gossipers, whether within or outside the ecclesia, will more easily condemn a novice. If a brother has behind him all the qualifications listed in 1 Tim. 3, of faithful children, a reputation as stable, patient etc., then such gossips will have less power to condemn him in the eyes of others. Paul indicates that he understands the power of gossip in the church- he knew that a spiritually young elder was going to face slander, as sure as day follows night. And therefore, young elders aren't a good idea, he concludes. We too need to face up to the reality of gossip, that it will happen, and we need to seek to protect those vulnerable to it before it starts.

It may be that we hear gossip in the church. It is my suggestion that we ought to challenge this, gently, of course, but with the weight of the above passages on our side. A gossip entices others to gossip; he reveals and also elicits secrets (Heb.); "therefore meddle not with him" (Prov. 20:19). Don't closely mix with such a brother or sister if they won't change their ways (there are degrees of fellowship within the one body). Indeed Prov. 20:19 in the RV goes even further, advising not to even be in the company of someone who "opens wide his lips"- we should simply not want to hear gossip. The command to go and discuss with our brother *alone* (Mt. 18:15) ought to be taken far more seriously. Statements like: "She smokes, you know. I really don't think she ought to smoke, do you?" are an absolute sin. Our response ought to be something like: "You must go and speak to the sister herself about it if she smokes. If you don't do this, you don't have a sincere objection to her smoking. I don't want to hear about somebody else's weakness". Biblically: "Keep thee far from a false matter" (Ex. 23:7). As many of you know, I don't always have the courage to make this kind of response. But it needs to be made. Often gossip is justified as being said out of concern for someone. The deed is done unthinkingly, dressed up with the appearance of spiritual concern. The Spirit foresaw this. "The words of a gossip are *like* choice morsels; they go down to a man's innermost parts" (Prov. 18:8 NIV) uses language elsewhere used in Proverbs about the "choice morsels" of true spiritual wisdom, which also go into "a man's innermost parts" (16:21,23; 20:27; 24:4 Heb.). The point of the similarity is that within the ecclesia of Israel, it would be easy to mistake gossip for true spirituality ("*like* choice morsels"). We must really watch out for this. There are times when it *is* necessary to discuss ecclesial problems; but the need for *personal* appeal to the person(s) concerned as outlined above is paramount.

The Source Of Gossip In The Church

One result of a works-based mentality is that we become very critical of others, rather than positive and affirmative, after the spirit of grace. A great ability to sense and pick up tension in relationships, “to make a man an offender for a word” as the works-centred Jews did, fearing where a “thin end of the wedge” may lead; a fear of sin rather than the perfect love which casts out fear. And all this leads to conversations which are talking about people, often third parties, rather than *to* the person you are with. There must be very few of us who feel confident that we are so grace-filled that none of this applies to us. The sin of Ham in relation to Noah's drunkenness included the fact that he told his brothers about Noah's shame (Gen. 9:22). This incident seems to be alluded to by Paul when he says that it is a shame to speak of what sinners do in secret (Eph. 5:12). A large amount of the communication which would be called 'gossip' includes the communication of sinful things which would be better not entering the minds of saints in any case- one tends to gossip about a neighbour's adultery rather than his lost cat.

Prov. 17:4 has a piercing analysis of gossip: "A wicked doer gives heed to wicked lips, and a liar gives ear to a lying tongue". It's the wicked who listen to gossip. It's liars who pay attention to lies. By listening to gossip, we show what sort of a person we are. Those with an interest in lies or gossip end up lying and gossiping themselves. Both gossiping and listening to it are both therefore part of a serious downward spiral of behaviour; and they are related to each other. This is how serious this matter is. The seriousness of it was reflected in how the Law of Moses stipulated a huge penalty if a man sullied the name of his wife by falsely accusing her- he had to pay 100 shekels of silver, twice the bride price (Dt. 22:19,29).

"A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth (Heb. covereth) the matter" (Prov. 11:13). The principles of the atonement and the redemption we have experienced ought to be finding expression in every part of our lives. Instead of gossiping, we ought to cover over the confidences which we have been let into. We should abstain from every appearing of sin; wherever it comes up, we should abstain (1 Thess. 5:22; this verse *doesn't* mean 'don't do things which look as if they're sinful'). Whenever we hear of sin we should seek to cover it, not to show it forth more widely, and especially seek for it to be forgiven. By doing so we will reflect our own experience of how God has dealt with His knowledge of our sins. To gossip is to show that we don't know God, that we haven't known or experienced His gracious overlooking of our dark side (Jer. 9:3,4). But yet in the face of this, we *all* gossip. We say things we shouldn't about our brethren. Let's admit it. And the gossips of others in the church are 'tasty morsels' to us. Therefore let's all pray, seriously pray, that privately and collectively we'll improve.

7-4-2 Paul: Victim Of Slander In The Church

- Too physically weak to do the job (2 Cor. 10:10)
- Underhanded, cunning (2 Cor. 4:2 RSV)
- Tampering with God's word (2 Cor. 4:2 RSV)
- Not preaching according to the sanction of the Lord Jesus, but inventing things for himself (in the context of Gentile liberty, Gal. 1:1).
- Preaching himself as the saviour, not Christ (2 Cor. 4:5)
- Commending himself, showing himself to be so spiritually strong (2 Cor. 3:1)
- Trying to build up his own self-image with his listeners as he preached the Gospel (2

Cor. 4:5)

- Trying to domineer over his brethren (2 Cor. 1:24; 8:8 Gk.)
- Mentally unstable (2 Cor. 5:13)
- Causing others to stumble (2 Cor. 6:3)
- An imposter (2 Cor. 6:8- in the context, Paul is saying that the fact he is so maligned is a kind of proof that he really is a genuine worker for the Lord!).
- Wronging, corrupting, financially defrauding brethren (2 Cor. 7:2)
- Demanding so much money from others that they would become impoverished themselves (2 Cor. 8:13,14 J.B. Phillips)
- But not a real apostle, seeing that if he was then he would do as the Lord had bidden and receive "hire" for being a "labourer"; if he was worthy, he would have accepted it. The fact he didn't showed he wasn't a hard labourer. This was so untrue. It's a real cruel example of slander in the church.
- He only threatened ecclesial discipline but never did anything in practice- he was all talk and no do (2 Cor. 10:1-6)
- What he wrote was in his letters was a contradiction of the person he was in practice (2 Cor. 1:13)
- He kept changing his mind over important issues (2 Cor. 1:17-19)
- They were offended that Paul didn't take money from them (2 Cor. 11:7 RSV), and yet also grudged giving money for the Jerusalem Poor Fund because the Corinthian church slandered Paul that he claimed he was only trying to get the money for himself.
- Crafty and a liar, not opening his heart to his brethren (2 Cor. 12:16 cp. 6:11)
- Preaching that we can be immoral because God's grace will cover us (Rom. 3:8)
- Preached in order to get money and have relationships with women (1 Thess. 2:3-12)
- Still secretly preached that circumcision was vital for salvation (Gal. 5:11).

Note: If you can imagine where Paul might have used quotation marks, this helps to reveal certain phrases which he was probably quoting from their claims. Most of the above slander in the church was from just one ecclesia (Corinth): one can be certain that there were many other such slanders. He very gently tried to encourage them to raise money for the poor saints in Jerusalem, in order to justify his boasting of them. Finally, after all his spiritual diplomacy in raising the fund, he had to ask the Romans to pray with him that the Jerusalem ecclesia would accept it (Rom. 15:31). Presumably they didn't want to accept help from Gentile converts whom they despised. And if they didn't accept it, then Paul would look as if he had got them to raise the money just to give to him. There must have been times when he thought of quitting the Christian community because of slander in the church. Paul was not a larger than life figure in the eyes of the early church. They didn't see him as we do. The harder he worked, the more he was slandered, and the more painfully. Every genuinely hard working brother in the Christian community has suffered the same slander in the church.

7-4-3 Christian Anger In The Church

In many smaller Christian groups there's a lot of anger; both on the individual level and also on the group level [e.g. ecclesias or groups of ecclesias against others, etc.]. How are we to cope with this, we who seek to emulate the gentle kindness and grace of the Father and Son? Anger in itself is a purely natural reaction, and is seen in both God and His Son. The issue is, how to "be angry and sin not" (Eph. 4:26)? God "made a path for His anger" with Egypt, by bringing plagues upon them and slaying their firstborn (Ps. 78:50 RV). Anger has to go somewhere, for otherwise it burns within us and rises up ultimately into extremely damaging

and inappropriate forms of behaviour. I say 'inappropriate' because pent up anger has a way of bursting forth upon anyone in its way, who may likely be nothing to do with the cause or object of the initial anger. Anger is a form of energy, and as such it must be harnessed. Throughout the Old Testament, we often read of God being "provoked to wrath" by human sin, and His anger burning. There's very little said about this in the New Testament; and I wonder if this is because the ultimate path which God made for His anger was in giving His Son to die for human sin, rather than endlessly seeking to punish human sin and be hurt by it. Immediately let's take an obvious lesson: don't waste your anger energy on endlessly fighting those who provoke you, but use it positively. Throw it in to some project or other for the Lord. For anger is to some extent reflective; whilst we remain horns locked with a situation, both our opponent and ourselves are feeding off each others' anger. Hence the wise advice of Prov. 22:24,25: "with a wrathful man you shall not go: lest you learn his ways". Disengage from anger situations.

But that's easier said than done. There are some situations which physically we can't just run from. We may live with someone in family or church life who provokes our anger, and just walking out isn't the right option. In this case, I have some suggestions which may or may not be helpful; they're simply things which have helped me:

Understand their anger

They're defending their territory perhaps; they may consider you a wolf in the flock because you interpret Scripture slightly differently from them, worship differently, hold a different view of something which is important to them (e.g. the role of women in the church), baptize people whom they wouldn't baptize, fellowship believers whom they don't fellowship. In all these cases, you are perceived as having entered their territory, disturbing their vision of life; and anger is often in fact self-defensive. A clash of value systems leads to 'war'; an inclusive person often simply can't be within an exclusive system without it leading to anger on all sides. Whether or not one quits the system depends upon each individual case and the responsibilities to others which one carries; but at least understanding anger and the psychological processes at play can assist in it hurting us somewhat less. It may help to put yourself in their shoes. What do *they* think of *you*? A good exercise is to say out loud the thoughts you suspect they have about you- e.g. "I am sure he's not really a brother in Christ. His behaviour is so non-Christian. He's not honest nor straightforward. He's just here at this conference to get support for his wrong positions". And you'll likely realize that these are the very thoughts *you* have about *them*. As they see themselves as defending the flock, as defending Biblical and spiritual principle, so likely do you- even if the choice of wording may vary slightly between you. And who knows, as you struggle to forgive your opponent, they may in their better moments be going through just the same for you. We need to realize a basic psychological truth- that those who hurt us the most are those most similar to us. It makes an interesting exercise to list the similarities between Jacob and Esau, and Jacob and Laban. These men hurt each other- because they were so similar to each other.

Change the structure of your relationship with the person[s]

Those raised within a religious group grew up dependent upon it for meaning and validation. And yet it's only natural that one progresses to the phase of contra-dependence, where one seeks to be independent, to break free... and yet in religious groups, one remains tied to the group by a belief that there is "truth" here which must not be abandoned. And so conflict situations develop, with their attendant anger. If it were merely a stamp collector's club, one

would resign and forget it. But because of the sense that the church is none other than the house of God, we remain. All I can say is that we must learn that God's validation of us is of supreme importance, and not that of men. Whilst we may remain within the group, the structure of our relationship with others in the group changes when we learn to take our personal worth from the Father and Son and not from man. We won't seek, as overgrown adolescents, conflicts to prove ourselves, define our patch. We will be secure in the Father's love. And we may be well advised to develop that patch, those talents God gave us, in a way unique to us. So that instead of spending hours of angry energy replying to angry emails, we spend that time instead e.g. developing our own ministry, be it baptizing people, caring for a specific need group, pushing for change in specific areas, etc. This doesn't mean we cease to be sensitive to our aggressors; sensitivity is part of the spirit of Christ, and "as much as lies within us, if it be possible, we should live at peace with all men" (Rom. 12:18). Paul's inspired wording tacitly accepts that we often cannot live in peace with others because it's not possible given their failures; but we can change *our* attitudes, this is the point.

Identify those parts of you which they hurt by their anger

Imagine a man walking with two close friends one evening in a city centre. A thug attacks him, pins him to a wall, and extracts his wallet and money from him. Afterwards, the man's not angry with the thug who did the damage, but with his friends who stood there and did nothing. What was hurt within the man? Surely his expectation of something better from those whom he thought were his friends. This is especially relevant to those who consider themselves in Christian brotherhood with each other. The Biblical ideals of Christian fellowship are such that we can assume that they are all attained within the brotherhood which we're in. But just as we personally are imperfect, so are our brethren. The man's friends in the example simply didn't love him as much as they should have done. There's no explaining that away. Their fear of consequences led them to betrayal. Like the Holocaust happened because good people did nothing. The New Testament teaching about Christian unity is an ideal, but it seems to me that realistically it's unattainable, and certainly has never yet been achieved on earth in the last 2000 years. People enter the church often with too high expectations, attracted by the love and unity they see, inspired by the idealistic Biblical teaching about it, and not realizing that actually, the ideal is far from achieved. In groups like our own, there is the impression given that all are equal, a priesthood of all believers. In churches like the Catholics, megachurch Pentecostal and Orthodox, there's far less anger between members because the expectations are laid upon the priesthood, the very visible human leadership, rather than upon each other as in a far smaller congregation. Feeling let down or betrayed by those we assumed were 'with us', one for all and all for one, is perhaps the largest single cause of anger between Christian believers. It helps to recognize that we as individuals aren't as strong as we think; we are far more fragile, woundable and sensitive to betrayal than we think. Realizing this will at least decrease the surprise factor in the anger we feel at being let down by others. If we sit on a chair and it collapses beneath us, we'll likely be angry with the chair. We expect chairs to hold us up. But if we approach the chair suspecting that it may possibly collapse, the surprise factor will be less. Our anger at such betrayal incidents is largely rooted in our shocked surprise. If we accept that chairs do collapse- partly because of our overweight- and friends do betray, brethren aren't perfect, trains run late... then the surprise factor will be far less.

But... does this mean, then, that we adopt a cynical view on people, never fully giving ourselves in trust to others, never trusting them, retreating inside our shells hurt and wounded to never love again? This isn't healthy, neither is it the intention of life in Christ. For

Christianity isn't a religion for lone individuals; the whole nature of being in Christ is that we are baptized into His body and learn of Him by our experience in His body. So how practically can we achieve a balance between a naive assumption that everyone in church life is our loving committed-to-death-for-us brother on the one hand; and a distrustful self-defensive-lest-we-be-hurt attitude on the other? The answer may simply be that we must recognize that our brethren and friends in Christ are imperfect, just as we are, and such betrayals aren't to be unexpected. And to frankly accept that there is a risk in every relationship we enter into: marriage, having children, having brothers or sisters in Christ. And yet enter relationships we must; to try not to is to deny our humanity as well as God's intention for us in Christ. Or we could consider the idea of boundaries. Human cells are surrounded by a membrane, a boundary, which allows helpful things in and excludes others; and allows the cell to excrete and also to communicate and bond with other cells. Recognize that we have boundaries; there are some things about ourselves which we will share with others, and other things which we will not. Just be aware of those boundaries; they can't be too hard as to let nothing in to assist us and stifle our communication to others; nor too soft as to let others dominate us by their anger. In practice, we define our boundaries according to our value system, our core focus. And here we're up against the hard question: What is that, for us? Is it the seeking of God's glory alone, or a system of values centred around membership of a church group and acceptance with them? If our focus is unswervingly upon God's glory and not our own, then somehow the whole question of how to define boundaries will somehow find its natural and healthy solution.

Shame And Anger

There's a definite link between shame and anger. Take a man whose mother yelled at him because as a toddler he ran out onto the balcony naked, and shamed him by her words. Years later on a hot Summer evening the man as an adult walks out on a balcony with just his underpants on. An old woman yells at him from the yard below that he should be ashamed of himself. And he's furiously angry with her- because of the shame given him by his mother in that incident 20 years ago. Shame and anger are clearly understood by God as being related, because His word several times connects them: "A fool's *anger* is immediately known; but a prudent man covers his *shame*" (Prov. 12:16); A king's *anger* is against a man who *shames* him (Prov. 14:35). Or consider 1 Sam. 20:34: "So Jonathan arose from the table in fierce *anger*, and did eat no meat the second day of the month... because his father had done him *shame*". Job's *anger* was related to the fact that he felt that ten times the friends had *shamed* him in their speeches (Job 19:3). Frequently the rejected are threatened with both shame and anger / gnashing of teeth; shame and anger are going to be connected in that awful experience. They will "curse [in anger]... and be ashamed" (Ps. 109:28). The final shame of the rejected is going to be so great that "they shall be greatly ashamed... their everlasting confusion shall never be forgotten" (Jer. 20:11). Seeing they will be long dead and gone, it is us, the accepted, who by God's grace will recall the terrible shame of the rejected throughout our eternity. Their shame will be so terrible; and hence their anger will likewise be. Because Paul's preaching 'despised' the goddess Diana, her worshippers perceived that she and they were somehow thereby shamed; and so "they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians" (Acts 19:27,28). It's perhaps possible to understand the wrath of God in this way, too. For His wrath is upon those who break His commands; and by breaking them we *shame* God (Rom. 2:23); we *despise* his desire for our repentance (Rom. 2:4).

We take shame, however, from how we understand our community / society; from whom we take validation and meaning. Our validation should be from the one God who justifies us,

who validates us, and gives us the only meaning worth having. There's significant Old Testament emphasis upon the fact that those who are truly on the Lord's side shall not be put to shame. It was prophesied of the Lord Jesus that He set His face like a flint, "that I shall not be ashamed" (Is. 50:7). Perhaps His lack of destructive anger was because He didn't let Himself be shamed by men, instead taking His self-worth and values from God's acceptance of Him. To avoid "anger" in the wrong sense, we need to avoid being wrongly shamed. And we can do this by ensuring we ourselves aren't led into shame, due to placing too great a value upon the opinions of men. Our shame should be before God for our sins against Him, and not before men. Hence the prophets often criticize Israel for not being ashamed of their sins before God (Jer. 6:15). Our shame before men leads to anger; our shame before God is resolved in repentance and belief in His gracious forgiveness. Thus Jeremiah recalls how his repentance involved being ashamed, and yet then being "instructed" (Jer. 31:19). It's through knowing this kind of shame before God that we come to a position where we are unashamed. Thus Joel begins his prophecy with a call to "be ashamed" before God for sin, and concludes with the comfort that in this case, "my people shall never [again] be ashamed" (Joel 1:1; 2:27). In this sense we can understand the comment that the Lord Jesus 'despised the shame' of the cross (Heb. 12:2). He 'thought against' it [Gk.], he refused to be shamed before men, even though naked and bedraggled and humanly defeated; for He believed that He was being 'lifted up' in glory from God's viewpoint. Paul could say that it mattered very little to him how men thought of him, for the Lord's judgment was all that mattered (1 Cor. 4:4); and the Lord Jesus gave somewhat the same impression, for He evidently "regarded not the person of men" (Mt. 22:16). If our value, validation, self-worth etc. are dependent upon men's opinions of us, then we're likely to be easily shamed; and this sets us up for all manner of anger feelings, and makes us the more easily woundable by those whose acceptance we crave. Quite simply- if God has accepted us, then don't let ourselves be shamed by men.

Childhood Issues

Whilst Freud's emphasis upon childhood influences may have been overdone, there's no doubt that they play a significant part in our personality structure. Many members of small Protestant groups grew up within the group or a similar one. Often this upbringing involved obeying rules which never made any sense; but protest and reasoning wasn't possible. The desire to protest was often quashed beneath a genuine, loving desire not to upset genuine, loving parents who held misplaced ideals. If the religiously-raised child failed, they felt shame for having let the side down, disgraced the family. This shame often leads to anger in later life. The desire to protest is still there in those who were raised within the community; but they protest by [e.g.] holding non-standard views on a matter of Biblical interpretation or practice, exposing what they know to be a weak point within the community etc. And these are the conflicts, the wars, which lead to anger situations. But often in religiously-raised children there's a willful desire to be the *provocateur*. Nothing much can be done to change all this in others- but to understand all is to forgive all, according to a French proverb. Anger has to feed upon something- and that something is often the shame induced in the person's childhood by the very community which they both love and hate, and whose acceptance they both crave and disdain. Whilst the cards we were dealt from birth can't be changed, we can change from where we take our values and validation. They must come from God, and not men. Whether they shake their fist at us or drown us in accolades, we will be unmoved- if God is for us a personal reality, and His judgments and opinion of us is paramount. It is this which gives us the ultimate freedom, the freedom to not get angry in response to others' anger. Because of the very direct and focused relationship of Jesus to the Father, He was the ultimately 'free' person and could forgive more than any other. For He wasn't looking for

human validation; He had this from the Father. And so do we, if we will take it.

Dynamics

All groups, be they a church or a denomination, are ever changing. At the point of our entry into them, they have certain club rules, statements of faith (written or unwritten), expectations, boundaries of who is in and who is out, and perceived founding fathers / pioneers. Over time it is inevitable that positions shift. Statements of faith and constitutions are amended, the pioneers reinterpreted; and these changes arise from individuals changing, processing, developing, testing paradigms and overthrowing them. Change is painful. It always involves conflict between those who enshrine the status quo as truth, and those who are led by the Spirit; those who fear, those who take their value from the acceptance of the majority view- and those who have shaken free of fear. These conflict situations exist within all churches and denominations in some form at some time. It's inevitable that we will face the anger and growth pains that come with them. As with all the spiritual challenges which God gives us along the path to His Kingdom, holding the 'right' or 'wrong' position may not always be of the essence; rather it is our integrity, holding fast to the freedom with and for which Christ has set us free, which is important. And in the total experience, we are led to seek our validation, our value, our acceptance, not in men but in the Father who gave His Son for our justification *in His sight*.

When All Is Said And Done

In the end, when all these psychological tricks and trials and attempts have been tried, the ultimate answer is in God. David spoke his anger to God. That's my explanation of his imprecatory Psalms, wherein he wishes all manner of evil judgments against his enemies. If those Psalms were to be dynamically translated, I suspect expletives would have to be used to convey the force- bearing in mind that in David's time, expletives weren't used, but rather aggressive language of cursing. But why does David put all this anger and 'bad language' into prayers to God? He knew that God sees and knows all things, nothing is hid to Him. All our lives are lived in His presence and are effectively prayer to Him. Quite simply, David was unburdening his anger upon God. We need to share and verbalize our anger with someone. And the Divine 'someone' is there for us in this 24/7. We can't make people love us or accept us. But God does. If He is believed in by us as real, then we'll be thrilled at His acceptance and love for us, to the extent that the anger and hurt of others is simply not what it is for those who have no God to believe in. And one final thought. If in all our hurt at others' anger against us, someone else bothers to contact us and let us know they're thinking of us- be it by letter, phone call, SMS, email- it can move the hardest, hurtest heart to tears. But there is that Divine 'Someone' for us, feeling for us, with us, even weeping for our hurt, with more understanding and insight than anyone else on earth. This isn't just a comforting close to this discussion of the difficult and irresolvable problem of anger; it's an utter reality. He is there, there for us; God is with us, Emmanuel, in His Son. Do we believe in His utter reality...? "Jesus loves *me* [that's where I like to put the stress in the song], this I know, for the Bible tells me so". Here, then, if we will allow it, is the ultimate issue of all our theology, Bible reading, meditation and reflection: "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not also with him freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that shall condemn?" (Rom. 8:31-34). Is that all really not quite enough for us?

7-4-4 Surviving Spiritual Abuse

There can be no doubt that a growing number of people, brothers and sisters in Christ, have been severely damaged by abusive behaviour from their own brethren. They entered the community of believers assuming that they had at last found "the truth", the body of Christ on earth, and thus brought high expectations with them. But then they met behaviour perhaps worse than what they encountered in the world. And they hit a crisis of faith. I feel qualified to write about this, as I saw it happen to literally hundreds of lovely folk whom I baptized into Christ who were then caught up in church politics which damaged or destroyed their faith. I will resist writing of my own experience of spiritual and emotional abuse at the hands of my brethren and the church I served from my youth to this day. I fortunately emerged from the experience relatively unscathed, by God's grace I kept my focus. But I am writing this for those who didn't, or who realize they swerved from the end point, which is Christ. I see no point in wallowing in our negative experiences. We're going through a grieving process for that which we have lost, as we realize that never again will we have the naive, trusting view towards our brethren or the church which we once had. And we must be careful not to get caught up on any one stage of that grieving process. We have to face the reality that our church community is not what we thought it was, or hoped it was; and we have all grieved over that. But we must move on, for getting caught up on one stage of the grief process is where we become dysfunctional and a burden rather than an assistance to others. Paul teaches that if we suffer anything, it is to obtain comfort with which we ourselves can then comfort others who are going through the same grief (2 Cor. 1:4). This is where internet forums, for all their many drawbacks, do have some advantages. Through them all those who suffered can share positively the comfort and insights they've received through their traumas, in order to provide comfort to others. The details of what we each suffered are a comfort in themselves insofar as others will realize that they are not alone. For how many times have we heard it admitted: "I thought I was the only person who'd gone through this... I thought it was just *our* family...". But we must go beyond mere sharing of experience, lest we become the club of mutual misery. Beyond this lies the sharing with each other of what we have learnt, of what God has done, of sharing *His* comfort with others. If we don't do this, then the whole process ceases to function as God intended. If we keep our grief and God's comfort to ourselves, without sharing it with others, then we can only become self-centred and dysfunction sets in.

So what, then, are the lessons to be learnt from the abuse suffered at the hands of fellow believers?

Perception

The experience of abuse causes us to examine and challenge our perceptions. For many victims of abuse, there is a degree to which their sufferings occur within their own minds. Naturally the component of "actual" against "perceived" abuse will vary from case to case. Those who died in the gas chambers of central Europe had 100% actual abuse- none of it was merely imagined. At the other end of the scale, a person may irrationally perceive that 'someone' in cyberspace is haunting them, and they perceive this as 'abuse'. We're all somewhere in that continuum. And so, in a way, are some [not all] of the abusers. Take a piece of paper and write down what you think the abusers are saying or thinking about you- and make the effort to do this, rather than making a mental list. The exercise is so much more effective. I recall the first time I did this. As I wrote those things down, I soon realized that actually, this is precisely what *I* think about 'them'. To the word and to the letter. I think you'll

find the same if you do that exercise. The conclusion I reach from this phenomenon is that *to some extent* abuse is in the perception of the sufferer. There's abuse that is real, and there's abuse that's only perceived. That being as it is, it's still awfully true- there's abuse that's for real.

The experience of abuse affects our perception of "church". Many have come through their abusive experiences to appreciate the difference between what has been called the visible and the invisible church. "They are not all Israel who are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6). Those with true spirituality may be found throughout the various fellowships; they are the invisible church, the body of Christ which God sees from His perspective. One thing that experiencing spiritual abuse teaches us is the utter folly of division between true believers. The traditional lines of division between believers become meaningless as we reflect: 'I am supposed not to fellowship that lovely, sincere sister in *that* group; but I must fellowship that abuser in *our* group'. Spiritual abuse robs us for ever of our naive belief and experience that the church is a loving, close-knit, caring community of people who try to follow Jesus. For some, the cruel breaking of that belief, the desecration of that image, leads them to lose faith in God and His Son. This may be because their faith was too much in the church as an institution, rather than in the essential core reality of the Father and Son and that great salvation which is in them. And so again, good can come from the whole terrible experience- in that the church is no longer a crutch to us, but we are thrown into a direct, personal relationship with the Father and Son, with no mediators or brokers between us. But that can be a scary prospect, as it was for Israel, who pleaded to have some mediation between them and the God of Sinai. The realization that the idea isn't going to happen is a huge loss, and it will involve us in a grieving process. The problem with grieving processes is that people can get caught up on one stage of the process and remain there- e.g. anger or self-hatred. Realize that we who have been abused are on a natural grieving and healing process, which we should allow to run its course. The end point is of course a recognition of the loss. Nothing can ever change that in this life, nor the broken and lost relationships, the damage done in some way remains. Whilst on one hand we should always be open to reconciliation, seeking the repentance of our abusers, on the other, there are some things which are done to people which result in permanent damage in this life. Living in denial of that reality only causes more pain, and is a sign we've not come to the end of the grieving process.

Injustice

Much of the pain felt by the spiritually abused focuses upon the issue of injustice. They were treated like *this*, but others are treated like *that*; *you* can't break bread in a church, but *he* can, even though *they* know that *he* is sexually immoral; *she* isn't allowed to attend the gathering but *he* is, and so forth. The Lord told a parable about a woman who repeatedly asked for 'justice', with the implication that she would only eventually find it at the Lord's return. But He went straight on to tell another parable, about the repentant man who beat upon his breast saying "God have mercy upon me, the sinner"; this man "went down to his house *justified*". The theme of 'justification' is thus a thread which continues from the woman demanding 'justification' (Gk.) against her abuser (Lk. 18:1-14). The Lord's point wasn't merely that justice will only be ultimately done at His return; but further, that we are all serious sinners, who have been 'justified' by God's grace; and this colossal-scale experience of receiving undeserved justice / justification should mean that we're not so concerned about receiving justice in human matters in this life. There cannot be perfection this side of God's Kingdom being established upon earth. To seek for perfection in relationships is perhaps reflective of a lack of faith or understanding relating to the Kingdom of perfection which is yet to come.

One of the greatest things for me about that Kingdom is the unity and perfection of relationships which there will then be. It is, however, all so hard because the New Testament presents how the church should be- an ideal of loving, sensitive, caring relationships in the spirit of Christ. And this is very attractive to us. It's very hard, therefore, to face the reality that this great intention, this lofty possibility, has actually been left unachieved by the church. It's like reading the descriptions of God's house in Ezekiel 40-48. This wonderful temple could've come about in Ezekiel's time. The possibilities are given in such great detail- but their fulfillment was quite simply dependent upon whether Judah wished to make it come real by living up to it (Ez. 43:10-12). And they chose not to. It's the same with the ideal "house of God" presented to us in the New Testament. Those who tend towards perfectionism find this very hard to cope with. It is indeed a tragedy, that so much Divine potential is as it were wasted, not realized, by our dysfunction. But none of this should take away from the personal reality of salvation and relationship with God which we each have. This is not to say that exposing abuse and dealing with it shouldn't happen. It should. But let's not feel that if justice isn't done, we are somehow without justice. We are the ultimately justified, and our standing before God's judgment seat is far more significant than our standing before that of mere humans.

Forgiving, Not Excusing

The Lord taught that our focus upon Him and His return should affect how we feel about others, even our enemies. Lk. 12:54-59 continues a theme of living appropriately to a belief that we shall all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. The Lord pictures us as walking to meet our judge, along with our adversary. And His parable assumes that we will automatically be found in the wrong, the case will go against us; and so therefore we better make peace with our adversary and drop the case. We are walking towards the day of judgment, our meeting with our Judge. The bottom line is that we should not be walking to judgment day carrying with us a case against our brother. Drop it, whatever it is. At least, in our hearts. It's simply impossible to live at peace with all- Paul spoke from much personal experience of living at peace with others inasmuch as it depends upon *us*: "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18). Again, this doesn't mean that abuse shouldn't be challenged and exposed. It should be. But we as sinners shouldn't be walking to judgment day carrying with us the weight of a case against our brother.

Nobody is perfect, neither is anyone wholly evil. Even those who have abused us. The strange mix of good and evil within us is what makes self-examination and self-management so difficult, and what so easily muddies human relationships. Like you and me, the abusers are composed of both flesh and spirit. They may live exemplary Christian lives in many areas; but when it comes to certain issues, which happen to concern *us*, their internal 'devil' comes out very strongly. Sadly, tragically, they tend to justify their sins of abuse as acts of righteousness; and this is where there arises the specter of systemic evil, the evil of a system which teaches men and women to do acts of rejection and harshness in the name of "defending the Truth", "upholding the Truth of Christ" and other such war cries. We will each come before the Lord in judgment, and realize how we too had some blind spots, some areas of terrible failure; partly from the weakness of the flesh, our lack of focus and faith; but also partly from our having been mistaught, our misunderstanding of what the life in Christ was all about. David prayed for forgiveness for his "secret faults", those sins he suspected he committed in ignorance (Ps. 19:12). If we pray this prayer as we should, and if it's really so that God's forgiveness of us is related to our forgiveness of others... then we really need to forgive our abusers. It is, finally, the only way for our own sanity and maturity. By doing so

we aren't stating anything about our abusers' final salvation nor standing with God- that is between Him and them. But for *us* to forgive them is important; and it is this which is, if you like, the ultimate counter-attack, our final victory over them and what they have done.

But forgiving them is not excusing them. If we confuse these two categories, we'll end up minimizing what they have done and are doing. We simply *must* forgive. The only option is revenge, against others or against ourselves. The pain the abuser causes you always feels heavier to you than it does to them. But let's also reflect that what we may consider as minor failings on our part toward another are felt as brutally heavy by them. Because of this, revenging pain never balances out. So... we simply must forgive, or else we will be caught up in ever more debilitating war within ourselves and with others. To say "they do what they do in misguided faithfulness to God" is to excuse sin; for the Lord commented that a time can come when those who kill us think they do God service. Perhaps we sometimes find forgiveness hard because we confuse it with excusing. Forgiving both others and ourselves requires us to be specific- she / he / I / they did this, that or the other sin. We don't just vaguely 'forgive', we must narrow down what we are seeking to forgive, to hard, actual specifics. All the time we're excusing the wrong others have done to us, we can't begin the process of healing. They have sinned; let's get it as straight as we must get the fact that we too have sinned. Blaming it on the church, on upbringing, on misunderstanding, is all very well- but it can never be allowed to obscure the reality of their sin. By making ourselves and others accountable for sin, not blaming it on anything else, we open up the possibility of forgiveness. We forgive people, and ourselves, for what is actually *done*, and not for who people *are* . Attempts to forgive the abusers or ourselves for who we *are* often end in miserable, depressing failure- because we were going for the wrong goal. It takes courage to be specific, not least because the self-righteous religious societies in which we live often unconsciously want us to live under an umbrella of permanent shame, to make them feel and look better. So, go for forgiveness. But be realistic. We will still have some anger and damage after achieving forgiveness. Probably we can only forgive both ourselves and others in dribs and drabs and not in the one-time magnanimous way that God does (for we are not God)... but all the same, forgiveness is an achievable goal. It's the ultimate sign of freedom, that we aren't going to be dominated by others' abuse, railroaded by the enormity of what they have done into the blind alley of unforgiveness. We are going to forgive, and thus be ultimately free and creative, after the Divine pattern in Christ.

Don't Demonize

As we've noted, our abusers aren't wholly evil. So we must beware of demonizing them. By sounding this caveat, I'm not for a moment suggesting that abuse doesn't take place. I know all too well that it does. But all the same, we need, I think, to be reminded: Don't demonize. And don't glory in a victim mentality, assuming some huge innate moral superiority against your abusers. We'll be assisted in this by appreciating that the same basic tendencies are within us as within the most outwardly evil of people. Our experiences of Hitlers, Stalins etc. should make us look within ourselves rather than demonize them. One only has to skim read Robert Simon's *Bad Men Do What Good Men Dream Of* - and look seriously and honestly into our own hearts- to see that we're all tempted to be the same desperate criminals. I know that some readers will object to this suggestion... but I can only appeal to your brutal honesty about the thoughts and desires that at times skate through your mind. "Everybody always talks about changing the world, but no one ever talks about changing himself", so Leo Tolstoy observed somewhere in *War And Peace*. And it's true. Solzhenitsyn both experienced and reflected upon abuse more than most; and his conclusion is the same: "If only it were all

so simple! If only... it were necessary only to separate [evil people] from the rest of us and destroy them! But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" (1). Psychologists have noted that most people will admit to feeling that someone or some system has been or is somehow against them; a child or teacher at school, a boss, a neighbour, a family member. We need to be aware that in identifying some church members as abusers, we run the risk of merely giving way to this same basic tendency which is within most of us. By demonizing in this way, it enables us to take out our anger, our dysfunctions, our gut dislikes of others- in the name of God, in the name of participating in a battle against 'abuse' in which we nobly take the side of Jesus. We tend to assume that God takes sides in all the squabbles which occur here on earth- and, of course, we like to think that He is on *our* side, and therefore our opponents are against God and therefore particularly awful and worthy of our best hatred. Shakespeare's Macduff reflects our assumptions in this area: "Did heaven look on and would not take their part?". It's this presumption that God is on our side in matters great and small, from a squabble with the neighbour to our fight against abusers, which can lead to the arrogance which is every bit as bad as perpetrating abuse. Remember how the prophets condemned Israel's leaders for pride as well as abuse.

Final Thoughts

Don't take out your hurt upon others who aren't directly responsible for the abuse perpetrated. Let's not get like the shop assistant who yells at her customers because she was yelled at by her partner over breakfast. On the other hand, those who are accessories to the abusers, who give them power because of their own weakness and refusal to stand for principle... they too have much to answer for, and cannot walk away wide eyed and innocent from what has been perpetrated. Your feelings about them will have some legitimacy. Just as if you are violently robbed, your anger will be more against your two 'friends' who stood next to you and did nothing, than against the robber. But remember... you too are weak, you too go with the flow all too easily, unthinking for the implications of your inaction, in so many matters great [to others] and small [to you]. So- stand up against inaction, against sins of omission. For this is exactly the environment which allows spiritual abuse to flourish.

Spare a thought for the abusers. They likely have moments of remorse, or at least doubt as to the correctness of the way they are taking. Those moments must be lonely for them, until they rush to the internet or telephone in order to find reassurance in their chosen path from the (bad) example of others. Lewis Smedes makes an acutely powerful observation: "The pain we cause other people becomes the hate we feel for ourselves. For having done them wrong" (2). Our abusers on some level of their consciousness do know what they are doing. The more we feel sorry for them, the more we pray for them in their self-hatred, the more we are mastering them and what they have done to us.

Finally. Keep your focus upon the Lord Jesus. He gave us each something of His, which we are to trade, use, develop, and we will give account of our stewardship when He returns. In that day, it will be quite inappropriate to excuse ourselves by saying "Well, he did this... they did that... she did that". The intensity of the Jesus-me relationship- and it's pretty intense because "the son of God loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*"- means that our response must be to *Him*, without letting he / she / they hinder it or the quality of it. Don't let them win. Triumph over them in the life of love, joy and forgiveness. For it is this which is, as we've said, the ultimate counter-attack, our final victory over them and what they have done.

Notes

(1) Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Monad Press, 1974) p. 168.

(2) Lewis Smedes, *Forgive And Forget* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) p. 72.

7.5 " Shouldn't we do more for the world?" : Is The Social Gospel Biblical?

It is often questioned whether we are correct to place our emphasis on preaching and Bible study, and instead perhaps we ought to concentrate on reaching out to help the suffering in this world, preaching a social Gospel. But is this Biblical? There is no doubt that we have a duty to do good to all men, to show the love and grace of Christ to all men and all things we come into contact with in life- even animals. Our experience of that love, so great, so free, ought to influence us even down to our body language and the way we walk. And yet the question is, what should be the balance in our lives; should we concentrate mainly on loving the brotherhood, or showing love to the world generally? On preaching the social Gospel, or feeding the starving?

There has been a very distinct trend in our community with regard to our social conscience about the world around us. When confronted with flood ruined Bangladesh, or drought smitten Somalia, the traditional response was firstly sorrow and sympathy, but then a most definite feeling that it was not for us to do anything practical to alleviate this suffering. " Let the potsherd of the earth strive with the potsherd of the earth" ; " let the dead bury their dead; but go thou and preach the Gospel" were verses oft quoted at church business meetings (and the like) in my youth when these issues were raised. But many in our community now seem to have developed a genuine conscience about the world's suffering, feeling that as God has reached out into our spiritually desperate lives, so we should be moved with compassion by the world's sufferings. The following are purely personal responses to our dilemma (if it is that).

- If we are the seed of the woman, we will be in constant, aggressive conflict with the seed of the snake; the world, structured as it is around the " Lusts" of human nature. Is this Biblically compatible with preaching a social gospel? In Christ we will have peace; but in the world, we will have tribulation, even as Christ did. Our pity for the world, the good deeds we should do to all men, must not lead us to *love* the world. For if we do that, it is impossible for us to love the Father (1 Jn. 2:15). The 'devil' refers both to our own internal lusts, and the world at large. The world is in our hearts, in this sense (Ecc. 3:11). Thus " the world" is paralleled with " the lust thereof" (1 Jn. 2:17). As there is a most pronounced conflict within our own beings between flesh and spirit, so there will be between us and the world. We are not to *agape* this world, to love with the love of Christian brethren. The *agape* we have for our brethren is something very special, and must not be shared with the world; if we do so, the love of the Father is not in us, because we are declaring the world to be the ecclesia (1 Jn. 2:15). It cannot therefore be true that we ought to show the same *kind* of love to the world as we show to our brethren.

- Yet God loved the world- through giving Christ to enable their spiritual salvation. " God *so* loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (Jn. 3:16) implies that the love of God for the world was channelled through the work of Christ. Biblically, this Gospel was not a

social Gospel. Note the import of the word " *so* " - not 'so much', but 'so, in this way...'. There are just so many connections between the love of God and the death of Christ, that it is easy to overlook them. For example, " God loved us, and sent His Son to be a propitiation for our sins...hereby ('in this') we perceive the love of God, because he laid down his life for us" (1 Jn. 4:10; 3:16). The love of God is " *in* Christ Jesus" . Likewise, the love of Christ is so often linked with His death. Christ " Loved us, and washed us from our sins" (Rev. 1:5). He gave His life so that the world might have life (Jn. 6:51); and yet He gave His life for *us*. My conclusion is that the love of Christ was not for the whole world, or for the physical planet. It was for us whom God has called out of this world to benefit from the Lord's sacrifice; for us who *to God*, from His perspective, constitute " the world" with which He deals. " The world" in John's Gospel often means the Jewish world. The Lord died for *their* salvation fundamentally (Gal. 4:5), and we only have access to this by becoming spiritual Israel through baptism.

- If we are to show the love of God to the world, this will primarily (but not exclusively) be in terms of our spiritual help towards them, rather than a social gospel. Our response to God's love in Christ will also be expressed by laying down our lives " for the *brethren*" . The next verse helps define this as material, practical help (1 Jn. 3:16,17). Paul's conception of love to the world around him was clearly rooted in the need to preach to them, rather than provide material help. He felt he had a debt to love others (Rom. 13:8); yet also a debt to preach (Rom. 1:14). His debt was to love in the form of preaching. There is a trend within our community which deserves thought: as increasing numbers are baptized in poorer countries, far outstripping growth in the wealthier areas, the material need of our brotherhood is increasing. As opportunities for witness open, our missionary brethren are faced with colossal numbers of men and women who earnestly desire to be taught the Truth. But those very brethren (and sisters) are operating to tight budgets which are scarcely adequate. My conclusion is that in our financial giving, we should firstly remember the desperate needs of many of our brethren. But again, I emphasize, this is *not* to say that there is no place for showing practical love and good deeds to the world at large.

- Let us not be wilfully ignorant of the fact that 'giving to charity' as part of a social gospel has an element of appealing to the flesh in it. Now I am not saying that I am even tempted to suspect any of us as having this motivation in our giving to the surrounding world; I simply raise it as a caveat. And let's not equate true love with the mere act of giving aid to charities. We can give all our goods to feed the poor, but lack true love; the life of love, the love of Christ permeating all our being (1 Cor. 13:3 may well have been written by Paul with his mind on some in the early Jerusalem ecclesia, who *did* give all their goods to the ecclesial poor, but lacked a true love, and returned to Judaism). The 'world' is structured around the desires of the flesh, being comprised of people who are devoted to the selfishness of human nature. Whether nominally 'Christian' or not, they do not have the *Biblical* attributes of " love, joy, peace" etc.- for these are *fruits* developed by the word of Truth acting upon the mind of the believer. All those outside of Christ are active enemies of God, provoking His anger (Eph. 2:3-15), labourers standing spiritually idle in the market place (Mt. 20:7). For this reason, we should not necessarily feel 'shamed' by the example of their charity. The 'world' raises huge amounts of money to help its own people. For a good cause, some would even dare to die. But does this not exemplify the Lord's words, when He spoke of how the world loves its own? None of these are reasons *not* to give to charities. But we *must* watch our motivation; for it is evident that *we* should have different motives in our giving, to those of the 'world' around us.

- The Old Covenant's command to love one's neighbour as oneself was in the context of life in Israel. One's "neighbour" referred to others belonging to the Covenant people; not to those in the 'world' of the surrounding nations. New Testament quotation of this command totally supports this view; under the New Covenant, we must love those *within the ecclesia* as we love ourselves (Gal. 5:14). 1 Cor. 6:1 (R.V.) speaks of brethren within the ecclesia as "neighbours". Again, this is not in itself proof that we should not give to (e.g.). famine relief. But it surely indicates that we are misguided in thinking that such action is fulfilling this command. However, there is copious evidence within the Law that Israel were to be considerate and concerned for the Gentile world around them. But there is no Biblical evidence that Israel preached a social Gospel to them.

- The parable of the good Samaritan needs careful reflection before we see in it a command to concentrate on giving to the world. It is used as Biblical evidence for a social gospel. The Samaritan was "neighbour unto him that fell among thieves" (Lk. 10:36)- i.e. the story shows how he fulfilled the command to love our neighbour. We have shown above that this command refers to love for those related to the Covenant. The Samaritan represented Christ. The mugged man was those He came to save; not the world generally, for they have not all accepted His healing. We must go and do likewise; in showing the love of Christ to the world. But we have earlier defined that love as being paramountly *spiritual*, and relating to the work of the cross. The parable was teaching the inability of the Law to save man *spiritually*, not materially.

- The Samaritan "was moved with compassion" by the man's (spiritual) state (Lk. 10:33 R.V.). This is the same phrase as used concerning how Christ "was moved with compassion" by the multitudes. The connection with the good Samaritan parable would invite us to read the Lord's compassion as fundamentally *spiritual*. The reason for the miracles was to confirm the spoken word (Mk. 16:20), to lead men to see the wisdom of the message they were validating (Mk. 6:2). Are there any examples of Christ doing miracles for reasons unconnected with preaching? They often (always?) had symbolic meaning; and were designed to inculcate faith (Jn. 20:31) and repentance (Mt. 11:21). And in any case, His miracles were largely to benefit the Covenant people, or those closely associated with them. The apostles didn't do mass benefit miracles (e.g. feeding thousands of people) to back up their preaching in the Gentile world; even though they had the power to do "greater works" than did the Lord (Jn. 14:12). 'Charitable' giving ought to be *associated* with preaching, surely, if we are to follow the example of Christ's compassion with the multitudes. In practice, the work of providing welfare and conducting fresh preaching is done by the same brethren in the mission field.

- We must be careful what we mean when we feel that God looks down upon the human condition, and is "moved with compassion" towards men, and therefore comes to their aid. Scripture abounds with examples of God doing this for *His people*. But not once do we read of God physically intervening to alleviate the distress of, e.g., an earthquake which has affected unenlightened people, and sharing some kind of social Gospel with them. Indeed, should He do so, one is faced with the paradox of God bringing that "evil" upon those people, and then being moved with compassion and partially reversing that "evil". The Spirit teaches that in our time of dying, human beings are the same as animals. It is tragically sad that animals are tortured and exterminated. But is there any higher degree of tragedy, in God's sight, in the suffering of unenlightened men? Because the Reubenites cried to God in faith, "there fell down many slain (of the Hagarites), because the war was of God" (1 Chron. 5:22). And consider how millions live and die or die in the womb, with God's full knowledge

and allowance, never to have the invitation of the Gospel. Short of believing in a universal 'second chance', we just have to accept that human death does not mean to God what it does to us as men. A lion will be more touched by the sufferings of its fellow lion, than it will be by the cries of a lion-mauled human being. Likewise, we are more touched by the sufferings of our fellow man than by those of other species. But *is* there any evidence that *God* sees human suffering differently from that of the animal world? Is the *manner* of death significant to God? These are honest questions.

- The whole language of our redemption and deliverance in Christ is based upon Israel's deliverance from Egypt. God was moved by the distress of those whom He was going to call into special relationship with Him; and therefore He was moved with compassion towards them. He did all that was possible to deliver them. But God was evidently not 'moved' in the same way by the sufferings of the Egyptians. The plagues brought about the equivalent devastation of the worst floods, earthquakes or volcanoes ever shown on TV. The economy was ruined, disease rampant (think of the plagues of blood, lice and flies, not to mention the huge numbers of rotting carcasses). This was all consciously brought about by God. And think of the death of the firstborn. 'All somebody's sons', as the Charity appeals often say; from sweet babies of happy young parents, to the strapping young men who were the pride and joy of middle age. It does us no harm to think of the physical and emotional carnage which *God* wrought. And the Israelites hardly had a whip round to help the poor old Egyptians who were in such a desperate crisis; in fact, God told them to do just the opposite. We must be fully aware that Israel's position exactly typifies our own. We have left the world of Egypt, a world which is heading for a like destruction. Those 'Egyptians' who wish can decide now to escape- by associating themselves with God's people. Indeed, the Mosaic Law stressed that any who showed any inclination to do this were to be treated with the utmost generosity; yet there seems to be no explicit command under the Law to encourage Israel to get involved in alleviating the problems of the surrounding nations. God's own Son made the point that He did not pray for the world, but for His own people (Jn. 17:9). The way He tells the Father this in prayer would seem to emphasize how strongly He felt about this. The commands to pray for the world are in the context of requesting that human Governments might permit God's people to live spiritual lives among them (Jer. 29:7; 1 Tim. 2:2); not for the Governments etc. in themselves.

God's World

The implication of some of the points listed above is that God is believer-centric; to Him, His 'world' is the believers, and the rest count for almost nothing, relatively speaking ⁽¹⁾. The following Biblical evidence needs to be considered before we opt for a social gospel. He speaks of "Macedonia and Achaia" as meaning 'the believers in Macedonia and Achaia' (Rom. 15:26). The whole creation which praises God is defined as God's saints (Ps. 145:10 NIV). God thereby reveals Himself as 'believer-centric'. Thus often Scripture speaks as if "all men" will be raised. Rom. 2:6-9 speaks of "every man" being judged at the second coming. We know that literally "all men" will not be. But the believers are "all things" to God and Christ. The head of "every man is Christ" only in the sense that "every [believing] man" has this relationship with Him. "Every man" to God is therefore those in Christ. "All" shall be made alive at the Lord's return- i.e. all "that are Christ's" (1 Cor. 15:22,23). "All things" is a title of the church in Ephesians and Colossians, and "any man" evidently means 'any believer' in 1 Cor. 8:10. "All men...every man" means 'all that believed' in Acts 2:44,45. Christ died a ransom "for all", and yet more specifically "a ransom for many", i.e. not all (1 Tim. 2:5 cp. Mk. 10:45). The Lord said that He did not pray for the world (relevant to joining

in 'days of prayer' etc.?), but for " *all mine*...them which thou gavest me out of the world" . The believers will " all" be raised. There are times, too, when Paul speaks as if " all" who are raised will be saved. Again, we know that this is not true. But once we appreciate that he saw " all" men as referring to the faithful, problems disappear. The " every man" who had material gave it for the construction of the tabernacle, according to Ex. 35:23; although this " every man" is elsewhere defined as " every one whom his spirit made willing" to donate (Ex. 35:21). In like manner, Rom. 3:19 (A.V.mg.) defines " all the world" as those " subject to the judgment of God" - which is only the responsible. " Every knee shall bow to me...every tongue shall confess...so then every one *of us* shall give account" (Rom. 14:11,12) is another example- 'all men', 'every man' means 'every one of us the responsible'. "The dead" will be judged (Rev. 11:18)- not everyone who ever died, but the dead who, God counts responsible. " The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men" (Tit. 2:11)- certainly not to every human being that has ever lived; but to the " all men" of the new creation. The Lord tasted death " for every man" (Heb. 2:9)- for every one who has a representative part in His sacrifice through baptism. Christ " reconciled the world" in that He obtained forgiveness for *us* (2 Cor. 5:19)- *we* are " the world" which was reconciled, we are the " all things" purged by His blood (Heb. 9:22). "The Gentiles" is put for 'the Gentiles who believe' (Rom. 2:14; 3 Jn. 7). 1 Cor. 4:9 seems to make a difference between " the world" and " men" , as if Paul is using " the world" here as meaning 'the world of believers'. The Lord was " a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:6), although it was only us, the redeemed, who were ransomed by Him out of sin's slavery (Lk. 1:68; Tit. 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18; Rom. 8:13; Rev. 5:9; 14:3,4). The " all men" of *our* 'world' should therefore be limited to those who constitute *God's* world, as here defined. The real solution to being 'too inward looking' is to go out into the highways and byways, and compel men to come in to the covenants of promise.

The risen Lord has filled " all things" with His spirituality, " the whole universe" , i.e. the believers (Eph. 3:19; 4:10 NIV). This is based on God's attitude in the OT; that Israel were His people, His 'world', and the other nations were " not a people" ; effectively, they weren't people, in God's eyes (Dt. 32:21). Is this Biblical evidence for a social Gospel? These words are true of all those who are out of covenant relationship with Him, including those who have fallen away. Thus Elisha told the apostate king of Israel: " Were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat the king of Judah, *I would not look toward thee, nor see thee*" (2 Kings 3:14). In some passages, it would seem that God's word is written specifically for His people, and has no meaning for the world at large- e.g. 2 Tim. 1:9,10: " Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling...which was given us in Christ...but is now made manifest [unto us] by the appearing of *our* Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death [*for us*], and hath brought life and immortality to light [*for us*] through the Gospel" .

Is. 60:2 speaks of the sun rising upon Zion- as if Zion was the whole earth to God. Ps. 89:12 shows how God reckons the points of the compass with reference to Jerusalem: " The north and the south thou hast created them: Tabor (in the west) and Hermon (in the east) shall rejoice" . Likewise " the sea" is often used to show that the west is intended, the Mediterranean being to the west of Jerusalem (Num. 2:18; Josh. 16:5,6; Ez. 42:19). " The east" is put for Persia, Media and the lands east of Jerusalem (Ez. 25:4; Mt. 2:1); " the south" for Egypt, south of Canaan (Jer. 13:19; Dan. 11:5), or for the negev, the hill country south of Jerusalem (Gen. 12:9; 13:1,3; Ez. 20:46,47); " the north" is put for Babylon (Jer. 1:13-15 etc.). This would all explain why Is. 20:6 (Heb.) describes Israel as an island in God's eyes. This, to Him, was 'the world'. Abraham was promised eternal inheritance of Israel, but Paul saw this as inheritance of "the world" (Rom. 4:13).

However, there is a strong and powerful corollary to all this. Those among God's people who break their covenant with Him, He sees as the world. Thus Moses prophesied of an apostate Israel: " They have dealt corruptly with [God], they are no longer his children because of their blemish; they are a perverse and crooked generation" (Dt. 32:5 RSV). These very words are used by Paul regarding the Gentile world (Phil. 2:15). Apostate Israel are the pagan world ⁽²⁾; and therefore the rejected at the day of judgment will be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). The disciples were to shake off the dust of their feet against unbelieving Israel (Mt. 10:14; Mk. 6:11; Acts 8:51), in allusion to the Rabbinic teaching that the dust of Gentile lands caused defilement. Israel who rejected the Gospel were thus to be treated as Gentiles. God sees the world as actively evil: " this present evil world" (Gal. 1:4), under His condemnation (1 Cor. 11:32); he that is not with the Lord Jesus is seen as actively against Him, not just passively indifferent (Lk. 11:23). It is absolutely fundamental that our separation from this world is related to our salvation. The act of baptism is a saving of ourselves not only from our sins, but all from " this untoward generation" in which we once lived (Acts 2:40).

Throughout Scripture, the opposition between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God is highlighted. After the establishment of the first ecclesia in Jerusalem, the Acts record seems to emphasize the pointed conflict between the ecclesia and the world. Being " of one accord" was a hallmark of the early brethren (Acts 1:14; 2:1,46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25); but the world were in " one accord" in their opposition to that united ecclesia (Acts 7:57; 12:20; 18:12; 19:29).

We ought to be deeply, deeply moved by the fact that we have been called into God's world, into His sphere of vision. He even created the different types of meats " to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth" (1 Tim. 4:3); they were made for us, not the world, and therefore *we* ought to give thanks for our food with this realization. Appreciating this is the most powerful motivator for us to be separate from this world. God destroyed Moab because they said that Judah was just like any other heathen nation (Ez. 25:8). Even though in reality this was true, this was so abhorrent for Yahweh to hear. There is a Biblical theme that the rejected saints will be punished along with the world around them (1 Cor. 11:32). If we are not separate from this world now, we will not be separated from them when the judgments fall. This was foreshadowed by the way apostate Israel were treated like the surrounding Gentile world in the time of their judgments (e.g. Jer. 4:7; Am. 9:7).

The love of God for " the world" was in giving Christ so that whoever believed in Him might have eternal life. Jn. 3:16 suggests a parallel between " the world" and whoever believes in Christ. This seems Biblical evidence to reject a social Gospel. Dan. 7:21 cp. 23 parallels the saints with "the whole earth". Christ died so that the sins of not only John and his readers might be forgiven, but also those " of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). If this means literally everyone, it would follow that God would give the whole world the opportunity to know His Son and repent, but He has not done this. It therefore follows that " the whole world" refers to those God has called to salvation. We are " all things" to Him, as He and the things of His Truth should be " all things" to us. The Lord died so that the world may have life (Jn. 6:51); but only those who eat His words and assimilate the true meaning of His cross will share this life; therefore " the world" refers to all who would believe. It is for them (us, by His grace), not even for those who respond but ultimately fall away, that the Lord gave His all. We are " the world" to Him. Let's not dilute the specialness of His love and the wonder of our calling to these things.

Notes

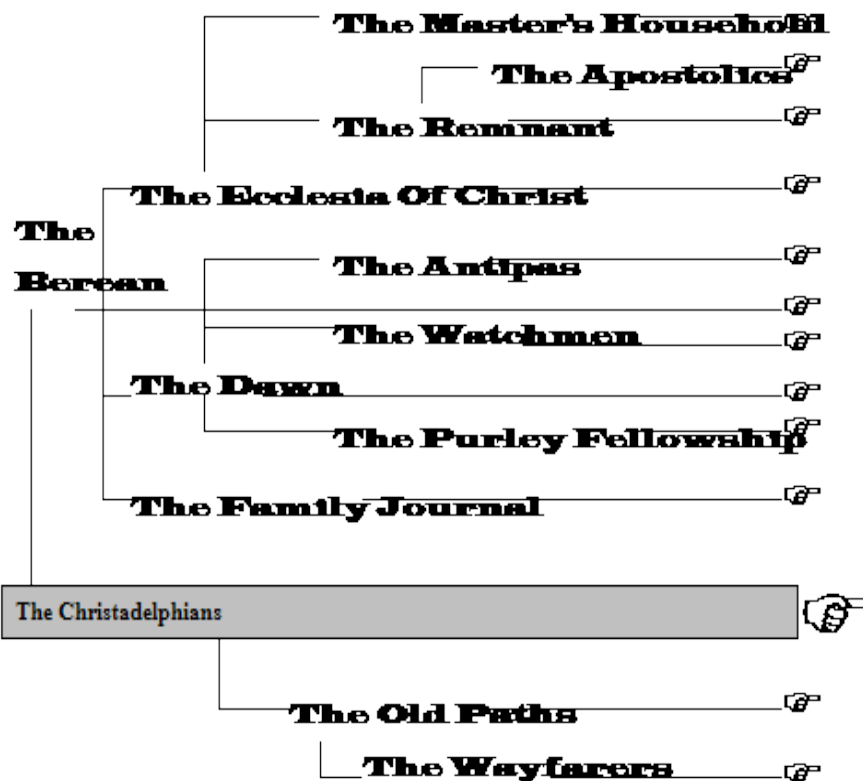
(1) This idea is also discussed in *The Language of God*.

(2) Many examples of this are given in *The Last Days* , Appendix 3.

7.6 " Who should I fellowship?" : Christadelphian Divisions

The average person who comes into contact with Christadelphians will have met up with the main, Central body of Christadelphians, numbering about 50,000 world-wide. However, there are a further 2,000 or so Christadelphians, divided up between a number of mutually exclusive 'fellowships'. Each of these fellowships believe the same, distinctive Christadelphian doctrines, but has chosen to place great emphasis on one or two non-fundamental issues, often relating to aspects of Bible teaching concerning marriage. They all disfellowship any of their members who break bread with members of any of the other groups, even if the individuals broken bread with do not themselves hold a different view to what they hold. The whole situation can become very confusing for those who are baptized by members of one of the smaller groups. The following chart illustrates the degree of fragmentation which has developed.

It must be emphasized that the *main*, central body of Christadelphians (numbering around 50,000 and accounting for the vast majority of Christadelphians) is *not* divided in this way. The sad picture presented below is, unfortunately, incomplete. There are literally dozens of small break away groups, none of them numbering more than 20, who have separated from the above fellowships. These also preach, eager for converts. The smaller the fellowship and the more earnest the belief that only they are right, the greater the desire for members. This may account for the observation that the smaller the fellowship, the greater the emphasis on preaching. Sadly, as things stand at the moment, the Lord will find His household divided at His return. We each have a solemn duty to do all within our power to bring about at least some unity in the body, before that time comes.



The question arises: How ever did this fragmentation develop? The answer lies in the fact that all the break away groups have a view of fellowship which results in this kind of thing being inevitable. They insist that every member of their group believes the same thing even on matters which are not fundamental to the basic Gospel, and they disfellowship anyone who breaks bread with anyone who breaks bread with anyone who breaks bread with someone who may be in error. So, let's say there is a brother in South Africa in isolation, baptized by one of the smaller groups. He finds that living next door to him there are Christadelphians from the main, Central group, believing exactly as he does. He breaks bread with them, and is visited by a brother from (say) Kenya, who breaks bread with him. The small fellowship would disfellowship the South African brother, plus the Kenyan brother, and then anyone who would break bread with the Kenyan brother. If some Kenyan brothers won't agree to this, then they are disfellowshipped. If they then travel over the border to Uganda and break bread there, then the Ugandan brothers are disfellowshipped, etc. etc. This view of fellowship is bound to cause world-wide division- as it has done. You will notice from the above chart that nearly all of the break away groups have subsequently sub-divided, e.g. the Dawn subdivided into the Purley group, the Antipas and the Watchmen (and many other smaller groups). This endless subdivision is inevitable if the theory of 'guilt by association' is held- i.e., that the guilt of one erring member passes to another through the breaking of bread, and then from him to another, from him to another, etc.

Not only is this view of fellowship unworkable, it is *never* taught in Scripture. Whoever is baptized after believing the doctrines of the true Gospel is our brother or sister- regardless of who baptized them, or what name they go under. Titus was Paul's son " after the common (Gk. *koinos*) faith" (Tit. 1:1). The faith, the doctrines which he had been taught by Paul and been baptized upon believing, were what had made him Paul's son; and therefore that faith was what bound them together in fellowship. The Faith, as in the basic doctrines which make baptism valid, are the basis of our commonality, our fellowship, with each other. *All*

Christadelphians are united in understanding what those doctrines are. If someone is validly baptized, we have a solemn duty towards them. If we cannot love our brother whom we have seen, we cannot claim to love God our common Father, who is manifested through that brother (1 Jn. 4:20). Even if we think that there may be some bearing the name 'Christadelphian' who are *not* validly baptized, this doesn't take away from our unity with those who *are* validly baptized.

One Body

Unity and avoiding division is vital. Paul even argues in Gal. 2:2 that all his colossal missionary effort would have been a 'running in vain' if the ecclesia divided into exclusive Jewish and Gentile sections. This may be hyperbole, but it is all the same a hyperbole which reflects the extent to which Paul felt that unity amongst believers was vital.

There is *one* body- this is a very common theme in the New Testament. But it has strong Old Testament antecedents. There was one chosen nation, one land, one tabernacle, one altar, one covenant, one temple- unity was God's evident intention for His people even in Old Testament times. Israel were redeemed from Egypt as one family (Am. 3:1). The earliest anticipation of the one body was the fact that man and woman become one flesh / body in the marriage process (Gen. 2:17). If we are all members of the one body, this fact requires us to strive for unity with each other. We can't just sit back and think 'OK, so there's one body'; rather like a married couple can't just say they are one because they are "one flesh". They must work on it if they want to be truly one. And likewise with the one body of Christ.

Throughout the Law of Moses, the unity of Israel was emphasized. Moses in his last great speech as recorded in Deuteronomy seems to have purposefully confused his use of "ye" [plural] and "thee" [singular] in addressing them; as if to show that they, the many, were also one body (e.g. Dt. 10:12-22; 11:1,2). Although God created the division between Israel and Judah as a punishment for their apostasy (cp. how He gave Egypt and the Shechemites a spirit of disunity likewise, Is. 19:1,2,14; Jud. 9:23), He never essentially recognized that division; for there was one Israel, one body. Indeed, He said that the division was the greatest tragedy to come upon His people (Is. 7:17). The way the new garment of Ahijah was torn up to symbolize the division, reflects the utter waste (1 Kings 11:29). For an outer cloak was a garment a man could wear for life; to have a new one was something significant. Significantly, the road to Jericho which features in the parable of the good Samaritan was the very dividing line between Judah and Ephraim (Josh. 16:1). The significance of this may be in the implication within the parable that Israel fell among thieves, needing the Messianic grace and rescue, as a result of their division into two kingdoms. And so many other spiritual lives have been shipwrecked over the rocks of division. Indeed, the Greek words for "division" and "stumbling block" are related; divisions are a stumblingblock to so many, even if they externally remain within their faith communities.

There is much emphasis on the ultimate union of Israel and Judah at the second coming (e.g. Jer. 3:18; Ez. 37:16,19; Hos. 1:18; 10:11; Zech. 9:13:). The division was evidently a source of concern to the faithful at the time of the prophets, and the sadness of the division was deeply felt; as it is in the present body of Christ. There are many passages where God emphasizes the essential unity of Israel and Judah through the device of parallelism. Two examples:

" In *Judah*

is God known:

His name is great

In *Israel*" (Ps. 86:1).

" For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts

is the house of *Israel*,

and the men of *Judah*

His pleasant plant" (Is. 5:7).

By Judah and Israel working together, the whole people of God could have brought forth spiritual fruit: "Ephraim is an heifer that is taught, that loveth to tread out the corn...I will set a rider on Ephraim. Judah shall plow, Jacob [i.e. Ephraim, the 10 tribes] shall break his clods. Sow to yourselves in righteousness...break up your fallow ground'" (Hos. 10:11,12 RV). Ephraim, the 10 tribes, were the heifer, Judah the plough, and Messiah the rider. But both Ephraim and Judah would not. And so an environment for spiritual fruit wasn't possible, and Messiah at that time could not unite them in His service. In the nations around early Israel, the extended family was the basis of 'fellowship'. But this was not to be so amongst them. "Better is a neighbour that is near than a brother far off...there is a friend closer than a brother" (Prov. 27:10; 18:24). This was all in specific contradiction of the prevailing idea that your blood brother was the closest to you, no matter how far he was. All Israel were to see themselves as one family, one body. It was a radical idea. Our Christadelphian way of calling each other brother and sister ought to imply the same. For us, blood needn't be thicker than water. It all depends whether you have your brother or sister in Christ near at hand.

There is *one* fold, in which are all the true sheep (Jn. 10). If we all respond to the voice of the same Shepherd, we will be gathered together unto Him (Ez. 34:5). The most serious problem in the Corinth ecclesia, Paul said, was that they were divided (1 Cor. 1:18 Gk; and notice how he begins his letter by addressing this problem, not the incest, the drunkenness at the breaking of bread, the false doctrine...). We are all grafted into the same olive tree (Rom. 11). There is one vine, and we are the branches (Jn. 15). It's not that Christ is the trunk and we are the branches. We are the branches, we make up the vine, we make up the Lord Jesus. He spoke of " we..." to mean 'I...' in Jn. 3:11, such was the unity He felt between Himself and His men. He asked Saul " Why persecutest thou *me*?" (Acts 9:4), again identifying Himself with His people. The term " Christ" is even used of the believers, such is His unity with us (1 Cor. 12:12). Christ is not divided, and therefore, Paul reasons, divisions amongst brethren are a nonsense. *Christ is not divided, and therefore neither should we be* (1 Cor. 1:13; 3:3). Let's remember this powerful logic, in all our thinking about this issue. Paul even goes so far as to suggest that if we do not discern the body at the breaking of bread, if we wilfully exclude certain members of the body, then we eat and drink condemnation to ourselves. This is how serious division is. The devil's house is divided (Mt. 12:25,26); Christ is not divided (1 Cor. 1:13 s.w.). We were called to the Gospel *so that* we might share in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ- i.e. fellowship with Him and His Father, and with all the others within His body (1 Cor. 1:9,10). If we accept that brethren and sisters are validly baptized into and remain within His body, then we simply *must* fellowship with them. Should we refuse to do this, we are working against the essential purpose of God- to build up the body of His Son now, so

that we might exist in that state eternally. Causing division within the body is therefore a sin which may exclude us from the Kingdom (1 Cor. 11:19 alludes Mt. 18:7). To refuse to fellowship a brother is to effectively say that he is not within the Lord's body; for when we break bread, we show that we are one bread and one body (1 Cor. 10:16,17). And as we condemn, so we will be (Mt. 7:1). The purpose of the cross was to gather together in one all God's children (Jn. 11:52), that the love of the Father and Son might be realized between us (Jn. 17:26). If we support division, we are denying the essential aim of the Lord's sacrifice.

The Lord Jesus spoke of how "I am come to send fire on earth [after the pattern of Elisha against apostate Israel]...I am come to give...division" (Lk. 12:49,51). He parallels the fire of condemnation with division. And yet He says that this figurative fire is "already kindled". If we are divided willingly, of our creation, then we stand self-condemned. This is how serious this matter is. I fear, really fear, that in the day of final account it may be that a brother or sister has lived separately from the world, believed all the right things, and yet his or her divisiveness means that they are condemned together with the immoral and the worldly. A divided house is the characteristic of Satan's house or kingdom, and it will fall- just as the house built on sand fell at the day of judgment (Lk. 11:17,18). This doesn't mean, though, that just because our community is divided therefore the Christadelphians are 'satan's kingdom'. Those who leave us in despair at our divisiveness never find an undivided church, until they fellowship only with themselves. The Lord taught that an inevitable by-product of His Gospel was that He would send division, often within families (Lk. 12:51-53). To be unwillingly caught up in a divided house / family is not, therefore, a sin or a sign of our personal condemnation. There must be schisms amongst us, that they might make manifest who the faithful are, by their attitude to them.

If there are divisions, then it is evident that they only exist in the minds of Christadelphians- not in that of God, for whom there is only *one* body. If we admit that our brother is validly baptized and *in* Christ (i.e. a Christadelphian), then we are intimately connected with him, regardless of what his background, colour, language, geographical location etc. may be. This is one of the finest mysteries of fellowship in Christ: that we are so inextricably linked: " We, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom. 12:5). We enter into the one body by correct baptism into the body of Christ. Our baptism was not only a statement of our relationship with the Lord Jesus; it is also a sign of our entry into the body of the Lord Jesus, i.e. the community of believers, the one ecclesia (Col. 1:24). Members are added to the church through baptism (Acts 2:41,47; 5:14; 11:24); thus baptism enables entry into the one body of Christ. Consider carefully how that whoever is properly baptized is a member of the one body, and is bound together with all other members of that body: " As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one spirit are we all baptized into one body...for the body is not one member, but many" (1 Cor. 12:12-14). Paul, in his relentless manner, drives the point home time and again. He goes on to reason that just because the hand says it isn't of the body, and won't co-operate with the feet, this doesn't mean that it *therefore* isn't of the body. And so it is with those like the Dawn fellowship who say they have broken away from Christadelphians; because they say they are not of the body doesn't mean they are not of the body. We are called to the hope of the Kingdom " in one body" (Col. 3:15); all who receive the call of the true Gospel are in the same one body. There is one body, based around sharing the one faith, one hope, understanding of the one Father and Son, having participated in the one baptism (Eph. 4:4-6). So whoever believes the doctrines of the basic Gospel and has been baptized and walks in Christ, we have a duty (and should have a desire) to fellowship. The need for unity amongst us is so very often stressed (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:10; Rom. 15:5,6; Phil. 2:2;

Eph. 4:31,32; Col. 3:12-15). The essential divide is not between Christadelphians, but between Christadelphia and the world. James urged the divided church of the first century to remember that God had visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people; he said this in the context of a conference seeking to unite factions within the brotherhood. His idea was clearly to put the whole debate into perspective- the Gentile believers were called out of the world, and therefore ought to be fellowship by those who had likewise left the world.

Fellowship In The Body

The declaration that we are in the one body is shown in terms of breaking bread together. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion (the sign of sharing in) the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread. Behold Israel after the flesh: are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?" (1 Cor. 10:16-18). All who share in the saving work of the Lord Jesus by true baptism into Him ought to break bread together. In the same way as the Jews were connected with the altar by reason of eating what was upon it, so all who are connected with the Christ-altar (Heb. 13:10) show this by eating of the memorial table. If we deny the breaking of bread to brethren, we are stating that they are outside covenant relationship with God, that they have no part in Israel. The Lord Jesus reconciled all true believers unto God "in one body by the cross" (Eph. 2:16). All who are reconciled by the Lord's sacrifice are therefore in the one body, and therefore we have a duty to fellowship with others in the one body. If we refuse to do this, we in some way attempt to nullify the aim of the cross. He died in the way that He did in order that the love which He had showed might be manifested between us (Jn. 17:26). To break apart the body is to undo the work of the cross. And yet, as a sad, wise old brother once remarked under his breath, "it's a shattered cross".

It is God's intention that "there should be no schism in the body" (1 Cor. 12:25). If we refuse to break bread with validly baptized, good living brethren- then we are working against God. And if we then go on to disfellowship anyone who will not agree with our opinion on a brother, we are doing just what Diotrephes is condemned for doing: "Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence...receiveth us not...and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, *and forbiddeth them that would, casting them out of the church*" (3 Jn. 10,11). Now this is exactly the position of the minority fellowships. If a member breaks bread with someone in another fellowship, even if they believe the same things, then they are disfellowshipped. And if another member will not accept this disfellowship, then they *too* are "cast out of the church". This is the big mistake: a sincere brother breaks bread with another brother, who doesn't hold or live false doctrine- and he is disfellowshipped. We should never hold a view of fellowship which allows this to happen. The bread which we break is a symbol not so much of the blood-covered body which hung on the cross, as of the body of Christ, the one ecclesia. The physical body was not broken; but we break the loaf to show how we being many each have our part in that one loaf of Christ. Paul lays down quite clearly the blasphemy of breaking bread without respecting the Lord's body. In the context, the Corinthians were divided and hateful against each other. When they broke bread, therefore, they were abusing the Lord's body. Whenever we break bread, we show our fellowship with all members of the body- both geographically, and also over time. To accept that a brother is a valid member of the body but not to break bread with him is therefore a contradiction in terms.

It is worth reflecting that all who will be in the Kingdom are in the one body. Therefore that

body exists, in God's eyes, not only over space, but also over time. Both Moses and Jesus were faithful in God's house, "whose house are we" (Heb. 3:5,6), as if we were actually His house then as much as now. We will all be saved through our identification with Christ's body. The Law encouraged each man to "enjoy the inheritance of his fathers" through only marrying within the tribe, to encourage this sense of unity with earlier believers (Num. 36:8). There are even examples of where the individual Israelite had the actions of the body of Israel in the past imputed to him (Dt. 1:26; 5:2; 29:1). This isn't 'guilt by association', but rather an example of the ineffable unity of all God's people, wherever and whenever they lived. Thus the most lonely individual can read the historical records of God's people in the past and feel a true sense of community with the people of God, knowing that these things are his very own personal legacy and spiritual inheritance. The full beauty of unity will only be appreciated fully in the Kingdom; Zechariah was given the vision of the unified candlestick after awaking from a figurative death (Zech. 4:1,2). And yet there is also wonderful evidence of the height of unity that was achieved amongst some even in this life. Paul sincerely felt the joy of others as being his personal joy (Rom. 12:15 cp. 1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 2:3). Because we are in one body, we rejoice with those who rejoice. "We are partakers of *your* joy", Paul could write. The comfort which Titus felt was that which Paul felt (2 Cor. 7:6,7,13); Corinth's joy was Paul's (2 Cor. 7:13). This should ensure a true richness of experience for the believer in Christ, sharing in the joys and sorrows, the tragedies and triumphs, of the one body on the Lord. "He that separateth himself seeketh his own desire" (Prov. 18:1 RV). This says it all. Any separation from our brethren, whether it be from personal dislike of them or for fear of losing friends amongst others who order us to separate from them...is all ultimately selfish.

Dealing With Error

There is, however, another side to the question of fellowship. Light has no fellowship with darkness. Therefore there is an urgent need to separate from those brethren who in their doctrine or way of life have openly rejected the way of God's Truth, despite repeated and extensive dialogue with them. However, our responsibility for withdrawing fellowship cannot go beyond our local context. Each individual Israelite had to ensure that there was no leaven in his or her immediate area on Passover night (Dt. 16:4- "thee" singular). And it must constantly be stressed that we also have a responsibility to fellowship with *all* who believe and live the one Faith. Most importantly, we must not slip into a mindset which is endlessly concerned with the supposed weaknesses of others; if we must rebuke another, let us do it considering our own weaknesses (Gal. 6:1). And let us beware of the tendency to think that our brother has a splinter in his eye, when we have a plank in our own (Mt. 7:5). This little parable surely teaches that it is *likely* that whenever we see something wrong with another believer, we are similarly guilty; for a splinter is also made of wood like a plank is. The Lord is saying that it's highly likely that we are failing in a much greater manner in the very area where we see a slight weakness in our brother.

There are different levels of being out of fellowship with other believers. Any analysis of the NT teaching about ecclesial discipline will make this clear. Some brethren should be simply *avoided*, kept away from, not *necessarily* because they themselves are teaching any false doctrine (Rom. 16:17 Gk.). More seriously, 2 Thess. 3:15 speaks of some cases where we should not count a brother as an "enemy", 'an opposing one', but admonish him as a brother, while *separate* from him; whilst Mt. 18:17 describes other cases where the errant brother should be treated as we would a worldly Gentile (although note: "Let him be unto *thee*" singular; this is talking about personal decisions, not ecclesial withdrawal); and, going a stage

further, 1 Cor. 5:11 suggests we should not even keep social company with a brother who is involved in sexual perversion. These different levels of being 'out of fellowship' can be applied to the different level of separation there may be in practice between us and a false teacher, and those who perhaps in a misguided view of 'love' still tolerate him in fellowship. Even if we insist that Mt. 18:7 should be applied to someone, it must be noted that the Lord's attitude to tax collectors and Gentiles was to mix with them, even share table fellowship with them, with a burning desire to win them for His cause (Mt. 9:9; 10:3; 11:19; 28:19). It is no accident that all these passages in Matthew have some reference to Matthew the tax collector being called and saved by the Lord. Matthew is effectively saying under inspiration that we should treat the person we decide to relate to as a tax collector and Gentile just as he had been treated by the Lord's saving, calling grace.

" It is not my province to issue bulls of excommunication, but simply to shew what the truth teaches and commands. I have to do with principles, not men...All whom the apostles fellowshipped, believed [the truth]; and all in the apostolic ecclesias who believed it not - *and there were such*- had not fellowship with the apostles, but opposed their teachings; and when they found they could not have their own way, John says, 'They went out from us, for they- the antiChrist- were not all of us' (1 Jn. 2:19). The apostles did not chase them out, but they went out of their own accord, not being able to endure sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3). Then preach the word etc., and exhort with all long-suffering and teaching. This is the purifying agent. Ignore brother this and brother that in said teaching; for personalities do not help the argument. Declare what you as a body believe to be the apostles' doctrine. Invite fellowship upon that basis alone. If upon that declaration any take the bread and wine, not being offered by you, they do so upon their own responsibility, and not on yours" .

John Thomas, 1870.

Compare this with the Lord's rebuke of the immature disciples when they effectively demanded that John's disciples be disfellowshipped:: " Forbid not: for he that is not against us is for us" (Lk. 9:49).

However, *all* such separations are not in any sense *judging*. We learn from the parable of the tares that the Lord alone will uproot the tares, at the judgment. That same parable reveals that the Lord foresaw how His future servants would have a tendency to uproot other believers who were in fact acceptable to Him- and therefore they should be willing to allow the wheat and tares to grow together, even if they have misgivings about some in the ecclesia. Likewise Rom. 14:1 counsels us to receive him that is weak in the faith- as long as he is in the faith. Ecclesial discipline is not, therefore, 'rooting up' our brethren and condemning them. *We dare not* do anything of the sort- for the sake of our own eternal destiny, if nothing else. What we are doing is obeying the very basic Biblical command to separate from that which is wrong. Any such separations are brought forth from much sorrow; Corinth ecclesia were told that they should have mourned as they withdrew from one who had left the faith (1 Cor. 5:2). " The whole house of Israel" were commanded to " mourn" the necessary destruction of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:6). Samuel mourned and God repented when Saul was finally rejected (1

Sam. 15:35). Paul wept when he wrote about some in the ecclesia who had fallen away (Phil. 3:17-19). It must be said that 'block disfellowship'- the cutting off of hundreds of brethren and sisters because theoretically they fellowship a weak brother- hardly enables 'mourning' and pleading with each of those who are disfellowshipped.

The Necessity Of Separation

The Law taught, time and again, the vital need to make a difference between clean and unclean (Lev. 10:10)- *on pain of death*. Leaven (a symbol of false doctrine) within the house (cp. the ecclesia) at Passover time (cp. the breaking of bread) meant *death* (1 Cor. 5:7,8). The man who sacrificed an animal to Yahweh at a place other than " the tabernacle of the congregation" had to die (Lev. 17:4). This might sound rather severe: he was worshipping Yahweh, but he was to die because what he had done might encourage other Israelites to offer sacrifices to other gods (Lev. 17:5). So someone was disfellowshipped, not just because of their own physical action, but because of what it might lead to in its effect on others. Eli, although apparently righteous himself in many ways, was rejected specifically because " he frowned not" upon his sons' apostasy; he personally was counted as 'kicking' at God and profiteering from His sacrifices, even though he himself seems to have truly loved God (1 Sam. 2:29; 4:18). Because Eli wouldn't exercise ecclesial discipline, he was somehow seen as committing those very things which he failed to rebuke. The man who wouldn't discipline his wayward ox was to be treated like as if he had committed the crime the ox did, and therefore must die if the ox killed a man (Ex. 21:29). False doctrine is likened to leaven (Mt. 16:6); and the classic characteristic of leaven is that it spreads and influences. It must, *therefore*, be removed, Paul says (1 Cor. 5:8), in order to prevent others being influenced. However, note how he commanded the 'leaven' of the erring brother to be removed, not for his own sake- Paul couldn't be defiled by 'guilt-by-association' with him- for the brother's sake, and that of the others in the ecclesia (1 Cor. 5:7-9,12; 2 Cor. 7:12).

Separation is taught right through the type of Israel leaving Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea (cp. baptism). It is possible that Jn. 12:11 implies that the Lord's early converts left the synagogue membership roll of their own volition, once they perceived the Truth of Christ. And yet on the other hand, the Lord predicted that His people would be cast out of the synagogues, as if He was happy that Christianity remained a sect of Judaism until such time as Judaism wouldn't tolerate it. His prediction that His people would be beaten in synagogues (Mk. 13:9) implies they would still be members, for the synagogues only had power to discipline their own members, not the general public. It is sometimes wrongly suggested that we can stay with another church until we are pushed out of it. But according to so much Bible teaching, separation is a stage in our redemptive process, it is something we must work together with God to achieve; we can't, for the sake of our very salvation, remain in fellowship with the apostasy. Anyone who properly understands the true Gospel will know of themselves that they must leave an apostate church; they *know* this themselves, almost without having to be explicitly told. To argue that we are free to fellowship with the apostasy indicates a sad lack of understanding of the basic doctrines of the true Gospel. The danger of returning to the apostate religions was almost an obsession with Paul (Acts 20:31; Hebrews; and so many other letters). Yet he was inspired by the Spirit to have this attitude. If we allow false doctrine into our midst, we will not be held guiltless. The ecclesia is the temple of God. In the past, gatekeepers checked who came in (2 Chron. 23:19). Yet as time went by, the gatekeepers let Gentiles in, people who were not in God's covenant: and this was the basis of their condemnation (Ez. 44:7,8). Probably they did so in a misguided conception of " love" towards the surrounding world.

By nature, we are slow to accept that sin is serious, that it spreads, and that we must separate ourselves from it. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were both amazed at the extent of doctrinal corruption within Israel when it was revealed to them (e.g. Ez. 8:9; 13:22). Phinehas' wife honestly thought that her apostate husband and father-in-law were "the glory of Israel" (1 Sam. 4:21). Paul told Timothy to shun, to turn away from false teaching. He was shy to correct others, he didn't want to break fellowship when he should have done, his own awareness of his own sins held him back; whereas Paul says that these things should not stop him rebuking and upholding the Faith. We as spiritual Israel have just the same tendencies. The classic example is in the events of Num. 16. In an ecclesia of 2 million, only a dozen or so saw the depth of apostasy to which they had sunk (v.41). They found it hard to accept that Korah, Dathan and Abiram were as bad as God knew they were. Even Moses and Aaron struggled with it: "Shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?" . God's answer was basically: "Yes" . He told Israel to separate themselves from these men, or else they too would die. In similar vein, the prophets warned that not only the false teachers but those influenced by them would face judgment (Ez. 14:10; Hos. 4:5).

Had Phinehas not killed the man who was teaching that marriage out of the Faith was quite acceptable, God would have punished *all the people of Israel* (Num. 25:11). God is a jealous God, and Phinehas is commended for his jealousy for God in terms of separating from that false teacher. We naturally turn away from the seriousness of these things. Within our humanity, we would rather God were not like this. But there is a harder side of God, a side which we come to know, to respect, understand and appreciate as we grow spiritually. However, all this said, we must seriously ask whether the Christadelphian community has sunk to the level of apostate Israel. Even if we feel that some have, and we must separate from them, then those others who have not done so are still our brethren whom we ought to fellowship. We must speak out against weakness and corruption in the ecclesia. "They that forsake the law praise the wicked: but such as keep the law contend with them" (Prov. 28:4). We must earnestly contend for the defence of the Faith (Jude 3). "Thou shalt (frankly, NIV) rebuke thy neighbour, that thou bear not sin for him" (Lev. 19:17 AV mg.). But if we do contend with our erring brother- this doesn't of itself mean that we forbid him the emblems of the Lord's gracious forgiveness. And neither does it mean that we should disfellowship many other brethren who also are willing to contend with the weak brother, but would still share bread and wine with him.

It must also be remembered that although in some ways *all* Israel were guilty for the sins of some of them (e.g. Daniel and Ezra describe themselves as guilty members of a guilty nation), this 'guilt by association' could not be 'escaped' by leaving Israel, the covenant people. And neither did God ever hold any individual Israelite personally guilty of the sin of another Israelite (Dt. 24:16 etc.). Ultimately, God will not destroy the righteous with the wicked (Gen. 18:24), although the righteous in Israel sometimes suffered *the effect* of the nation's wickedness (cp. our suffering the *effect* of Adam's sin without being personally guilty of it). However, punishment for sin was not given indiscriminately. There was a time when one wicked city was punished by drought, but a more righteous city had rain (Am. 8:4). Let's ever remember what is the end, the goal, of the commandments to resist false teaching and practice: love out of a pure heart, a good conscience, and faith unfeigned (1 Tim. 3:3-5)- not bitterness, self-righteousness, smugness that we are pure and others aren't, thanking God that we are not sinners as other brethren are.

The Impact On The Ecclesia

Our attitude to the doctrines of the one Faith is our attitude to the body of Christ. Paul recounts how he destroyed "the faith" and also destroyed (same Greek word) "the church of God" (Gal. 3:13,23). If we weaken the doctrines of the One Faith, we are hurting our brethren and sisters, and therefore hurting the Lord Jesus. If new converts are not taught the Truth properly or taught with little emphasis on the importance of doctrine, the people they convert will not know the Truth, their baptisms will not be valid, and the Truth will be lost; but there will still be a community bearing the name "Christadelphian". If we do not disfellowship those with false doctrine, "many (*will*) be defiled" (Heb. 12:15); not 'run the risk of being defiled'; they *will* be defiled, and lose the Hope of the Kingdom. This is serious. Again, these principles were laid down in the Law: Dt. 29:22-28 threaten that *because* of the toleration of false teachers (v. 18-21), the land / Kingdom would be destroyed, the Truth would be lost, and Israel would no longer be God's Covenant people. Think about it. If a group of believers, on their own admission, tolerate false teachers, they will lose the Faith because of it. Silence means consent (Num. 30:12,15). Can you at least appreciate *why* we are so serious about rebuking false teachers? The sad story of natural Israel is written for our learning.

Let's summarize the last few paragraphs:

- We must separate from false doctrines and those who teach them. We each have a responsibility in this. But this must be balanced against a principle which is given even more Biblical emphasis: that we must fellowship all brethren who believe and live the One Faith, whatever their attitude to a third party may be.
- If we allow the Truth to be lost, we are harming our present and future brethren and sisters.
- However, on no account can we judge each other or even speculate as to the outcome of the judgment seat. But we each have a duty to separate from what is false.
- We cannot be responsible for the disfellowship of false teachers in areas outside our immediate concern.

A Balance

And yet we must be balanced. It is inevitable that there will be moral and doctrinal weakness in the ecclesia. The parable of the wheat and tares teaches this; and it is not for us to be over-concerned with identifying and rooting up the tares. That's surely the basic lesson the Lord was seeking to get over. If there is such a thing as guilt by association, then this parable becomes meaningless- for our eternal destiny would depend upon hunting out any contamination from our community. If we insist on having a "pure fellowship", aren't we being self-righteous? None of us is pure, we fail time and again. How then can we refuse to break bread with a brother who has broken bread with another brother whom we classify as 'impure'? Our salvation is ultimately by pure grace alone, not separation from false teachers. If other brethren will not separate as we think they should, our response should not be to separate from them, if they are validly in Christ. The prophets of the Old Testament remained within an apostate community to plead with Israel; the faithful of the New Testament remained within corrupt ecclesias like Corinth. Even there, in an ecclesia riddled with immorality, false doctrine, abuse of the breaking of bread etc., Paul makes a point of calling them his "brethren" (far more than in any other letter).

The greatest evidence against the view that we must maintain a totally pure fellowship is to be found in the letters to the seven ecclesias in Rev. 2 and 3. The "few" in Sardis who had not defiled their clothes attended an apostate ecclesia; and yet they are *not* seen as "defiled"

by the Lord Jesus (Rev. 3:4). This is proof positive that there is no such thing as guilt by association with erring members of an ecclesia. Those faithful members were not rebuked for not disfellowshipping the others. The Lord's criticism of the ecclesias seems to be that they had allowed false teaching to develop, rather than the fact they hadn't separated from it. Smyrna was an ecclesia which received no criticism at all from the Lord; they weren't rebuked for not disfellowshipping the other local ecclesias who were apostate (Rev. 2:8-11). The elders at Sardis, an ecclesia holding many false teachers, were told to strengthen what remained (the Greek is usually used regarding people)- they were to strengthen the faithful minority, but nothing was said about withdrawing from them because they fellowshipped weak brethren.

The Proverbs often taught the need to separate from and contend with those within Israel (cp. Christadelphians as spiritual Israel) who were astray (e.g. 14:7; 28:4). They were not to fellowship, not walk in common, with thieves (1:11,14; 28:24 LXX *koinonos*). But they were not guilty by reason of just being in the same community as those people; they were not to walk with them, not to fellowship them, in the sense of not behaving as they did. And there was never the hint that the faithful were to somehow leave the community of Israel because there were wrongdoers in it.

Practical Conclusions

If the above reasoning has been followed, we come to the following practical conclusions:

- We should fellowship with all who have been validly baptized into the one body of the Lord Jesus Christ and continue to hold the Faith. We cannot insist that complete agreement on every aspect of Christian life is essential for fellowship. Our fellowship is on the basis of the basic doctrines comprising the true Gospel.
- We should rebuke and discipline those in our ecclesia or immediate circle of contact who are weak in the faith.
- We cannot be responsible for the errors of distant brethren which we hear about. We should not listen to rumours concerning the failures of those we don't know.
- We should do all that we can to bring about unity between brethren and not disfellowship those who themselves hold and live the One Faith.
- Holding the above principles should not lead us to tolerate doctrinal weaknesses on fundamental issues. If we meet a Christadelphian we don't know, we should make sure he / she believes as we do, and then break bread with them. To refuse fellowship to another believer is a sin; but it is also wrong to open the table of the Lord to anybody, regardless of their belief and behaviour.

Appendix 1: Contradictions

I have no relish in pointing out the logical contradictions in the position of others. And yet I present the following as food for thought to the many sincere brethren and sisters in minority fellowships who really think that their position on fellowship is unassailably correct.

- If a brother marries a sister in another fellowship, this isn't treated as marriage out of the

Truth. Therefore we accept those in other fellowships as in Christ, not in the world. So, why not fellowship them?

- A member of (e.g.) the Dawn fellowship can attend the meetings of other fellowships, pray with them, write in their magazines, study with them, court them- but can't break bread with them. But this is surely using the breaking of bread as a political weapon. Fellowship consists in many things apart from breaking bread; thus the early believers continued in fellowship in breaking of bread, prayers, preaching and holding on to the doctrines taught them by the apostles (Acts 2:42 RV). The breaking of bread ought not to be singled out in the way it is.

- It has been observed that there are serious personal failures amongst *all* Christadelphians. Yet because they accept a certain position on (e.g.) fellowship and divorce, they remain in fellowship- whilst a member who is far more spiritual is disfellowshipped for breaking bread with another member of the One Body, who happens to be in a different fellowship.

- Brother Robert Roberts repeatedly went on record as accepting that there was an exceptive clause- i.e. that divorce and remarriage was possible where there has been adultery. If he were alive today, many of the minority fellowships would not accept him in fellowship; and yet they wish to give the impression that they have followed his teachings faithfully.

- The baptisms of other fellowships are usually accepted as valid. They are addressed as " brother" and " sister" (except by a minority of extremists). Generally, there is no re-baptism if someone from another fellowship wants to join one of the minority fellowships. So if it is accepted that the baptisms are valid, that they believe the Gospel and are true brethren in Christ, thereby members of the one body- why not fellowship them?

7.6.1 " Who is my brother?"

It is my observation that our walk in Christ is prone to deflection by two extremes: on the one hand, a liberal view of doctrine, coupled with a drifting towards the world until there is practically no difference between us and those from whom we have been redeemed; and on the other, a fanaticism regarding separation from others which is only making the 'Truth' which we hold an excuse for fuelling our own pride, passive bitterness and desire to stand in judgment over our brethren. I submit that to this category belongs the idea that because a brother has a different view to us on fellowship, we should therefore call him " Mr." rather than " brother" . We become a brother by reason of baptism into Christ, which is made valid by our belief of the true Gospel. Whoever is validly baptized is therefore our brother; it makes no difference who baptized him. There are, to use a phrase of Robert Roberts, " True principles and uncertain details" . If someone is baptized with a faulty understanding of basic principles, he is not a brother. But if he only differs from us on the details, then he is still a brother. We may consider him a mistaken brother, or an erring brother- but still a brother. Even if a brother is withdrawn from, " count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thess. 3:6,15). This ought to be plain enough. There are " brethren" who " err from the truth" , James says (5:19), and we must try to regain them. But they are still brethren, although erring brethren. Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Galatians frequently employ the word " brethren" , even though he accuses them of the most outrageous errors- rejection of the Lord's resurrection, drunkenness at the breaking of bread, harbouring an incestuous brother. Yet he still called them " brethren" . Even the brother actually guilty of incest is described as one that has the name of a brother, although he was not to be

fellowshipped (1 Cor. 5:11,19). Who is my brother? All who have been truly baptized into the brotherhood of Christ.

Whether someone is a brother or not depends on the validity of his baptism. In the same way as your natural brother is always your brother, whatever he might do, so a brother is always a brother. When a brother from another fellowship seeks to join us, we do not normally re-baptize him. Therefore we accept the baptisms of all who accept basic Bible doctrine as being valid, and therefore we recognize them as our brethren. If we do not call them brethren, we are questioning the validity of their baptism, and therefore they would need to be rebaptized if they wished to join us. This is utterly wrong. We do not have the right to say that somebody is no longer a brother of Christ because they disagree with us, neither can we imply that only the baptisms done by our community are valid. The validity of baptism depends on the state of our knowledge and attitude, not on the person who baptizes us. After all, we are baptized into none other than *the Lord Jesus Christ* (let not the *wonder* of that escape us), not some church or organization. Theoretically, even self-baptism would be acceptable. We must not think of those who leave our community as " Mr." and " Mrs." . This would imply that if they decide to join us or apply for refellowship they are " Brother" ; this would mean that *our decision* to admit them to *our* community makes them a brother in Christ, rather than their faith and baptism into the Lord their Saviour.

Not only do we have no right or ability to gather up the tares from among the wheat (we must leave this to the day of judgment); but it is the clear teaching of the NT that if we judge / condemn our brother, we too will be condemned. So, if someone is validly baptized into the Truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, *don't* say he isn't really a brother- for the sake of your own eternal destiny, if nothing else. Work these things out for yourselves, without blindly accepting the ideas of other brethren. And encourage others to reject this idea that anyone outside our community cannot be a brother in Christ. For the end result of this reasoning is a cult mentality; everyone outside us is big, bad and evil, only we are righteous before God, we must be progressively exclusive of anyone who dares to disagree with us about anything...until *we* are the ultimate deciders of a man's status before God. If your brother is weak, admonish him " as a brother" , beseech him as your brother, withdraw from him if necessary- but don't say he isn't a brother any more. And remember that our attitude to the least (the Greek is usually used about the spiritually weakest) of our brethren, is our attitude to the Lord Jesus, and this will be taken into account in the day of judgment (Mt. 25:45); for if a man cannot love his brother whom he has seen, how can he claim to love God, whom he has not seen (1 Jn. 4:20)? " *Why dost thou set at nought thy brother* [it's so crazy and spiritually illogical, Paul is saying]? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (Rom. 14:10), and crawl before Him for that mercy and utter grace which we ought now to be extending.

The Importance Of Unity

Note how Paul speaks of the breaking of bread in 1 Cor. 10:16-21. He sees the bread and wine as gifts from God to us. It's all about receiving the cup of the Lord, the cup which comes from Him. We should take it with both hands. It seems so inappropriate, given this emphasis, if our focus is rather on worrying about forbidding others in His body from reaching their hands out to partake that same cup and bread. Way back in Gen. 14:18, the gift of bread and wine [which foreshadowed our present memorial meetings] was a sign of God blessing us. Hence it was "the cup of blessing", which Paul says we also bless. There is a

mutuality about it- we bless God, He blesses us. No part of this wonderful and comforting arrangement depends upon us not passing that cup to our brethren.

Phil. 3:2 graphically describes how evil division is: "Look out for those dogs...who do evil... who cut the body" (NET). If this is merely a reference to circumcision, it would contradict Paul's tolerant attitude towards those who in their immaturity still practiced the rite. He wasn't so passionately against circumcision as such; his reference is to those who divide the body of Christ through insisting upon such things. This cutting of the body is so easily done, whenever discord is sown. The language used by the Spirit here is some of the strongest anywhere in the New Testament. Sowing division is so seriously wrong.

In the one body, whatever happens to one part of the body happens in some sense to all of us. This is why it's important to come to a correct perception of who is in the body of Christ and how it is defined. For we are to extend our feelings towards those within that body. The Old Testament body of Christ was based around Israel, and thus when the Lord made a breach upon Uzzah, David could say that the Lord "made a breach upon *us*" (1 Chron. 13:11; 15:13). The body of Christ is His "fullness" through which He fills us all (Eph. 1:23). I take this to mean that each member of the body of Christ manifests something unique about Jesus, so that between us, we show all of Christ to the world- e.g. one may reveal His patience, another His zeal, etc. By limiting our definition of the body of Christ, we limit our perception and experience of Him; and thus we limit the extent we are filled with His fullness if we refuse to accept that which every member of the body supplies to us in order that we might grow up in Him (Eph. 4:16). Out of the tabernacle labours the point that the whole house of God, this huge but delicate structure, was held together by "clasps of brass to couple the tent together, that it might be one" (Ex. 36:18 and often). "That it might be one" is alluded to by the Lord when He prayed for His people, "that they might be one" (Jn. 17:11,21-23). The record of the tabernacle stresses how the system was based around a mass of boards, tenons, curtain couplings etc. God's dwelling place, His house, hangs together by millions of inter-personal connections. "Out of church Christians", in the sense of those who think they can go it alone in splendid isolation, are totally missing the point.

Fear of false teachers, even paranoia about them, is what has led to so much division in practice. The Lord Jesus tackled the issue of whether a person is a true or a false teacher. He didn't make the division so much on the *content* of their teaching, as we usually do, but rather says that the true teacher is motivated by seeking the Father's glory, whereas the false teacher seeks only his own glory (Jn. 7:18). Yet it is the endless fear of 'false teachers' in terms of the *content* of their teaching which has led to so much division- and often the process of it seems to have led to self-glorifying individuals establishing their own followings.

Appendix 2: Guilt By Association

It is often claimed that there are Bible verses which support the idea of guilt by association. It is true that the whole of the one body is in fact affected by the guilt of individual members; but we cannot escape out of the body (unless we leave the Lord Jesus Christ), and therefore the state of the body as a whole *inevitably* affects us all. However, please note that none of

the passages quoted are suggesting that the sin of anyone else can enter us as if it were some bread or wine-borne disease, or that the faithful ought to have *left* the one body. Guilt by association, if we must use that phrase, is something we can do nothing about. We are in a sense in fellowship with the world in that we are human- we are "joined (LXX *koinonio* - fellowshipped) to all the living" (Ecc. 9:4); we are guilty in some way for the rejection of God's Son- *we* turned away from Him, and esteemed Him rejected of God (Is. 53:3,4). *But we can do nothing about being members of the human race.* We cannot exit from humanity, as we cannot exit from the body of Christ. Israel were told to destroy any of their number who worshipped idols; but if they failed to do this, God said that He Himself would remove that man from the community. He doesn't say that the whole nation of Israel would become personally guilty by association and therefore the whole nation would be treated by Him as the one man who was idolatrous (Lev. 20:5).

In the same way as Daniel, Isaiah, Ezra etc. were reckoned as guilty but were not personally responsible for the sins of others, so the Lord Jesus was reckoned as a sinner on the cross; He was made sin for us, who knew no sin personally (2 Cor. 5:21). He carried our sins by His association with us, prefigured by the way in which Israel's sins were transferred to the animal; but He personally was not a sinner because of His association with us. The degree of our guilt by association is hard to measure, but in some sense we sinned "in Adam" (Rom. 5:12 AVmg.) In the context of Rom. 5, Paul is pointing an antithesis between imputed *sin* by association with Adam, and imputed *righteousness* by association with Christ. In response to the atonement we have experienced, should we not like our Lord be reaching out to touch the lepers, associating ourselves with the weak in order to bring them to salvation- rather than running away from them for fear of 'guilt by association'?

Guilt by association is deeply ingrained in the human psyche- it's one of the most obstinate parts of our nature with which we have to do battle. We tend to assume that people are like those with whom they associate. The association of God's Son with us just shows how totally untrue that assumption is- and He went out of His way to turn it on its head by associating with whores and gamblers. You can see an example of the guilt by association mentality in the incident of the healed blind man in John 9. The Jews accused Jesus of being illegitimate- they mocked the former blind man about his healer: "as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is" (Jn. 9:29). When the healed man stands up for Jesus, the Jews get really mad with him: "You were completely born in sin!"- i.e. 'you're illegitimate' (Jn. 9:34). But the record reveals that the Jews knew the man's parents and had just spoken with them (Jn. 9:20). Clearly the mentality of these learned men was: 'You follow a bastard; so, *you* are a bastard'. Simple as that.

John Thomas faced the fellowship problem in the 19th century. The argument was put forward that whoever fellowshipped a weak brother shared his sinfulness. He clearly rejected this concept of guilt by association:

" [The] argument is that in fellowshipping [e.g.] slave-owners, and those who fellowship them, the parties so fellowshipping them are partakers with them of their evil deeds; and therefore as much slave owners and slave holders as if they actually held and drove them. The argument is *not sound* the salvation of individuals is not predicated on the purity of their neighbour's faith, though these may be members of the same ecclesiastical organization" (John Thomas, *The Herald*, 1851, pp. 204, 120).

7.6.2 Self Baptism

If the validity of baptism depends upon who the baptizer is, we would effectively have a system of priesthood whereby a man's salvation depends not upon his own understanding of and obedience to God's word, but on another human being. This is quite contrary to the spirit of New Testament Christianity. No brother has any more God-given right to baptize others than any other brother. We have earlier demonstrated that the command to go into all the world preaching and baptizing applies to every one of us; and therefore we *each* have a mandate to baptize others (Mt. 28:19). If we say that only some have the right to baptize, we are saying that only some have a right to preach. It helps in considering this kind of question to think about the hypothetical case of a man on a desert island with a Bible. He must theoretically be able to come to the knowledge of Christ and be baptized, without the intervention of any other human being. Whilst the desert island case may be hypothetical, the case of men in prison with no right to be visited, or those in such isolated places that they cannot be visited because the would-be baptizers lack funds to do so- these are real life situations. Self baptism is the only option for them. The conclusion of the following study is that we should do all we possibly can to visit, examine and baptize candidates for baptism; but we must recognize that theoretically self-baptism is quite acceptable, and we should recognize the self-baptized as our brethren and sisters (after, of course, ascertaining that they shared our beliefs at the time of baptism).

The New Testament Record

Of the forty or so NT references to baptism, it is significant that there are only two references to the actual process of the baptizer baptizing the convert (John the Baptist and Philip). And there is no condemnation of self baptism. This is not to say that the converts dipped themselves under the water; but the point is, the focus of the narrative is on the fact that the convert was baptized *into Christ*, rather than on the person who did the baptizing. Even when Peter decided to baptize the first group of Gentile converts, he commanded them to be baptized (Acts 10:48)- he isn't recorded as doing it himself. The NT emphasis is that at baptism, the believer calls upon himself (Gk.) the name of the Lord Jesus- this is a personal act. The man holding your shoulders has no part to play in this. The meaning of baptism depends upon the believer of the Gospel going under water, symbolizing his death with Christ, and coming up out of the water, connecting him with the Lord's resurrection. The person holding his shoulders as this happens is irrelevant to the symbolism.

The Old Testament types of baptism do not feature a 'baptizer':

- The priests washed *themselves* in the laver; they were not washed by anyone else
- The cleansed leper likewise *washed himself*
- Naaman *dipped himself* in Jordan
- Israel crossed the Red Sea with the cloud of water above them, water on either side of them, and with their bodies dripping wet from the pouring rain (so we learn from the Psalms). This is the clearest figure of baptism (1 Cor. 10:2); but there is no 'baptizer' in the type. Indeed, Bullinger comments that " they were all baptized into Moses" can be literally rendered 'they baptized themselves'. The same verb form occurs in Luke 2:5, where Joseph went " to be taxed" , literally 'to enrol himself'.

However, it ought to be clear enough that we should do all that is humanly possible to avoid

cases of self-baptism. Baptism is only valid if there is an acceptable level of knowledge of the Gospel first of all. It is very difficult for a new convert to discern whether he is 'ready' or not; there really needs to be some discussion with a more mature believer to establish whether or not the person does understand or not. For this reason alone we would ask those who are themselves new converts to not baptize their contacts until a more mature brother can be present. This is not because there is any command that a new convert cannot baptize, in the same way as there is no command that baptism must be performed by another believer. I am not *insisting* on this point- for ultimately, I can't. But baptism is a serious thing, and if someone is baptized without enough knowledge, their eternal salvation is at stake. We therefore ask all of us to accept this and work with each other in mutual submission so that the spiritual house we build is on a sure foundation.

Baptism Into The Body

It should also be remembered that baptism is not only entry into covenant relationship with the Father and His Son; it is also baptism into the body of Christ, i.e. the body of believers (1 Cor. 12:13). This is where self baptism shouldn't be used too liberally. Thus the record in Acts describes baptisms as believers being "added" to the body of believers (Acts 2:41,47); but also as them being "added" (s.w.) to the Lord Jesus (5:14; 11:24). It is therefore appropriate that there are other members of the body of Christ present at the baptism; baptism is entry into relationship with the community of believers, as well as into a personal relationship with Christ.

One of the many problems at Corinth was that they placed too much significance on the brother who baptized them; those baptized by Paul or by Apollos or Peter formed into different groups. Paul tackles this problem head on by saying that baptism is into Christ, and that the meaning of the baptizer is utterly irrelevant. "Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the Gospel" (1 Cor. 1:13) is probably hyperbole (i.e. grossly exaggerated language to make a point). The command to preach and baptize as given in the great preaching commission was just one command; preaching-and-baptizing went together. It seems to me that Paul *did* baptize; but using the figure of hyperbole, he's saying: 'My emphasis is on getting on with the work of preaching the Gospel, the fact I've held the shoulders of many men and women as I pushed them under the water is irrelevant; Christ didn't send me to just do this, but more importantly to preach the Gospel'. And may this be our attitude too.

Going Deeper...

For those who wish, it's possible to go a bit deeper into this issue of self baptism and who baptizes. "For *by one Spirit* are we all baptized into one body" of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). The Spirit seems to be the baptizer. But how? The Lord Jesus baptizes by the Spirit (Jn. 1:33), although He didn't personally hold the shoulders of those He baptized (Jn. 4:2- doubtless to show that who does this is irrelevant). We obeyed the Truth (through baptism) "by the Spirit" (2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:22). This doesn't necessarily mean that the Spirit made us obey the Truth. Rather is the idea that as *Christ* died and was raised by the Spirit (1 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 1:4), so we go through the same process in baptism, being likewise resurrected (in a figure) by the Spirit (1 Pet. 3:18-21). It is therefore the Spirit which raises us up out of the water, as it raised Christ; the man holding our shoulders is irrelevant. It is therefore through / by the Spirit that we have our hope of salvation (Gal. 5:5). There is only one resurrection, ultimately: that of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 6:14,15). By baptism into Him, we have a part in that. God in this sense resurrected us with Christ (Eph. 2:5,6), we even ascended into

heavenly places in Him, as He rose up into the literal Heavens. And this whole process was achieved by the Spirit.

So " the Spirit" is as it were our baptizer, whether through self baptism or traditional baptism; the Spirit is the power which raises us out of the symbolic grave of baptism and gives us new life. This makes the role of the human 'baptizer' purely incidental. But what does " the Spirit" mean in this context? The Lord Jesus Himself is the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). The Spirit is what quickens us; but consider Jn. 6:63: " It is the Spirit that quickeneth...the words that I speak unto you, *they* are spirit, and *they* are (what gives) life" . The process of coming alive with Christ by baptism, the raising out of the grave which the water represents, is therefore due to the work of the Lord Jesus through His Spirit and His word. He is " the Lord the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18 RV). At baptism we are born of (or by) water-and-spirit (Jn. 3:5; the Greek implies one act, combining water and spirit). We were washed by baptism " in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). " He that is joined to the Lord (Jesus) (by baptism) is one spirit (with Him)" (1 Cor. 6:17). We are saved " by the washing (baptism) of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Spirit; which he shed on us abundantly by Jesus Christ" (Tit. 3:5,6).

What all these lofty ideas mean to us in practice needs personal meditation. For much as we may fight shy of any mention of the Spirit's work, the fact is that these verses stand true for us today. In our present context I simply make the point that the Lord Jesus, through His Spirit, is the One who resurrects us out of the water of baptism to new life in Him. It is demeaning to Him, and the work He does, to suggest that the efficacy of this depends upon a human being lifting a man or woman up out of the water. He, not a man, is our Saviour. Therefore self-baptism is valid as much as traditional baptism.

It is Christ, not the actual baptizer, who actually does the moral washing of a person from their sins when they are baptized. Consider these simple parallels within John's Gospel:

John 3:5	John 13:8
Unless	If
One is born of water and Spirit	I do not wash you
He cannot enter into the Kingdom	You have no part in me

Not only does this reflect the crucial importance of baptism; it indicates that it is the Lord Jesus who does the moral washing of a person when they are baptized. Once we accept that, then *who* performs baptisms becomes irrelevant.

APPENDIX: Some emails about self-baptism

On 29/08 23:55, Roger wrote:
> How does one do self-baptism?

That's so great you are willing to baptize yourself! You must be a very strong individual to have this understanding and personal relationship of your Lord, to be baptized into Him and see the significance of it 100% without the distractions which come whenever you are baptized by someone

else or a church. Well done, I so respect you for it!

My suggestion for baptism is to pray; read Romans chapter 6; meditate on the chapter, that by going under the water you are sharing in the death and burial of Christ; coming up out of the water, you are identifying with His resurrection. And "repent", the Greek word means literally to re-think. To think again. I understand repentance as a recognition before God that we are sinners. It will be unwise to promise God never to sin again, because 1 Jn. 1:8-10 says that if we [as baptized believers] say we do not sin, then we are liars. In fact we get baptized exactly because we realize we are the sick who need a doctor, rather than those who think they have no need of any healing.

Then, pray again, go into the water or bath tub and say "I am being baptized into the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of my sins" and then put yourself under the water.

Then pray when you come up out of the water.

I am happy to talk with you before or after it, but maybe you would prefer to keep it completely private, and I would understand that. But if you'd like, let me know your phone number. Or we can talk on Skype.

I was baptized myself in a bath tub. AND I baptized many since then in bath tubs. It is easier to lie on your side with your head towards the taps, pull your arm right up so you can get under.

I am so excited about your decision and I pray it works out!

God bless!

Duncan

On Thu, Aug 30, at 3:23 PM, Roger wrote:

Hi Duncan,

Well, I baptized myself earlier today in my bath tub.

I am a part of Christ in His Body of baptized believers now.

Rejoicing over this event and I have made the right decision that I will never regret as long as I live in the flesh on earth until the day I rest in the Lord and be raised to life in even now as I will be raised to eternal life on the last day.

Thank you for supporting and encouraging me in Christ to make this decision and to have followed through with it. Now, the real life begins to unfold a whole new chapter in Jesus, by following Him as a true believer. Have a great Friday tomorrow. Thank you, brother. May we discuss more of Christ and the Bible.

Blessings,

Roger

On 31/08/ 23:31, Roger wrote:

Hello Duncan,

I am so happy to be baptized and be a Christian now. Ever since I received my Bible from you and began reading it, I realized that I believe in all that it presents and I was able to be self-baptized, in knowing that it is valid. Also, I am reading the New Testament in Hebrew and in Yiddish. I read other translations of the Bible. Even the Catholic Bibles versions I have in hard copy seem to disprove the Trinity and denounce un-Biblical concepts.

Also, I have learned to not really keep much of any holidays, but I do feel that each and every day is sacred as well as the First Day of the Week, being a day of worship and breaking of bread with wine. Came to deny the concept of the Trinity, since it is un-Biblical and rather false of a belief since I came to believe in the Bible and real Christian way of living.

Read about the websites and that came with the Bible you sent me and they are very good and nice educational sites with lots of Biblical Christian information. It is really great to have made the covenant and to have baptized myself in Jesus for forgiveness of my sins. Thank you, brother.

Sincerely,

Roger

Appendix 3: The Atonement And Fellowship

A major result of the existence of Jesus was unity amongst God's people. Thus the Angels sang: "...on earth peace among men in whom He is well pleased" (Lk. 2:14 RV). If we are not at peace amongst ourselves, then God is not well pleased. God has reconciled all of us into Himself through the work of Jesus (Col. 1:20 RVmg.); reconciliation with God is therefore related, inextricably, to reconciliation with each other. The fact that believers in Christ remain so bitterly unreconciled is a sober, sober issue. For it would appear that without reconciliation to each other, we are not reconciled to God. All we can do is to ensure that any unreconciled issues between us and our brethren are not ultimately our fault. It is abundantly evident in the New Testament that there is a connection between fellowship and the fact we are all in the same one body of the Lord Jesus. But there is also an associated connection between the fact that all who experience the Lord's saving work are therefore and thereby in fellowship with each other. It follows that if we deny fellowship to a member of the one body, we are suggesting that they are outside the experience of the atonement. Thus we will be judging in the sense of condemning; and as we judge... (Mt. 7:1). Consider the following evidence:

- " If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn. 1:7,8). To refuse a brother fellowship is to imply that he is in the darkness, and that the blood of Jesus Christ is not cleansing him from sin.

- " If any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him of himself think this again, that as he is Christ's, even so are we Christ's" (2 Cor. 10:7). If we are sure we are the Lord's, let's remember that we aren't the *only* person He died for. Therefore we *must* receive one another, as Christ received us, with all our inadequacies of understanding and behaviour (Rom. 15:7).

We are thereby taught of God to love one another; we must forgive and forbear each other, as the Lord did and does with us (1 Thess. 4:9; Eph. 4:32).

- Paul had "fellowship in the Gospel" with the Philippians, "because...ye all are partakers with me of grace" (Phil. 1:5-7 RV). All those in the Lord Jesus by valid baptism, and who remain in Him by faithful continuance in His way, are partakers of His gracious pardon, salvation, and patient fellowship; and they will, naturally and inevitably, reflect this to their brethren as part of their gratitude to Him.

- We were redeemed in one body by the cross; and *therefore*, Paul reasons, we are "fellowcitizens with [all] the saints, and of [all] the household of God...in whom *all* the building fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded *together* for an habitation of God" (Eph. 2:16-22). Christ died for all of us in the one body, and therefore we who benefit from this are built up *together* into a temple in which God will eternally dwell. To refuse fellowship to other stones of the temple is surely a denial that they are part of that one body which was redeemed by the cross. He died to make us all one, to abolish all that humanly might keep us apart, "for to make in himself one new man, so making peace" (Eph. 2:13-15). To uphold division and disharmony within the "one new man" is well nigh a blasphemy against the body and blood of the Lord. From the Lord's pierced side came His bride, after the pattern of Eve from Adam, through the blood (memorial meeting?) and water (baptism?). The creation of the one body was a direct result of His death. The Greek word for "fellowship", *koinonia*, is used outside the New Testament to refer to peoples' joint sharing of a common property. We are "in fellowship" with each other by reason of our relation to a greater whole in which we have a part. And that 'property', the greater whole, is the person and work of the Lord Jesus- for our fellowship is "in Him". This background of the word shows that it's inappropriate to claim to have 'withdrawn fellowship' from anyone who is in Christ. They are joint sharers in Christ just as much as we are- so we cannot tell them that they don't share *koinonia* with us. To say that is to judge either them or ourselves to be not sharing in Christ- and according to the Lord's plain teaching, any such judgment will lead to our condemnation. It is the Lord's body, His work, and He invites who He wishes to have *koinonia* in Him. It's not for us to claim that *we* have withdrawn fellowship from anyone who has *koinonia* in Him.

- Christ being undivided is placed parallel with the fact Paul was not crucified for us, but Christ was (1 Cor. 1:13). The implication is surely that because Christ was crucified for us, therefore those He died to redeem are undivided. We have one Saviour, through one salvation act, and therefore we must be one. The atonement and fellowship are so linked.

- "All men" would be drawn together unto the crucified Christ (Jn. 12:32). There is a theme in John's Gospel, that there was disunity amongst the Jews whenever they rejected the message of Christ crucified (7:43; 9:16; 10:19- which implies this was often the case). Conversely, acceptance of His atonement leads to unity.

- There is great emphasis in Ex. 26 that the tabernacle was "one", joined together in such a way that taught the lesson of unity. The spiritual tabernacle, the believers, was "pitched" by the Lord- translating a Greek word which suggests 'crucifixion' (Heb. 8:2). Through the cross, the one, united tabernacle was pitched. To tear down that structure by disuniting the body is to undo the work of the cross.

- The Lord spoke of the giving of His life, as the good shepherd, in the context of bringing all

the sheep together into one fold (Jn. 10:15-17).

- Clearly enough, the bronze serpent lifted up on the "standard" was a symbol of Christ crucified. But time and again throughout Isaiah, we read that a "standard" or ensign will be "lifted up" in order to gather people together to it (Is. 5:26; 13:2; 11:12; 18:3; 62:10). This was the idea of an ensign lifted up. Thus our common response to the cross of Christ should be to gather together unto Him there. And we need to take note that several of those Isaiah passages are speaking about what shall happen in the last days, when divided Israel will unite on the basis of their acceptance of the crucified Jesus.

- The Lord Jesus died as He did in order that all who benefit from His cross should show forth the love, the glory and the Name of the Father and Son, and thus have an extraordinary unity among themselves- so powerful it would convert the world (Jn. 17:20-26). This theme of unity amongst us played deeply on His mind as He faced death in Jn. 17. He died that He might gather together in one all God's children (Jn. 11:52). Those who advocate splitting the body, thereby showing the world our *disunity*, are working albeit unwittingly against *the most essential intention of the cross*. And in this, for me at least, lies an unspeakable tragedy. The atonement should create fellowship.

The Lord Jesus is a yoke- He unites men together, so that the otherwise unbearable burden of the spiritual life is lighter (Mt. 11:29). If we do not let our fellowship with others lighten our load, then we basically have not been brought under Christ. To be in Him, under His yoke, is to put our arms around our brethren and labour together. The Lord paralleled "Come unto me" with taking His yoke upon us, in order to have a light burden (Mt. 11:28-30). A yoke is what binds animals together, so that they can between them carry a burden which otherwise would be too great for them individually. The invitation to come unto Jesus personally is therefore an invitation into a community- to be lined up alongside another, and have a yoke placed upon us. Without submitting to this, we can't actually carry the heavy burden laid upon us. This heavy burden laid upon the believer must surely have some reference to the cross we are asked to share in and carry. We can't do this alone; and perhaps it happened that the Lord Himself couldn't even bear His own cross without the help of another, in order to show us the point. We can't claim to have come personally unto Jesus, somehow liking the idea of the Man Jesus, intellectually accepting His teachings on an abstract level- and yet keep our distance from our brethren. Paul had this in mind when he described his brethren as 'yokefellows' (Phil. 4:3). For Paul, his joy and crown would be to see his brethren accepted into God's Kingdom at judgment day. David had the same spirit when he wrote of how he longed to "see the prosperity of thy chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of thy nation, that I may glory with thine inheritance" (Ps. 106:5). His personal vision of God's Kingdom involved seeing others there; there's no hint of spiritual selfishness in David. And he goes straight on to comment: "We have sinned with our fathers, we have committed iniquity... our fathers understood not..." (Ps. 106:6). David felt himself very much at one with the community of God's children, both in their failures and in their ultimate hope. Life with God simply can't be lived in isolation from the rest of His people. Our salvation in that sense has a collective aspect to it, and if we want 'out' with the community of believers in this life, then we're really voting ourselves out of their future glory.

Life "In Christ"

So many does Paul speak of life "in Christ". We become "in Christ" by entering into the body of Christ by baptism; yet the "body of Christ" refers to the body of believers. A fair case can

be made for interpreting Paul's phrase "in Christ" as very often having some reference to life in the community of believers. "In Christ" appears to be often a shorthand way of saying "in the body of Christ". It's because we are of "the same body" that we are sharers in all that is "in Christ" - whatever is true of Him becomes true of us. If He is the seed of Abraham, then so we are we, etc. (Eph. 3:6; Gal. 3:27-29). Salvation was "given *us* in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:9) as a community, just as Israel were saved as a body, "the body of Moses", when they were baptized at the Red Sea. This is why we usually read about "you" plural as being "in Christ", rather than of an individual alone being "in Christ". *We* were created "in Christ" (Eph. 2:10); "*all you* that are in Christ" (1 Pet. 5:14); *you* are now *all* made near "in Christ" (Eph. 2:13); *we* are in heavenly places "*together...* in Christ" (Eph. 2:6); *all* God's children are gathered *together in one* "in Christ" (Eph. 1:10; Gal. 3:28). God's whole purpose is "in Christ" (Eph. 3:11); His plan to save us was through our joining a community, the body of Christ, headed up in the person of Jesus. It can't really be so, therefore, that a believer can live "in Christ" with no association with the rest of the body of Christ. This is how important fellowship is. Salvation is "in Christ" (2 Tim. 2:10); not in any particular ecclesia or fellowship, but through being an active part of His body in the Biblical sense. In what form our active participation takes place is of course a wider question- I know a paralyzed brother in a remote village who constantly communicates with members of the body world-wide through mouth-operated text messages and brief emails. But he doesn't of course get to attend any ecclesial activities. I have elsewhere pointed out the way that Paul's writings constantly allude to the words of the Lord Jesus. It makes an interesting exercise to plot out how his commands about life "in Christ" allude to the Lord's teaching about what the Kingdom of God is to be like. The "Kingdom of God" is not only a future political entity to be established on earth; the term refers also to whatever God has Kingship over now. A Kingdom is essentially a people. God's people are His Kingdom, here and now. By entry into the body of Christ by baptism, we are like Israel being declared as God's Kingdom on earth (Ex. 19:5,6) after their Red Sea 'baptism'. Life in [the body of] Christ now, the Kingdom life now [as the Lord speaks of it in Mt. 5-7], the life to be eternally experienced in the future manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth... it's all about life *in a community*. It's not about splendid isolation now, because it won't be about that in the eternal future either.

This idea of salvation through belonging to a community is taught by Paul in Romans, where he speaks of two representative men- Christ and Adam. They were, as the early Christadelphians liked to say in the 19th century, "federal heads". They headed up a 'federation' of millions of little people who were somehow "in" them. Everyone "in Adam" dies; but all those "in Christ" are made alive. Or as C.H. Dodd put it in the 20th century: "...the corporate nature of salvation, realized through Christ as our Representative" (1). Or as I am putting it in the 21st century: salvation is in a person, Jesus- but that "person" is comprised of a multitude of believers located in His "one body".

What all this means is that we shouldn't seek isolation from our brothers and sisters; we should seek to be with them and interact with them. Think of Gad, Reuben and the half tribe of Manasseh. They didn't want to go over Jordan and be with their brethren; they chose the good pasturelands East of Jordan to live in because it was good cattle country. But in later Scripture, every reference to the towns they settled in records those towns (Dibon, Ataroth, Heshbon etc.) as being in Gentile hands (Num. 32:33-38); and it would seem from the 1 Chron. 5 genealogies that they went off into Assyria and assimilated into the tribes there. By choosing separation from God's people, they drifted off with the world. And notice how Gad asked for permission to build dwellings East of Jordan "for our cattle and for our children / little ones", but God gave them permission to build such dwellings "for your little ones and

for your cattle" (Num. 32:16,24). Gad and co. put cattle before kids; God put kids before cattle. And how many times have we seen this come true- those who move away from fellowship with their brethren drift off to the world, they put cattle before kids, materialism before raising a Godly seed... And of course we can go far from our brethren in many ways other than geographically moving away from them; there can be a distance within us from them which is just the same.

The internet generation especially seems to find fellowship "in Christ" difficult. They have grown up relying upon emails, text messages etc. for communication- the written word rather than the spoken word and face to face contact. The online, virtual life results in difficulty in actually living life in relationship with others. If you are hurt by a person, you don't reply to their email or text; or you regulate your response by the sequence of letters you tap out to them as an answer. Life in families, in ecclesias, just isn't like that. We don't just walk away or shrug and tap a sequence of letters when the going gets tough in relationships. We are in the body of Christ for eternal life; and it starts now. In our temporary, disposable-everything society, relationships too have become all too short. Hence the loneliness and short-termism we see on every hand. Life "in [the body of] Christ" isn't to be like this; its very permanence and family nature is intended to be the unity which has the power to make the world know that truly, our community is none less than Jesus on earth.

(1) C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle Of Paul To The Romans* (London: Fontana, 1959) p. 93

Defining *Koinonia*

The Greek word beloved of Paul when writing about "fellowship" is *koinononia*; but the problem is that this word has a wide range of meaning. In classical Greek it referred to a sharing in anything, often in a business sense. Thus we read that the disciples were "partners" in a fishing business (Lk. 5:10). *Koinonos* means 'a sharer' as in to share with one another in a possession held in common. Only participation as a contributive member allows one to share in what others have. What is shared, received or given becomes the common ground through which *Koinonia* becomes real. A state of being "in fellowship" is therefore impossible without some active sharing in something which is held in common by the parties. "Fellowship" is therefore never an on-paper agreement which means nothing in practice. *Koinonia* creates a brethren bond which builds trust and, in Greek thought, overcomes two of humanity's deepest fears and insecurities: being betrayed and being demeaned. The misuse of "fellowship" to demean and exclude others is therefore very human, and never intended within the original concept of *koinonia*. To create a bond between comrades is the meaning of *koinonia* when people are recognized, share their joy and pains together, and are united because of their common experiences, interests and goals. Fellowship creates a mutual bond which overrides each individual's pride, vanity, and individualism, fulfilling the human yearning with fraternity, belonging, and companionship. This meaning of *koinonia* accounts for the ease by which sharing and generosity flow. When combined with the spiritual implications of *koinonia*, fellowship provides a joint participation in God's graces and denotes that common possession of spiritual values. The more one surveys the richness and variety of meaning in the word *koinonia*, the more apparent it is that it is facile to draw a line of "in fellowship" and "out of fellowship" between Christian believers. And likewise, the more apparent it is that Paul's statement that we are called to have *koinonia* in and with Christ (1 Cor. 1:9), especially with His crucifixion sufferings (Phil. 3:10), is a call to an ideal, which will only be fully realized at His return and our participation in the *koinonia* of His resurrection (Phil. 3:10). It is as he says in 1 Cor. 1:9 a "call" to that *koinonia*.

It's apparent from a look around any Christian community that *koinonia* therefore refers to an ideal. It's never really achieved in totality; to speak of our being "in fellowship" is therefore at best a description of how God graciously perceives the body of His Son. There's therefore no point in assuming that all within a human group defined by certain theological and practical propositions are "in fellowship"; this is a myth. But because it is believed, those within the groups claiming to have "fellowship" within them maintain very hard boundaries against those outside the group, fearing that their "fellowship" will be spoilt or compromised. But we can never be completely certain who believes what in their hearts, and how many closet moral failures there are in the human lives of those within "our" group. And there will always be some who for whatever reason are technical members of the group, but fail to contribute to it in the sense which *koinonia* requires. The body of Christ in which *koinonia* is experienced is in fact indivisible; this is a major Pauline teaching. The net into which the fish of humanity fall cannot in fact be severed, like the garment of Jesus at the crucifixion. We need not fear, therefore, that we may break His body by fellowship practices. It is indivisible. Only human denominations can fracture and break up.

The Jewish, especially Pharisaic, misunderstandings of "fellowship" appear to be repeated in many exclusive "fellowships" today. "In Jewish literature, *koinonos* took the place of Hebrew *haber*" (G.V. Jourdan, "Koinonia in 1 Cor. 10:16", JBL 57 (1948) 111,112). The Pharisees spoke of their fellowship with each other as the *haberim*, thus marking themselves off from the "people of the land" (*amme ha-ares*) with whom the Lord Jesus so insistently identified Himself. Paul therefore speaks of *koinonia* as being experienced by all of us by reason of being human (Heb. 2:14), and as the great characteristic of the entire body of Christ. The highly exclusive Qumran community styled itself the *koinonia* in a similar way to which many exclusive Christian fellowships do today.

Paul's emphasis is that *koinonia* is in and with Christ. It always has a collective sense; the focus of our *koinonia* is in a person, the Lord Jesus. It never refers to a set of theological propositions, a "statement of faith", as a basis for *koinonia*. Acts 2:42 speaks of the experience of *koinonia* in the breaking of bread, praying together, and the apostles' teaching about Christ. But these are not the only aspects of *koinonia*; and these things are all centered around the person of Jesus.

7.7 " Are we the only ones who have truth...?" :

Is my church the only one which has truth?

There is a question which will occur to each of us as we go this wilderness way: " Are my church the *only* ones who've got it right? Are people from other churches really not in fellowship with God and without hope? Aren't we rather arrogant to say 'We've got the Truth'...?" . These questions will plague some of us more than others. But the fact is, we are living in a world which is rapidly breaking down barriers, which is seeking peace and unity at all possible costs. We deal with people who have lived through the twentieth century, and seen the dangers of dogmatism. We have seen millions of people have their lives ruined by being forced to unquestioningly accept misplaced ideals, millions after millions emotionally scarred by megalomaniacs. And so our contemporaries have come to the conclusion: You can't be sure about anything, let's just get on with enjoying life as and where we are, principles are phoney, let's each find the best path we can through this crazy jungle of life.

Our life in 'the Truth' is a total contrast to this. The Lord Jesus is " the (only) way, *the* truth, *the* (only way to) life" . God's word is *truth* (Jn. 17:17). Yet the whole world is looking on at us, screaming, muttering, whispering in our ear: 'But there's no such thing as absolute truth!'. The fact is, the basic doctrines which make up the One Faith are indeed " the truth" . God really did promise Abraham eternal life on earth; He really did explain to him the work of Christ. Christ really will come back to fulfil these promises; those in Christ by baptism really will be raised and share in that eternal age. Sin really is serious, the devil really is within us (rather than outside of us); we really must repent; Christ really was of our nature; He really can grant us forgiveness... As we huddle together at a funeral, with our backs to the wall, as we behold a beloved brother or sister in Christ lowered into the earth, we cling on tight to the wondrous reality of the Truth. Job likewise could look out of the misery of his depression: " *I know* that my redeemer liveth...he *shall* stand at the latter day upon the earth...whom I *shall* see for myself, and mine eyes *shall* behold..." . Yet without the intensity of trials like this, we find it hard to hold on to this conviction all the time. This is the challenge of living *in* the Truth, of framing our daily lives around the implications of our fundamental doctrines.

If there is truth, there must be error. The more tightly we cling on to what we know God's word reveals as Truth, the more we effectively deny the truth of anything else. The teaching of the Father and Son as recorded in the word is fundamentally exclusive. The idea that Christians must be 'inclusive' *at all costs* is an effective denial of the truth and holiness (separateness) of the Lord God and His Son. There is repeated Biblical emphasis on the need to not only believe Truth, but also to deny error. Our Statement of Faith therefore lists doctrines which we believe and those which we reject. It is meaningless to claim to believe that (e.g.) God is one, and yet refuse to categorically reject the doctrine of a trinity.

We must in some way separate people from the beliefs they hold. We are baptized into the truth of Christ, not our church. Many of my Sunday School contemporaries reasoned: 'O.K. the Truth is true, we can't deny it, but we can't be baptized because we don't like this church. They're old fashioned, divisive, boring...'. We would all agree that their attitude was wrong. They mixed up the doctrines with the people holding them. They rejected the doctrines (in effect), and above all the Lord Jesus Christ, because they rejected the people who held those doctrines, and the people of Christ. Men have ever done the same with natural Israel. Because of the bad behaviour of the Jewish people, many in the 'Christian' church have thrown away the basic tenets of the Jewish faith which are also at the root of true Christianity: the promises to Abraham, belief in one God, Messiah being inferior to God and not eternally pre-existent, the Hope of Israel being the Gentile hope, an eternal Kingdom on earth... thus the Gentile world has failed to separate people from their doctrines. If we say that our church alone 'have the Truth', then we would, in essence, be making the same kind of error. We would be totally associating people with their doctrine. What we should be saying is that the doctrines of the One Faith are the one and only Truth, and anyone who holds them has the Truth. Not all bearing the name of our church likely believe those doctrines. And there could well be groups of isolated believers who believe exactly as we do, without using our name.

We must make this separation between people and doctrine as we look out on the false 'religious' world around us. We cannot judge any man in the sense of condemning him; that is for God, " the judge of all" . Yet we must " judge righteous judgment" in the sense of forming a Biblically-informed opinion. When it comes to doctrine, we can certainly say that there are some doctrines which are vital to understand if we are to enter into covenant relationship with God. There is a set of doctrines which Eph. 4:4-6 calls " the one faith" ; which Rom. 6:17 calls " that form of doctrine" to be believed before baptism; " the form of sound words" (2

Tim. 1:13). It is baptism, following a knowledge of this one basic Gospel, which places us in covenant relationship with God. Our sincerity or 'Christian' way of life is irrelevant in terms of entering the covenant. We only enter into Christ by being baptized into Him; it is easy to underestimate the importance of baptism and covenant relationship. The 'religious' world is not in this relationship; the bulk of them are not even baptized, and certainly do not know the true terms of the new covenant.

God's people in the past were the people of Israel. Through baptism and sharing the faith of Abraham, we become spiritual Israel. We are only part of the people of God by reason of our correct faith and baptism. When we see someone who appears so sincere in the fake 'Christian' churches, we must ask, 'Are they in spiritual Israel, or not?'. Under the Old Covenant, it is not revealed to us that God had fellowship with isolated groups of Gentiles who He respected for their sincerity. He fellowshiped only with His people Israel. But in extreme cases of Gentile sincerity and faith, they were guided by Him to join His people Israel- Ruth and Rahab are examples of this. In the New Testament, God beheld the potential spirituality of Cornelius, and guided him to join up with the body of believers.

God desires unity amongst those who are His people. It is for this reason that I, personally, find it hard to believe that in these days of easy communication, God would stop baptized believers who believe our same doctrines, from finding us and uniting with us. There are many cases I know in Africa and Eastern Europe of men and women who had come to understand much of the Truth, and were then guided by God to contact us, and therefore come to full fellowship with the rest of the body. This is one of the reasons why I personally remain sceptical of the suggestion that there are lots of people somewhere 'out there' who believe as we do.

By now many will be drawing a deep breath. 'So, are you effectively saying that yes, we can say that our church *are* the only ones who've got it right?'. Our basic doctrines *are* the one and only approach to God, yes. The question of whether our church are the only ones who teach these doctrines is to some degree academic. So what? Let's rejoice that " We have the *truth*" ! Let's put the emphasis on the word " *truth*" rather than " we" . If we really believe that we, on a personal level, have the truth, yes *the* one and only *saving truth of Christ*, we will appreciate that the world around us is truly in darkness. We will be intensely motivated to go forth and hold up the banner of Truth to them, the true light of the real Christ as He hung on Calvary; to debate and dialogue with those who do not believe the Truth; to go forth as far as we are able and offer this pearl of great price to the whole world. If we have the truth in our hearts, we know where we are going. We have a sense of direction which the world totally lacks. True Christian doctrine is not just another town along the road for us. We have been blessed with the truth of Christ. It's the greatest honour a man could have. We have the greatest thing in the world. Let's not treat it as something ordinary.

7.8 The Genesis Record

A number of questions present themselves when we carefully analyze the Genesis record of creation. Is the record in Gen. 2 different to that in Gen. 1? Why are there two different accounts? Was everything created " in the beginning" or on the days of creation? How long were the days? Were they six literal days? How are we to understand Gen. 2:4,5? Were there previous creations?

There are a number of possible answers to these questions. What follows is by no means a conclusive answer, but it is a suggested framework for understanding the creation record. The basic thesis which I present here has been developed from a section in Alan Hayward, *Creation and Evolution* (London: Triangle, 1985).

But firstly, let's not get seriously worried about the way pseudo-science mocks our simple faith in Genesis 1-3. The branch of science called 'apologetics' (that which answers 'scientific' objections to faith) has chosen an altogether bad title for itself. We as Bible believers have *nothing*, absolutely nothing, to apologize for. It is evolutionists and the like who ought to be the real apologetics- for science has no viable explanation for life's essential origin. We need not be made to feel almost ashamed that we believe the Biblical record.

7-8 Creation or Evolution: There is a Third Way

Creation or Evolution? There is a Third Road

When faced with 'Creation or evolution?', too many of us feel we are facing off against two piles of evidence, with learned specialists on each side quoting streams of academic articles which are beyond us as lay folks to process. But I want to suggest there is a third way- that of faith, faith which is not based upon evidence. Those [apparently] learned, erudite advocates of either side are all labouring under the paradigm of evidence-based acceptance of one position or another. And there is another, better way.

I may not be Einstein, but like you, I am also no simpleton. What's my qualification to talk to you about these issues? My first degree was in Geology and Geography, but that is no qualification. My real qualification to talk to you is two-fold:

- 1) With my own hands, with my own mouth and pen, I was used by the Lord to teach and baptize into Christ a few thousand atheists in my 27 years missionary work in the former USSR. I saw multiple cases of unbelievers becoming believers, despite having been raised in a regime of scientific atheism. And yet I never once appealed to apologetics, never spoke much about Bible prophecies being fulfilled, never got into the creation / evolution debate, never gave lists of reasons to prove the existence of God or the truth of the Bible.
- 2) I saw a significant number of my own peer group from the West lose their faith because the evidence they built it upon was apparently swept from under their feet by scientific discoveries which appeared to support

evolution and discredit the Biblical record of creation.

So I have wide personal experience of the journey from unbelief to belief, and vice versa.

The Nature of Science

Don't be blinded by 'science'. T.S. Kuhn developed the helpful theory of paradigms and revolutions in scientific thought. His observation was that science goes through stages, and whilst we live in a stage of thought and understanding, we can't easily see beyond it. It appeared once that the earth was flat. Observable evidence appeared to support that paradigm. Galileo and Columbus had the vision to break through that paradigm. And Columbus set sail across the Atlantic, with most scientists assuming he was going to come to the end of the earth and fall off the edge to fiery destruction. Instead, he came to the tropical beaches of the Americas and found naked women dancing on the beaches, festooning him with gold and diamonds. And so there arose a revolution in scientific thought; from then on it was obvious that the earth was not flat, and nobody much thought outside that new paradigm.

We must see ourselves in historical perspective. We stand where we stand in terms of science, but if the Lord remains away, our scientific positions shall appear laughable and primitive to the scientists of a few centuries in the future. Where we stand now in terms of science and understanding- this too shall pass.

Rationality

For centuries, people believed in God and creation almost blindly. But then there arose the age of reason, rationalism, the examination of every assumption, the demand for faith to be held up in the light of reason and scientific exploration. This was no bad thing, in some ways. The age of reason and re-examination of belief led to some helpful realizations in terms of theology. Isaac Newton and many other thinkers came to realize that church doctrines such as the Trinity, hell as a place of fire, Satan as a literal dragon, the immortal soul etc. were indeed unexamined assumptions, and the Bible text and basic reason simply didn't support them. This gave rise to the growth of a whole range of Protestant sects, each with their particular take on some of those doctrines, holding on to some traditional doctrines whilst taking a more Biblical approach to others. This continued throughout the 19th century. Those various groups, from my own Christadelphian movement to Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists and the like, were rightly described by my razor-sharp friend John Stibbs as "Voltaire's bastards". I was shocked, just slightly,

when he first came out with that term, as we drank coffee on his veranda in a Brisbane suburb many years ago now. He meant that they are the illegitimate, partial descendants of the age of reason and rationality. This explains why within all such groups there is endless argument about evidence and ‘fact’, a quasi-scientific desire to get everything right, to close every hole in an argument, to come to watertight truth on every matter of faith and interpretation.

The beauty of the Bible’s message and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is lost by such a *de jure*, rigorous academic approach- even though the way I am wired, such endless debate and striving for legalistic, logical ‘truth’ is of itself attractive to me. We are human. No less than human, but also no more than human. We are not completely rational. Have you ever really, really loved... a woman, a man? Ever spent your time and money doing something totally irrational, and afterwards feel satisfied that ‘That was really me’? Sure you have. You do not only do rational things, judging purely in an evidence-based, pragmatic, objective way. You would be scarcely human if you did. That subjective, irrational side to us is part of being human. There’s no shame to it. We are human, no less, but no more. Sure, we stop at a red light, dutifully drive on the green light... but that is only part of us. We who are made in God’s image reflect the way that He too is not a God of stone, operating according to strict principles. He has them, of course; “the law of Christ”, the principle that we should live as His Son, cuts deeply into every part of Christian thinking, speaking and action. But the God who truly pronounces that “the wages of sin is death” likewise finds means by which sinners may be saved from death. He reveals His subjective, irrational patience, forgiveness and grace throughout His recorded relationship with Israel, the people of His love, the forerunners of the “Israel of God” today, all His true people.

“Faith” in the Bible

Roy Boyd was one of the wisest Christians with whom it has been my privilege to work in teaching folks to truly believe. He made the point in one exchange I observed that the Biblical words for ‘belief’, in both Hebrew and Greek, really mean ‘to trust’. Yes, trust. This is why unless we become like little trusting children, we shall never enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus said so. It’s not that we as hobby level, amateur scientists are to wade through the evidence pro and con a belief in God or creation versus evolution. We are to trust. The evidence-based believer starts to shift uncomfortably in the chair now. And the scientific atheist starts to grin, debating victory now in sight. Apparently.

Unashamedly, I want to put to you what the Bible says about faith. The Gospel was

preached to Abraham, and his response makes him “the father of the faithful”. He is presented as a secular man living in Haran, a city rising out of the desert in Iraq. He was asked to have a relationship with the one true God, to quit the life of the world, and embark on a journey to a promised land. And he believed. There is no record of him being presented with evidence, and Abraham wisely analyzing it and coming down on the side of belief. "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (James 2:23). He had no history to go on. No prophecies had been fulfilled. No evidence for Divine creation as opposed to the surrounding myths of origins was presented. No evidence is recorded as being provided. And he is set up as our example. “Abraham believed and hoped, even when there was no reason for hoping” (Rom. 4:18 GNB). Abraham was impotent and his wife nearly 100 years old- and he was told they were to have a son. There was no evidence to go on, nor was any provided. Indeed, the scientific evidence was all apparently against believing in the word of promise. Gyn doctors, fertility specialists and the rest would have all soberly talked their science about how there was no way this could be true. The evidence was stacked against. Abraham’s exemplary faith was not at all evidence based. Dt. 13:1 goes so far as to say that if a false prophet does signs, provides evidence, that appears conclusive- God’s people were still not believe them.

Hebrews 11

The classic Biblical explanation of faith is in Hebrews 11:1-3: “Now faith is assurance of things hoped for, the evidence about invisible things... By faith we understand that the ages have been framed by the word of God, so that what is seen has not been made out of things which appear”. Putting meaning into words, this at first blush is circular reasoning. Faith is the evidence. But on what evidence are we to believe? Faith is the evidence. The Hebrew writer was no simplistic fool. He [or she] was surely aware that this is apparently circular reasoning. Faith is the evidence. So, faith is not evidence-based. You believe on the basis of faith. The same kind of apparently circular reasoning is found often in the Bible. Once you are on the look out for it. Take 1 Jn. 5:13: “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may... believe on the name of the Son of God”.

I’ll return later to this kind of [apparently] circular reasoning. But for now, I want to go through the examples of faith which are given in Hebrews 11 and discuss on what basis they believed.

Faith is the evidence of things not seen. The context of Hebrews 11 is in Hebrews

10:1, where the things not seen are those in the Most Holy Place; indeed “the things not seen” was a technical term in Judaism for the contents of the Most Holy Place. The veil that hid them from the sight of lay people was torn down when the Lord Jesus died on the cross- meaning that the way to see the unseen is through Christ. It was because that veil was torn down that we have the full “assurance of faith” (Heb. 10:20-22). Faith in God is a result of faith in Christ, not sifting through scientific evidence and making a rational decision. And I shall return to that point later. The unseen things were finally those of Christ (Mt. 13:17). The examples of faith in Hebrews 11 were not simply cases of belief in God, but belief in His longer term plan of salvation which was to be effected through His Son. “These all died in faith, not having received [the Greek can mean ‘to have experience of, to prove’] the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them” (Heb. 11:13). They believed without experience or evidence. They saw that which was not visible.

Noah was warned of a flood, a “thing *not seen* as yet” (Heb. 11:7), and which scientific analysis of his world would have ruled impossible, seeing the earth was then watered by a mist, and rain was unheard of. Moses left Egypt by faith, as seeing the God who is invisible (Heb. 11:27). This all provides the context for the appeal of Heb. 12:2,3, to look / see Jesus at the right hand of God, seeing the invisible. The faithful ‘saw’ the fulfilment of God’s promises, not having received / had experience of / proved them (Heb. 11:13). They were “persuaded” of their truth by the promise itself, and not by material evidence. This ‘persuasion’ refers to an internal psychological process within the minds of those believers, triggered by the message itself. Unbelievers fight against that process, unwilling on a deep subconscious level to submit to the life of practical obedience to that faith. Likewise Abraham accounted / reasoned / reckoned that God would resurrect Isaac (Heb. 11:19)- when there was no evidence for that. The Greek word translated “persuaded” in Heb. 11:13 is to be found elsewhere translated ‘believed’ (Acts 17:4; 27:11; 28:24). There is a word play in Acts 28:23,24: Paul persuaded people, and they believed. Again, this is an apparently circular argument. The mindset of faith produces more faith.

The walls of Jericho fell by faith (Heb. 11:30), some refused deliverance from torture because of their faith in a future resurrection (Heb. 11:35). But no evidence was provided. They had seen no resurrections, no other walls falling. Faith is an understanding, a worldview, a perception, an outlook on life. Through such faith we understand / perceive that God created the world or “ages” from nothing; matter, like time, was not made of that which appears visible (Heb. 11:3). Clearly Hebrews 11 speaks of two kinds of ‘sight’ or understanding- that of faith, and that

which sees only what is before our noses. Abraham responded to God's challenge in faith, not knowing / understanding where he was going (Heb 11:8). His faith, which is our example, was not therefore based upon rational understanding.

Faith Without Evidence

So Hebrews 11 claims that faith is the evidence for things not seen. Paul makes a powerful point in Rom. 8:24,25. "What a man sees, he does not hope for... we hope [as believers] for what we do not see". The Greek *elpis* is translated both "hope" and "faith". We believe / hope for what we do not see. There is no tangible, visible evidence for it, no Euclidean proof waiting to be found by us on some obscure corner of the internet. For otherwise faith would not be faith. It's not that you wade through the piles of evidence on the internet for creation, then wade through the 'evolution' pile, and come down on the side of creation / faith. In any case, we live today in an age without precedent in terms of the mass availability of all this material. Most believers throughout history had no access to it all, and it would be true to say that we are unable to process all the arguments anyway. We suffer from not only information overload, but an inability to process it all. Yet faith and hope is in what we do not see. This is why John's Gospel uses 'seeing' as a metaphor for 'believing'.

It is common for my middle aged Western peer group to look back upon how they raised their kids with comments like: "Well, I raised my kids to sensibly look at the evidence for things, weigh it all up, and come down on the right side. And that's why they are believers now". Unfortunately, that's the problem. Faith, Biblical faith, is not based on rationality, nor middle class 'sense and sensibility'. Remove a plank of the supposed evidence- and then, where is their faith? It may very well be that your rational, sensible, well groomed offspring encounter apparent evidence for common descent, or realize that actually the Bible doesn't predict a Russian invasion of Israel, and *rosh* in Ezekiel 38 actually has no reference to modern Russia, or figure that remains of chariot wheels on the Red Sea shores or discoveries of an old boat on the top of Ararat were just hype, and the supposed academics who once touted these 'discoveries' are now saying 'Just kiddin'!'. For those whose faith is in God and in Jesus without evidence- such realizations are non-issues. I just shrug at all those things. And you can too. Your children, and you, are humans; no more, but no less. Life is not perfectly rational. You would be less, or more, than human if it was. And again I say it- we are humans; no more, but no less. Again- those whose faith rests upon evidence are prone to collapse of faith if the evidence they rested upon is exposed as false. They likewise have a tendency to cantankerous argument with others about evidence, ever needing to

prove themselves right. When they are proven wrong about their evidence- their entire belief system collapses. And this has been witnessed time and again.

In Your Face

The Bible consistently presents the reality of God, creation and His future purpose with the earth *without evidence*. We are summoned to believe it, and live in the “obedience of faith” to those realities, seen by the eye of faith. It is no coincidence that the noun “the faith” is the same word as the verb ‘to faith’, to believe. We have faith in “the faith”; the Gospel itself is “the faith”. We believe the belief, we have faith in faith. This is the same kind of circular argument presented in Heb. 11:1. Faith is a command- for we read of ‘obedience to the faith’ (Acts 6:7). To believe is presented to us as a challenge which as it were comes from God and His Son, out of nowhere. The language of ‘obedience to the faith’ doesn’t suppose that a rational, intelligent person weighed up evidence and came down on the side of faith. To believe in God and His Son calls for an obedient life and mind in practice, not simply ticking a box in our heads which defines us on our profile as a believer rather than an unbeliever.

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). The message is of itself the reason to believe it. That needs to be repeated, because it is fundamental to what I believe the Bible has to say about faith: The message is of itself the reason to believe it. This is the reason for the otherwise ‘circular argument’ found in Bible teaching about faith- that faith is the evidence for faith. And here I can play the cards of the qualifications I began by mentioning. Over the course of personal involvement in several thousand conversions of atheists to belief in God and His Son, I never gave any apologetic reason for belief in God or His word or His Son. Never appealed to archaeology, creationism, fulfilled prophecies or any such apologies for the Bible or God or the Lord Jesus. The wonderful message needs no apology for it. The message itself was presented, baldly and simply, and people believed in it. And so I observe a paradox- those raised in atheism, often with poor family background, grasping faith with both hands, eagerly. And those schooled in all the rational evidence for God turning away from it, bit by bit, to lukewarm faith or open atheism. But for those who are apparently turning away- they perhaps never really believed, in a Biblical sense. Now is their great opportunity to reconsider the Gospel and believe, in the Biblical sense. Again, the message is of itself the reason to believe it. The Bible is clear about this. People “hear the word of the Gospel and believe” (Acts 15:7); the word sown in the heart of men leads them to faith (Lk. 8:12). “John [the Baptist] did no

miracle”, he simply confronted people with their sins and told them they therefore ought to believe on Jesus (Acts 19:4). The disciples expressed their faith in Jesus at one point, simply because of the authority of what He said in His claim to be God’s own Son: “I did come from the Father, and I came into the world; and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father. Then his disciples said to him, "Now you are speaking plainly, without using figures of speech. We know now that you know everything; you do not need to have someone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God" (Jn. 16:28-30).

The Reasons for Unbelief

Why people do not believe sheds some light on what is the basis of faith. Nowhere does the Bible say that people fail to believe because they didn’t see the evidence. Evidence itself doesn’t produce faith; otherwise, Israel in the wilderness would all have believed God. Israel in the wilderness are held up as the parade example of those who did *not* believe- even though they were provided with daily miracles and fulfilled prophecies galore. Evidence didn’t produce faith in them. The message itself elicits faith in the message; but people choose not to believe because “the obedience of faith” is perceived by them, often subconsciously, as being too great a demand upon them. And so they choose to halt that internal psychological movement towards faith which is initiated by encounter with the message itself. Thus Heb. 10:38,39 contrasts ‘belief’ with ‘turning back’; the message itself provokes a path towards belief, but we can turn back from that path. It is access to a preacher, the message, which is required for faith (Rom. 10:14). The reasons given in the Bible for not believing *never once* include lack of access to the evidence. The Lord observed that the Jewish leadership of His day did not believe because they sought glory from each other- they were worried about their image (Jn. 5:44; 12:42). Likewise they did not believe the Gospel as John the Baptist taught it because they feared their image (Mt. 21:25), and did not want to be seen to be associated with prostitutes and other notorious sinners who had believed it (Mt. 21:32). Job admitted that his bitterness with life and obsession with his own sufferings meant that he could not allow himself to believe (Job 9:16). It was fear which potentially stopped the ruler of the synagogue from believing- his fear that others must be right and the word of Jesus therefore wrong (Mk. 5:36).

Jesus Christ as the Source of Faith

The Lord Jesus claimed that He was the only way to God; belief in Him was related to belief in God (Jn. 14:1). This leads me to a major point: that faith in God comes not from rational analysis of evidence, but from faith in Christ. God gave

assurance to all about His existence and purpose in that He raised Christ from the dead (Acts 17:31). I mentioned earlier that it was the removal of the veil over the Most Holy Place that the things unseen became visible- for believers in Christ (Heb. 10:20-22). Peter puts it perhaps the most extremely when he says that it is by [Greek *dia*] Christ and His resurrection that we believe in God (1 Pet. 1:21). Note that this was written at a time when atheism was uncommon. But Peter speaks about Christian converts as ‘believing in God’ as it were for the first time. In other words, true faith in God is only possible through belief in Jesus Christ. Any other semblance of theism is not belief in God in Biblical terms.

Much of the debate about creation or evolution, theism or atheism, is centered around belief *in God*. The Bible carefully omits any attempt to prove God’s existence. It claims on every page to be God’s word, and that is that. The appeals for faith are not appeals for acceptance of God’s existence; they are appeals to believers to trust God in various circumstances, to let faith triumph over the immediate life situations we are faced with. The Gospel message is fundamentally about Jesus. It was *this* which attracted so many of those atheists who I have mentioned as having come to faith. They came with their sadness, loneliness, disappointment in themselves, need for cleansing, for hope... and they encountered the message and person of Jesus. And they believed it. The same may be observed in the amazing growth of Christianity in the first century. There were huge barriers to it. Why should illiterate pagans in the Roman empire risk so much for the sake of belief in an invisible Jew now in Heaven? What real evidence was there? There was very little, in visible terms. Historians and commentators have failed to find a human factor which satisfactorily explains the spread of the Gospel in the first and second centuries of the Christian era. This phenomena demands a verdict. I suggest that it was the power of the message itself which persuaded them; my sense is that miracles played little part in the conversion and abiding faith of the majority of converts.

As the Lord Jesus Himself made clear, if we believe in Him, we shall believe in His Father. For He is the way to the Father. So debate about *God* and His existence and style of creation is misplaced. For those who have stopped believing in God because of ‘science’, my question is: ‘But what about Jesus? He loved you, died for you, rose again for you. How can you throw away that relationship, just because you read some science that lead you to doubt creation?’. The honest answer seems to be: ‘Well I never had a relationship with Jesus. My faith was in *God*...’. It is this approach which overshadows the perhaps obvious question: ‘But what do you do with the Genesis account?’. In the bigger picture, the interpretation of that account is neither here nor there in my personal experience of Jesus. In any

case, read as Genesis was intended to be read, I see no undue problem with it even in terms of science- see my thoughts at <http://www.realdevil.info/dig3.htm> . Genesis was written for Israel on their wilderness journeys; it is literature, not a blow by blow scientific account of creation. To read it that way seems an almost wilful disregard of its obvious intention.

I know Jesus. He knows me. He died for me, and I feel His love all the time. I don't frankly care what you may postulate about science and creation, in terms of my own faith in Jesus. It's like sitting with your lover on a park bench, watching an airliner up in the sky. Playful debate between the two of you about how jet engines function or originated is neither here nor there in terms of your relationship with each other; unless you actually don't have much of a relationship with each other and are subconsciously seeking an excuse for a parting of the ways between you. Whatever you claim about evolution, Genesis, proof, evidence etc. cannot remove from my sight the reality of the risen Lord Jesus, standing ever before me. Likewise, I love my wife and am ever with her in spirit, wherever I am. Whatever you may tell me about where she came from generations ago is irrelevant to her existence right now, and my very real relationship with her. I cannot throw away a real, actual relationship with Jesus, or with anyone, because of some academic argument about science. It's not relevant at all. If it does become relevant, all I can say is that we have not really experienced a living relationship with Jesus. And many of those 'believers' who now disbelieve admit that the idea of a living, two way relationship with the invisible Jesus was to them always phoney, and not what they were into. The lack of Christ-centeredness in their theology, mindset and upbringing was surely a factor in their current disbelief in God. So, sadly, it is no surprise that they now do not believe in His Father. For *He* is the way to the Father- not rational consideration of scientific evidence for creation.

A Personal Appeal

Rationalism is not next to Godliness. See yourself in historical perspective, realize that scientific rationalism is an outcome of the enlightenment period of European history, and this too shall pass. Peter dogmatically stated that he was a personal witness of the fact Jesus Christ had died, risen again, ascended to Heaven, was now enthroned at the right hand of God, and mediates forgiveness to men on earth. But he hadn't been up to Heaven to check. He provided no rational evidence for his assertion. He and his experience was the evidence. The grounds for faith are simply faith. Consider again the message of the cross of Christ, of God's love and that great salvation planned for us in God's Kingdom. The wonder of it all has been enough to persuade millions over the centuries- with no need for any

scientific, evidence-based crutch for faith. The Father and Son love you, and want you to come to them without reserve, with total hearts for them, in child-like trust believing them without reservation, not leaning on the crutch of archaeology or science or clever creationist arguments (that so often have holes in). This total abandon of faith is what 'coming to Jesus' is really all about. This is 'seeing' as our creator intended. I urge you to join the ranks of we who live in that vision. Be baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus; you may even consider being re-baptized into Him, if your former 'baptism' was simply a ticking of a box required by a denomination or social club, a mere assent to a set of theology, or a way to tell your mum and dad that you pretty much agreed with them. Come to *Him* crucified and risen again and set to return, in all His compelling reality and naked beauty of personality, with all that you are and all that you have.

7-8-1 Six Literal Days

There is no doubt in my mind that the six days of creation were six literal days of 24 hours. There is no suggestion in the way the Lord Jesus and Paul both quote from and allude to the Genesis record that it is to be taken figuratively. Israel were to keep the seventh day as Sabbath and creatively labour in the six other days (which was just as much a command as the keeping of Sabbath), because "in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh day" (Ex. 20:11). Adam was the first man, and Eve was the mother of all living human beings. >From one blood all were created (Acts 17:26). It is emphasized that God created through His word of command; He said, and it was done (Ps. 33:6,9; 148:5; Is. 40:26; Jn. 1:3; Heb. 11:3; 2 Pet. 3:5). God is outside the constraints of time, and outside the possibility of His word not being fulfilled. Therefore if He says something, it is as it is done, even if in human time His command is not immediately fulfilled. Thus He calls things which are not as though they are (Rom. 4:17). It is in this sense that the Lord Jesus and those in Him are spoken of as if we existed at the beginning; although we didn't physically. And so God spoke the words He did on six literal, consecutive days, and the orders ('fiats' is the word Bro. Hayward uses) were therefore, in this sense as good as done. But the actual time taken to carry them out by the Angels may have been very long. The Genesis record can then be understood as stating these commands, and then recording their fulfilment- although the fulfilment wasn't necessarily on that same day.

Ongoing Creation

Indeed, it would seem from later Scripture that the orders and intentions outlined by God on the six literal days are *still* being fulfilled. Take the command for there to be light (Gen. 1:3,4). This is interpreted in 2 Cor. 4:6 as meaning that God shines in men's hearts in order to give them the knowledge of the light of Christ. The command was initially fulfilled by the Angels enabling the sun to shine through the thick darkness that shrouded the earth; but the deeper intention was to shine the spiritual light into the heart of earth-dwellers. And this is still being fulfilled. Likewise the resting of God on the seventh day was in fact a prophecy

concerning how He and all His people will enter into the "rest" of the Kingdom. The Lord realized this when He said that even on Sabbath, God was still working (Jn. 5:17). The creation work had not *really* been completed in practice, although in prospect it had been. In this very context Paul comments that although we must still enter into that rest, "the works were finished from the foundation of the world" (Heb. 4:3).

Another example is the command uttered on the sixth day to make man in God's image. The creation record in Genesis 2 is not about a different creation; it is a more detailed account of how the Angels went about fulfilling the command they were given on the sixth day. The process of bringing all the animals to Adam, him naming them, becoming disappointed with them, wishing for a true partner need not therefore be compressed into 24 hours. It could have taken a period of time. Yet the command to make man, male and female, was given on the sixth day. However, this may have taken far longer than 24 hours to complete. Indeed, the real intention of God to create man in His image was not finished even then; for Col. 1:15 interprets the creation of a man in God's image as a reference to the resurrection and glorification of the Lord Jesus. *This* was what the Angels had worked for millennia for, in order to fulfil the original fiat concerning the creation of man in God's image. Even now, we see not yet all things subdued under Him (Heb. 2:8); the intention that the man should have dominion over all creation as uttered *and apparently fulfilled* on the sixth day has yet to materially come to pass. The Angels are still working- with us. For 1 Cor. 15:49 teaches that *we* do not now fully have God's image, but we will receive it at the resurrection. Therefore we are driven to the conclusion that the outworking of the creation directives regarding man in God's image was not only in the 24 hours after it was given, but is still working itself out now. The new creation is therefore a continuation of and an essential part of the natural creation; not just a mirror of the natural in spiritual terms.

I can foresee that the objection to this thesis would be that God is spoken of as resting on the seventh day as if all creation has been finished. This is indeed what it sounds like- and from God's perspective, it was true. He had spoken, and so it was done. *He* through His word had created. The Angels were now working it all out in practice, having 'set it up' in the six literal days. This view of the record explains two verses which would seem to defy any other sensible interpretation: "God blessed the seventh day...because that in it he had rested from all his work which God had created to make" (2:3 AVmg.). God "had created to make" by the seventh day. He had created, because His word was as good as executed; but the things were not all made. But He had "created to make". Likewise Gen. 2:5 speaks of the day that the Lord "made the earth and the heavens, and every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew". Now this is saving the best for last. Here surely is concrete evidence for the thesis presented. The plants were made before they were actually in the earth. This doesn't mean that they were made in Heaven and then transplanted to earth. Surely it is to be read in the context of all the other hints that God stated His commands regarding creation, and this was as good as it all being made. But in material terms, it all appeared some time later.

And let's take deeply to ourselves the power of God's word as revealed here. He has spoken to us and of us, He has promised us His salvation and the inheritance of the earth. It is as good as done. Our difficulty in grasping this in the Genesis record of six literal days creation is continued in our hesitancy to apprehend the utter certainty of our promised salvation and the spiritual heights into which we have therefore already been translated.

7-8-2 Previous Creations

As to whether there were previous creations before our own, my basic sense is 'Yes, probably there were'. The earth being "without form and void" (Gen. 1:2) uses a phrase elsewhere used to describe the judgment that has come on an order of things (Jer. 4:23; Is. 24:10; 34:11). It may be, therefore, that there was a previous creation on earth which was destroyed in judgment. John Thomas in the first section of *Elpis Israel* suggests (without much direct support from the Hebrew, it must be admitted) that the command to Adam to "replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28) implies to re-fill, as if there had been a previous creation that was destroyed, presumably by water. "In the beginning", perhaps a huge period of time ago, God created the heavens and earth. But the present creation can be seen as being constituted some time later, after the previous creations. When during the six days of creation He said "Let there be light" this may not have necessitated the actual manufacture of the sun; this was presumably done "in the beginning". But the sun was commanded to shine out of the darkness (2 Cor. 4:6), and therefore from the viewpoint of someone standing on the earth, it was as if the sun had been created. The earth was covered with water at the time the present creation began (Gen. 1:2). This would mean that the destruction of the earth by the flood in Noah's time was actually a repeat of something God had previously done. This sheds light on His promise to never again destroy the earth with water: "I will establish my covenant with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9:11). This sounds as if destruction of the earth by flooding had happened several times before. It's almost as if the God of all grace is showing Himself progressively gracious to earth's inhabitants: 'I've done it before several times, but now I promise you humans, you new race of inhabitants upon whom my special love is to be shown through My Son, that I'll never do it again'.

All That Fall

It was presumably in one of the previous creations that the Angels were developed. They have knowledge of good and evil, just as fallen man has (Gen. 3:22). This could suggest that they too had the experience of temptation and choice between sin and obedience. Job speaks of the angels who were charged with folly as if this fact was well known (Job 4:18). Bro. Thomas suggests that the "angels that sinned" in 2 Pet. 2:4 lived at this time. There is no doubt that this passage in Peter, and the parallel in Jude, has some reference to Korah's rebellion. However, there are many such warnings to God's people which combine reference to more than one historical event, and it could be the same here: as if to say, 'History repeats itself. The angels that sinned so long ago went through in principle the same process of apostasy as Korah's company, and you too are capable of falling from grace in the same basic way'.

Apostasy has a long continuity; all who fall follow a similar pattern, ultimately sharing the same apotheosis. It could even be that the fall of the Kings of Tyre and Babylon (Is. 14; Ez. 28) are recorded in the language of an angel / "anointed cherub" who wanted superiority over the others, and who then fell from Heaven (Ez. 28:14; Is. 14:13,14 cp. Eph. 4:10). There are strong similarities between these passages and the Jewish understanding of Angels that sinned before creation. These similarities would be in order to show the same kind of historical continuity: between the Angels who once sinned, and spiritually blessed men who turned away from what they could have had. The fact that *all* the Angels *now* are righteous and incapable of sinning (cp. Lk. 20:35,36) doesn't mean that Angels never sinned in a previous creation. But the point to note is that they are now in the grave, chained in darkness-not running around as evil spirits causing mischief. They are "reserved unto judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4), when "we shall judge angels" (1 Cor. 6:3).

The Wonder Of It All

From these thoughts comes a powerful devotional point. God, who existed from eternity, has doubtless been *active* from eternity. He is Spirit, and His Spirit is essentially His power in action. There was at least one previous creation, involving the Angels. The fossil record, if indeed it can be taken seriously, would suggest that there were plants and animals (e.g. dinosaurs) which lived millions of years ago. These may have been part of those previous creations. And yet Adam was the first human being (1 Cor. 15:45), created around 6,000 years ago.

The human race which descended from him has generally rejected God. The majority of His chosen people, Israel, rejected Him to the point of crucifying His Son. But for such a small group of people, existing at such a small time and in such a tiny physical area in the perspective of infinite time and space, God gave His only begotten Son. The Lord Jesus didn't physically exist before His birth; He wasn't some kind of time traveller who had shown up in previous creations. The *only begotten* Son of God was born for the very first time. This is the pure wonder of the narratives of His birth. He was a human being, not an Angel, because He shared the nature of those He came to redeem (Hebrews 2 develops this at length). The *only and begotten* Son of God was a human being because He came to save just a few million (or however many) little human beings on this little insignificant planet, a pin prick in the vastness of space *even within this present creation*, people who lived out their history for just a few thousand years compared to infinity. And this only son of His was born to an illiterate young girl, and then the crying, gurgling *Son of God* was laid down in a cattle stall (Luke, the doctor who appreciated the need for hygiene, so emphasizes this: Lk. 2:7,12,16), because the other guests in that cheap hotel couldn't make space for a heavily pregnant woman (again, Luke the sometime-gyn doctor would've sensed the shame of it). And this was the beginning of the *only and ever begotten Son of God*, who dwelt light years away from that humble barn. It's almost too wonderful to believe. There will be many "ages" to come, as there have doubtless been many "ages" of previous creations already (Rom. 1:25; 9:5; Heb. 13:8); but for our "age" alone was the only begotten Son of God given as a representative of *us*, the humans who live in this brief "age". God thus describes Himself as a first timer falling in love with His people; as a young man marries a virgin, so God marries us (Is. 62:5); Israel were as the lines graven on a man's palm, with which he was born (Is. 49:16). Thus from absolute eternity, we were the great "all things" to Almighty God, the God of all, all past and future creations.

We may well ask why space is so big, why there were countless previous creations, why out of all the teeming species and forms of life on this planet (and perhaps others), God's salvation in Christ is only for human beings, whom He represented in His very nature; why out of all humans, only a few are called, and why out of those few called are even fewer chosen; why in the past He *delighted to* chose Israel, one of the smallest and unlovely nations, and their small, despised land, as *His* land and *His* people (and in principle He has done the same in His calling of the new Israel)... and the answer may be that God has arranged it this way in order to show us the magnitude of His humanly senseless love; that He has given *so* much, even His Only Son, for *so very few* in such a very small geographical area in such a very short time span. Brethren, think on these things. Look up at the night sky and like father Abraham, struggle, successfully, to believe the wonder of it all.

7.9 Marriage Out Of The Faith

Despite the many grey areas in our walk in Christ, there are some things which are plain wrong. Marriage to unbelievers is one of them. We live in a world which cannot tell right from wrong, and which judges behaviour according to the situation individuals find themselves in (dressed up as "situational ethics", in the jargon). A marked feature of our community is that the majority of new converts are not only single, but live in relative isolation, with little regular contact with other believers. Finding a believing partner is a major problem. Resisting the spirit of "situational ethics" is inevitably difficult. The thought evidently runs through many minds: "In my situation, there's no Christian for me to marry, so why not...?". Esau probably thought like this; but his heathen wives were a "grief of mind" to his Godly parents. Isaac forbade Jacob to take a wife of the "daughters of Canaan", probably after seeing the spiritual destruction these women had wrought on his other son. Samson's parents likewise rebuked him for marrying a Philistine. The record of the good and bad kings of Israel and Judah seems to emphasize the influence of the mother; a pagan mother nearly always resulted in a child who later turned away from the Truth.

The following are some plain Biblical reasons why marriage to those out of the Faith is absolutely wrong. We must live our lives by the guiding light of God's principles, not how we perceive our situation. If there were examples in Scripture of where *sometimes*, in some situations, believers married out of the Faith and God accepted it, we would have excuse for saying "Well, there's no believer near me to marry, so I'll marry an unbeliever". But there are no such examples. The Bible teaching is plain; only marry those in covenant with God. To do otherwise is to deny our covenant relationship with God.

Covenant Relationship

As with many problems we face, marriage out of the Faith is associated with a chronic lack of appreciation of covenant relationship. If Dinah had married Hamor, this would have been a covenant relationship which would have resulted in the people of God and the surrounding world becoming "one people" (Gen. 34:16,22). We can't very well marry out of the Faith and claim we are still God's people, separated from the world. Through baptism, we are the seed of Abraham, we are *the* people of God, we have been selected to undergo a few years preparation now, so that when the Lord comes we may enter His Kingdom. We are not here, therefore, to get the maximum happiness and self-realization we can, living as if this life is the end. At baptism, we pledge to seek first God's Kingdom and the things of His righteousness, in faith that all human things will be added unto us as far as God knows we need them (Mt. 5:47,48). Baptism is an entry into a covenant relationship with none other than the God of Israel. His covenant grace and mercy is for ever; He has promised to keep us as His very own peculiar people, until we reach the eternity of His Kingdom. Separation from this world is therefore a fundamental stage in our redemptive process, as Israel left the world of Egypt, separated from them by the water of baptism, and walked the wilderness way to the Kingdom of God. Time and again Israel were taught that because they were God's covenant people, it was a denial of that covenant to enter into any covenant relationship with anyone who wasn't in covenant with God.

This is the basis of the Law's prohibition of marriage with non-Israelites. Because Israel were in covenant with God, *therefore* they were not to make covenants with the other nations, and marriage is mentioned as an example of this (Ex. 34:10,12). In his repetition of this part of the law in Deuteronomy, Moses gave even more repeated emphasis to the fact that our covenant with God precludes any covenant relationship with anyone else: "Thou shalt make no covenant with them...neither shalt thou make marriages with them...for thou art an holy

people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all (other) people that are on the face of the earth. The Lord ...set his love upon you ...chose you...because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers...the Lord hath brought you out (of the world) with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen...know therefore that the Lord thy God, he God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments...and repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them; he will not be slack to him that hateth him. Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments..." (Dt. 7:2-11). The wonder of our relationship with Yahweh is stated time and again. To marry back into Egypt, the house of bondmen from which we have been redeemed, is to despise the covenant, to reverse the redemptive work which God has wrought with us. In this context of marriage out of the Faith, we read that God will destroy " him that hateth him" , and repay him to his face. On the other hand, not marrying Gentiles was part of *loving* God (Josh. 23:12,13).

So according to Moses, whoever married a Gentile was effectively hating God. It is possible that the Lord had this in mind when He taught that we either serve God and hate the world, or we love the world and hate God (Mt. 6:24). This isn't, of course, how we see it. We would like to think that there is a third way; a way in which we can love God and yet also love someone in the world. Yet effectively, in God's eyes, this is hating Him. Doubtless many Israelites thought Moses was going too heavy in saying that those who married Gentiles were hating God. And the new Israel may be tempted to likewise respond to the new covenant's insistence that our love of God means a thorough rejection of this world. Whoever even *wishes* to be a friend of the world is an enemy of God (James 4:4). There are two roads, one to death, the other to the Kingdom (Mt. 7:13,14; and Proverbs is full of this theme too). They go in opposite directions. We cannot unite ourselves in a lifelong covenant of love with someone outside of Christ and still claim to love God. We can't travel both roads. If we love this world, we hate God. There are only two groups of people in this world, in God's eyes; those in His Son, and those in the world, who will die in their sins. " The world" is described by God as actively sinful; not just nice people who live in ignorance of God's ways. There is no middle group of 'nice people who are in the world'. This 'group', if they exist, share the same judgment as the more 'wicked'. The Proverbs repeatedly warn Israel against marrying the " strange" (Gentile) woman; and she is consistently described there as a prostitute of the lowest sort. Proverbs is God's comment on the Mosaic Law. These purple passages are not simply warning against the hooker who stands on the street corner; they are saying that " the strange (Gentile) woman" , *whoever* she is, however nice and respectable in human eyes, is the lowest sort of call girl in God's eyes, because she is out of covenant with God.

Israel were not to marry people from the surrounding world because God had chosen them to be His special people, " and because he would keep the oath that he had sworn unto your fathers" (Dt. 7:2,8). Those " fathers" were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. By baptism, we enter into the same covenant as they did; the promises to Abraham are made to us (Gal. 3:27-29). We enter that same Abrahamic covenant which in prospect extended to Israel (although it was only ratified or enabled by the death of Christ). The everlasting, Abrahamic covenant extended to *all* generations of Abraham's seed (Gen. 17:7-9). The fact Israel were forbidden to marry Gentiles was not only a *type* of how the new Israel should not marry unbelievers; we are in essence in their position. We *are* the Israel of God, not just their antitype. We too have been chosen, we too share the same fathers, and the covenant made to them. Whilst this is supposed to be a first principle among us, the average Christian seems to hear precious little about it after baptism. God's essential morality does not change over time. If He forbade His

covenant people to marry those not in covenant, on account of the implication of the Abrahamic promises , that still stands for us today who through baptism have entered this same covenant.

Breaking Covenant

To marry out of the covenant is effectively to deny or even break one's covenant with God as defined in the promises to Abraham, seeing that we cannot love Him and the world. Those who married Gentiles " profaned the covenant of our ancestors (Abraham etc.). Judah has broken faith" by intermarrying (Mal. 2:10,11 Jerusalem Bible). Thus those who 'married out' in Ezra's time admitted: " We have broken covenant with our God (" have broken faith with our God" , RSV) and have taken strange (i.e. Gentile) wives of the people of the land...now let us make a covenant with our God, to put away all these wives" (Ezra 10:2 LXX). Ezra confirms the truth of what they said: " You have broken covenant and taken strange wives" (Ezra 10:10 LXX). Some years later, Nehemiah stridently criticized Israel for yet again marrying Gentiles. He described their action as " breaking covenant with our God and marrying strange wives" (Neh. 13:27 LXX); the Levites likewise " defiled the priesthood, and the covenant of the priesthood" (Neh. 13:29) by their marriages. Notice how the repentant Jews in Ezra's time realized that they had broken the covenant, and sought to rectify things by re-entering the covenant, through serious repentance.

Paul spoke of how those who join themselves with unbelievers (and marriage must surely have been in his mind) had to retract or repent of that relationship, and *then* God would receive them and *be their God* (2 Cor. 6:14-17). He was referring back to the Abrahamic promise of Gen. 17:7, that God would be the God of Abraham's seed. Is not the suggestion that those who unrepentantly marry into the world have broken the covenant?

Strong Language

Marriage out of the Faith is this serious. Consider the severity of language which is used about it:

- " To do all this great evil, and act treacherously (" playing traitor" , Jerusalem Bible) against our God" (Neh. 13:27 RSV).
- The first recorded marriage out of the Faith was when the sons of God (the believers) saw the daughters of men (the women of the world), that they were " fair" (translated " better" 72 times; i.e. they *preferred* them to the faithful) (Gen. 6:2). The next verse describes how because of this, God decided to destroy mankind after 120 years. The corruption of God's way at that time was epitomized by marriage out of the Faith. The situation just before the flood is a type of that in the last days (Mt. 24:38); marriage out of the Faith will be a major problem for our last generation, according to this type.
- Marriage with Gentiles was " forgetting God" (Jud. 3:6,7); although that's not how Israel saw it at the time.
- The girl who married a Gentile couldn't eat of the holy things; and neither could a Gentile, it is added, in the same passage (Lev. 22:12,13). The point was: if you marry a Gentile, then you are a Gentile, and you forego your spiritual privileges which you have as an Israelite. But if she was a widow or divorced (from the Gentile?) then she could eat the holy things.
- God said that the sign of His condemnation and rejection of Israel was that He would give their daughters to be married to Gentiles (Dt. 28:32). To willingly marry a

Gentile was therefore to proclaim oneself as rejected from the Israel of God.

- Ahab's marriage to a Gentile was far worse than *all* the sins of Jeroboam; the idolatry, the perversion, the making of Israel sin; these were "a light thing" compared to the evil of marriage out of the faith (1 Kings 16:31). That perspective on marriage out of the Truth doesn't seem to be shared by all Christians. And further, those who married the daughters of Ahab were led astray by them (2 Kings 8:18,27).
- Time and again in the record of Esau it is emphasized that he married Gentiles. The record mentions this fact no fewer than nine times in Gen. 36 alone! Why such emphasis? Surely to demonstrate how through the millennia of human history, God has remembered Esau's behaviour and held it against him, recording it for our learning.
- Ezra was deeply repulsed at the way the Jews had married Gentiles: "At this news I tore my garment and my cloak; I tore hair from my head and beard and sat down, quite overcome. All who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered round me (cp. Job's friends, as if Ezra's grief was of a like magnitude), when faced by *the treachery* of the exiles...I went on sitting there, overcome (cp. Job again)...at the evening sacrifice I came out of stupor and falling on my knees with my garment and cloak torn, I stretched out my hands to Yahweh, and said (concerning marriage out of the faith)...our crimes have increased...our sin has piled up to heaven...we have deserted your commandments...our great fault...are we to break your commandments again and intermarry with these people...will you not be provoked to the point of destroying us...(Ezra) was in mourning for the exile's treachery" (Ezra 9, Jerusalem Bible). The "fierce wrath" of God was upon them for marrying those Gentiles (Ezra 10:14).
- Nehemiah's reaction to similar news was also extreme: "I reprimanded them and called down curses on them; I struck several of them and tore out their hair (reminding them of Ezra's grief some years before?)" (Neh. 13:25 Jerusalem Bible).
- Some years later, there was yet a third wave of marriage out of the Faith. Mal. 2:11 comments that this was an "abomination...for Judah hath profaned the holiness of Yahweh, which he ought to love" (Mal. 2:11 AVmg.). Likewise the prohibition of marriage with unbelievers in Ex. 34:12 was made straight after the awesome declaration of God's holiness on Sinai. It was as if God was telling Moses: 'See, this is your God, so wondrous in grace and determination to save you. So please, be mine, don't unite yourselves in marriage to this world that doesn't know Me. If I, in all My moral and physical glory, am your God, how can you intermarry?'. There is a kind of juxtaposition between the heights of God's moral revelation in Ex. 34:1-8, and then the 'down to earth' prohibition against marriage out of the Faith.
- Josh. 23:13 is explicit that it was because of marriage out of the faith that Israel lost their inheritance in the Kingdom, and the Gentile nations there remained a thorn in their eyes.

Unmistakable Judgment

Because of the seriousness of it, the prohibitions against intermarriage are often accompanied with an unmistakable threat of judgment: "The Lord will cut off the man that doeth this" (Mal. 2:11); "destroy them...(the Lord) will not be slack...he will repay him to his face" (Dt. 7:2,10); "know for a certainty...that God will expel you from the land" if you intermarry (Josh. 23:12,13); "him shall God destroy" (2 Co. 6:14-16 cp. 1 Cor. 3:13). If we deny our covenant with God by marrying into the world, we have effectively cut ourselves off from Him. The command for widows to marry "whom she will; only in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39) is

alluding back to the command to Zelophehad's daughters to marry "whom they think best", but *only* "in" their tribe, otherwise they would lose the inheritance (Num. 36:6,7). The implication is that those who do not marry "in the Lord" will likewise lose their promised inheritance. And this rather strange allusion indicates one more thing: the extent of the seriousness of marriage out of the Faith is only evident to those who search Scripture deeply. As man and woman within Israel were joint heirs of the inheritance, so man and wife are joint heirs of the inheritance of the Kingdom (1 Pet. 3:7).

And Spiritual Problems

In nearly every reference to marriage to Gentiles, there is the comment that this would surely lead to adopting the religious views of the Gentile partner; views which inevitably take a man away from the one and only Divine Truth, as revealed in the covenants of the Gospel. Turn through the following passages, which all make the connection between marriage out of the covenant, and adopting idolatry: Ex. 34:12-16; Dt. 7:2-9; Jud. 3:6,7; 1 Kings 11:2,3; Mal. 2:11; 2 Cor. 6:14. Dt. 7:4 RV dogmatically predicts that a Gentile man will definitely turn away the heart of his Hebrew son-in-law... So certain is it that marriage to Gentiles leads to accepting their idols that Ezra 9:1,2 reasons that Israel hadn't separated from idols *because* they had married Gentiles. Time and again, those who marry out of the covenant claim that they feel strong enough to cope with it, that marriage is only a human thing, and that their spiritual relationship with God is between them and God, and unaffected by their worldly partner. Yet this is exactly the opposite of what God's word says. It's not true that you can marry into the world and be unaffected in your own spirituality. Solomon thought he could handle it; and apparently, he did- for the first 20 years or so. But his Gentile wives were his spiritual ruin at the end. The record brings out his spiritual self-confidence: "But King Solomon loved many strange (Gentile) women...of the nations concerning which the Lord said...Ye shall not go in to them...for *surely* they will turn away your heart after their gods....it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods...and Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord" (1 Kings 11:1-6). The Law said that "surely" intermarriage meant spiritual ruin. Solomon thought he could handle it. But in the end, God's law was right. They led him back to the way of their parents. By contrast, the only provision for marrying a Gentile involved her going through a process of separation from her parents, reconciling herself to the fact she would never see them again, and making her realize that because she was outside the covenant, she was to be treated like a leper or defiled person (Dt. 21:11,12 = Num. 6:9; Lev. 14:9). Only once she had learnt this lesson could she enter into covenant with God's people and be married.

Diverging Paths

There are of course a few isolated cases of those who have married into the world, and then repented. Every brother or sister like this which I know is exceptionally humble, and exceptionally strong in the Lord- now. Each of them will admit the pain and agony their mistake has put them through. "Marry in haste, repent at leisure" is too mild to describe their torment. Their examples prove the depth of God's grace; that despite such clear warning and prohibition, even those who openly flout all this can still have forgiveness. And His grace and zeal to work with fallen man is demonstrated all the more by the fact that occasionally (not as often as is sometimes claimed), the unbelieving partner is converted. Esther married out of the faith, egged on by her uncle; but in the crisis which came upon apostate Jewry, God worked through her failure to save His repentant people. But those who will not bring themselves to a full, crawling repentance (before God, not men) have gone the way of

Solomon. In the cases of all those who have truly repented of their folly, there is a free and open admission that life with the unbelieving partner is difficult; they realize, more than most, that they are on roads which lead in exactly opposite directions; they serve different masters; one is the seed of the woman, the other the seed of the serpent. And there has to be that antagonism between the two. The alienation and passive conflict in such a marriage will not only be demonstrated by the Biblical principles. It has been realized by impartial observers of such marriages. Bryan Wilson is one such: " There can be no doubt that the rule against exogamy [marriage with the alien] effectively promotes the individual's allegiance to the Faith, and that most ...are so brought up that the rule operates without them feeling very much constraint. *For those who make outside affiliations, a real conflict of allegiance develops*" ⁽¹⁾. Or to put it Biblically, there is nothing, *nothing* in common, no sharing, no fellowship, between those in the temple of God and those in the world (2 Cor. 6:14-16). To marry out of the faith into the world is to effectively say that we have nothing in common with the things of God.

Practical Considerations

All this has far reaching implications, beyond the act of marriage. Relationships with those not in Christ, outside the covenant, are equally wrong. All too often the impression is given to new converts: 'You mustn't marry out of the Truth, so if you have a boyfriend / girlfriend, make sure that you teach them the Truth and get them baptized first, before the wedding'. It seems to me that this is wrong advice. If we appreciate what it means to be among God's people, to have been chosen for His Kingdom, to have been separated from this world by Him, the emphasis will change to: 'Don't have a boyfriend / girlfriend in the world. Preach the Truth to all you meet, not just the girl you fancy at college. And marry a baptized believer who is wholeheartedly committed to the Lord and the Hope of Israel'. It is inevitable (yes, inevitable) that anyone 'in love' with a Christian will realize that their friend really requires them to convert and be baptized, and they will be inclined to 'go along' with this for the sake of marriage. And therefore their interest in the Gospel will be overshadowed by another motivator rather than seeking to personally respond to the love of Christ. Solomon warns the young believer to be especially wary of the " stranger" (the Hebrew word is usually used about Gentiles) who has forgotten the covenant of God- i.e. she had an appearance of interest in becoming a proselyte, in accepting covenant relationship (cp. baptism), but she wasn't really serious about it.

In my observation, those who marry out of the faith either don't preach the Gospel to their intended partner, or they do but the partner doesn't respond. In the latter case, this means they may be responsible to judgment- at which, as far as we can tell, those who have known but rejected the Gospel will be condemned. I cannot understand someone who claims to believe the Gospel marrying someone who has rejected it, with all this implies. The only other possible scenario is that the believer has not preached the Gospel to the person they wish to marry. If we hide the Gospel from the person we chose to intimately share our lives with, we don't really love them; and more than that, it seems to me that faith in the Gospel will *inevitably* be shown by preaching it to others ⁽²⁾. If you don't teach the Gospel to your future partner; do you really believe it? If it doesn't well up within you, does it mean anything at all to you, in real terms? The believer who marries out is either reflecting a lack of real faith in the Gospel, or is saying that they are willing to marry an " enlightened rejecter" of the Gospel. Either way, they are rejecting the Gospel of the Father and Son.

For many couples, producing children is an expected part of marriage. Mal. 2:11-15 shows

that the sin of marriage out of the faith is because it is a denial of God's principles regarding children; He instituted marriage to create "a Godly seed". It stands to reason that marrying an unbeliever (or an uncommitted believer, for that matter) cannot very easily produce a Godly seed. Israel were not to sow "mingled seed" in their fields, or make clothes of "mingled" materials (Lev. 19:19). The materials would, as the Lord Himself mentioned, tear apart. The garment wouldn't last. And sowing different seeds together likewise would bring no fruit to perfection. But the LXX in these passages is quoted in one place only in the NT: "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). If we are, *the relationship can't work*. So don't think that if we marry out of the Faith, it will all work out OK. Unless there is serious repentance (and even then, not always), *it won't work*. It will be a garment patched up with two different materials. Solomon's difficult, ultimately unsatisfying relationship with his Egyptian girlfriend as outlined in the Song (e.g. 8:2) is one of many examples of this. He married the daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh, and became like a Pharaoh, her father (1 Kings 3:15 cp. Gen. 41:7). Surely, as God had prophesied, that woman turned away his heart; but according to the Song (and our own informed imagination), neither she nor he had any satisfaction from the relationship.

The Potential Missed

Marriage as ordained by God was clearly intended to have a spiritual dimension, and marriage to an unbeliever nullifies or ignores this intention. God created Adam and gave him the command not to eat of the tree; He then created Eve because Adam alone was the only thing "not good" in an otherwise "very good" creation. It could be argued that the provision of Eve was in order to "help" Adam not only in God's work of tending the garden, but against temptation. The whole story of Eve's creation teaches that in Christian marriage, there is one specific woman intended for the believer. David Levin's translation brings this out:

"This one at last, bone of my bones

And flesh of my flesh,

This one shall be called Woman,

For from man was *this one* taken".

This sense that 'this is the *one* for me' can only ultimately and lastingly be true in the context of Christian marriage. The creation record teaches that the bond between parents and children is somewhat temporary- for the children must leave them and cleave to their partner. But the bond between man and wife is to be permanent, and is an ever increasing process of being 'joined' to each other by God. Insofar as the man represents Christ and the woman represents the church, this speaks of how we are progressively bonded with Christ and feel a decreasing bond with our natural background.

What If...?

I would hope that most of what I've written so far would basically be agreed by all of us. Far more tricky is the question of how to treat a brother or sister who, in the face of all this evidence, still goes ahead and does it (just as we all fly in the face of Biblical teaching at

times, knowing full well our folly). It's here that the principles are more difficult to discern, and almost impossible to universally agree upon throughout the brotherhood. What follows is only my suggestion.

" There is hope in Israel concerning this thing" (Ezra 10:2). Really, " there *is* hope" for wayward Israel. There is a way back. We must never give the impression that marriage out of the Faith is irreversible. But it's a hard way back. In our pastoral response to those who 'marry out', there can be no giving the impression that it's as easy as writing a letter saying 'I'm sorry I did wrong and I want to fellowship again'. It may be that easy to get back into a church, but it won't be that easy to get to the Kingdom. Marriage sets an example. Thus Nehemiah rhetorically asked those who had married Gentiles: " Shall we hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?" (Neh. 13:27). The fact they had married Gentiles was a silent invitation to the rest of Israel to follow suite. Sexual attitudes undoubtedly spread. Thus if a very poor man discreetly prostituted his daughter out of financial desperation, the whole land would fall to whoredom and sexual abandon (Lev. 19:29).

Personal Pleading

Because of this, marriage out of the Faith cannot be 'let go' unchallenged. Something must be done. But 'automatic' withdrawal doesn't seem to me to be the way to handle every case. We are seeking to reflect the saving and restorative work of the Lord Jesus in all our ways, privately and in the ecclesia. There must be a real pleading with the person concerned, especially in the lead up to marriage; not just two brethren going to see him or her, with the attitude that the outcome of their meeting is all a foregone conclusion. Why can't *every* member of an ecclesia be involved in pleading with the person concerned? Consider again the Biblical principles involved. If we have any sense of concern for our brother's salvation, we must make some response to the prospect of marriage out of the covenant. Remember Ezra's response. And Nehemiah's. There was no indifference there, no shrugging of the shoulders, no hiding inaction under the disguise of love and tolerance, no 'automatic withdrawal' syndrome. There was a feeling of personal guilt; Ezra felt that he too was implicated in the marriage out of the Faith, because he too was in the same body of Israel. The intensity of his grief and prayer should be our example. Only if this 'fails', only if there is wilful persistence in the evil way, should we dissociate ourselves formally. And yet I fear, really fear, that Ezra's example is all too much hard work for many of us. We'd rather write them off by automatic withdrawal, or shrug our shoulders and let them stay, kidding ourselves that such an attitude reflects our spirituality and commitment to God's principles.

There is something about which every member of our community needs to bow our heads in shame. We will travel, or enable others to travel, the length and breadth of this planet, undertaking the most dangerous, difficult and unknown journeys, in order to baptize someone. But right on our doorsteps there are those who have left the faith, in a far more serious situation than the world generally; and (generally) we scarcely lift a finger to contact them. Let's not make excuses. We simply aren't very good, individually or collectively, at replicating the zeal of our good shepherd. And especially is this seen with those who 'marry out'. We see all the tell tale signs, their relationship with someone deepens, the wedding comes and goes; and then they are disfellowshipped or drift off. And usually, little more is heard from them. Brethren, this ought not so to be. We really ought to be making far more effort to win back and save the lost sheep of Israel, especially in this vital area of marriage out of the Faith.

It seems that Ezra's example was what prompted the guilty ones to repent. Ezra hears the news, and sits in utter grief and emotional pain. The more spiritual among the guilty people come and stand around him for several hours; doubtless the crowd grew larger as the afternoon went on. Then he falls down on the earth and prays, as the ram of the evening sacrifice bleated in agony. " Now when *Ezra* had prayed, and when *he* had confessed, weeping and casting himself down, there assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation...the people wept very sore" and confessed, just as Ezra prayed, wept and confessed (Ezra 10:1,2). They saw in the depth of his concern and grief the seriousness of their ways. And perhaps if we showed a similar attitude, this in itself would lead back those who go astray in this way.

How To Repent?

Those men expressed their repentance by divorcing their wives, and sending them back to Babylon, along with their children. Those men listed in Ezra 10 are spiritual heroes of the highest order; maybe that's why God listed their names, to show His eternal memory of them. In our minds, let's really salute them. They could have done what those in Nehemiah's time did; they accepted Nehemiah's rebuke of them, and promised to do what they could to ensure that their example did not spread; and this meant that they were " cleansed" from their relationships with the Gentiles (Neh. 13:30), even though they remained married to them. The men in Ezra's time could have done the same, but they chose, on their own suggestion, to divorce their Gentile wives. The picture of that convoy of women tramping back to Babylon, dragging those mixed up, pathetic little children (jabbering half in Hebrew, half in Chaldee?), and those broken, broken men left behind... you must have a heart made of stone if this picture doesn't bring tears to sensitive eyes. Yet this is the cruelty of sin. The fact the children were sent away too is twice emphasized (Ezra 10:2,44). Those men were real heroes to make that suggestion, and do it. They rose to the highest level. Men of Ezra 10, I salute you.

But what does this mean for us? With caution, guided by this Biblical precedent, I would suggest that those who marry out should consider expressing their repentance by leaving the partner. I'm not saying that those who marry out must leave their partner; I am simply directing us to the Biblical precedent. Marriage to an unbeliever is not blessed by God. Those who come to the Faith already married have their marriage " sanctified" by God- if God did not do this, their children would be " unclean; but now are they holy" (1 Cor. 7:14). The implication is that God does not see marriage in the world in the same way as He sees marriage between His children. The implication of 1 Cor. 7:14 seems to be that if a believer has a relationship with an unbeliever, the resulting children are " unclean" , illegitimate, even if they are married in the eyes of the world. However, if the believer was married to the partner at the time of baptism, God sanctifies the relationship, and the children are therefore " holy" . If this is correct interpretation, it follows that those who deny their covenant with God by marrying an unbeliever do not have a marriage which is " sanctified" by God; for this reason it is not possible for us to support in any spiritual sense the 'marriage' of a believer with an unbeliever, e.g. by offering prayers at the 'wedding'. Further evidence that God does not fully recognize 'marriage' in the world is in the fact that He instituted marriage partly to produce " a Godly seed" (Mal. 2:11-15), which is evidently irrelevant to the 'marriages' of the world. The way Paul talks of how in 'marriage', the man represents Christ and the woman the church, helping each other towards salvation, would indicate that he presumed marriage was only relevant to believers; Christian marriage seems to be the only model of marriage he assumes. Likewise Peter speaks of husband and wife praying together (1 Pet. 3:7); he too assumed marriage in the Faith as the only model of marriage.

Proceeding still with caution, the idea of separating from the unbelieving partner may be countenanced in 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1: " Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers...what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?...wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing...having therefore these promises...let us cleanse ourselves" . The links with Is. 52:11 and Rev. 18:4 suggest that the people referred to were actually *in* spiritual Babylon; they had unequally yoked themselves together with unbelievers; they needed to separate (s.w. to divide, sever) themselves, and come out from among them. The idea of unequal yoking is a marriage allusion. Could it be that Paul is suggesting that they sever themselves from the unbelievers they had wrongly married?

Whether this is what Paul is suggesting or not, we have in Ezra 10 the highest level of repentance in connection with marriage out of the Faith; a leaving of the Gentile partner, even if there are children involved. In Neh. 13 we have a lower level of response, which is still acceptable; by recognizing their sin, repenting of it, and doing what they could to stop others following their example, those who had married out were " cleansed" from their relationships, even though they didn't actually end them. This " cleansing" was presumably in the same sense in which God " sanctifies" the relationship between a believer and an unbeliever who they were married to at the time of their baptism.

And finally. I have more nervousness than I think my readers realize when I write on this kind of subject. I sense that burden of responsibility which any brother has when writing about issues which affect the intimate lives of others; there is a deep responsibility to correctly expound God's word. A false turn in exposition, a mistaken emphasis, could place a burden too heavy to be borne on a fellow believer; or give another a false way out of a situation where, if he would attain the Kingdom, he must face up to carrying a cross. And yet one cannot be silent. I have prayed, studied, and prayed, before, during and after writing all this. I can only commend each of us to a merciful Father, and to earnest personal reflection on the word of His grace, which is able to build us up, guide us, and lead us to that inheritance " among all them which are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

Notes

(1) Bryan Wilson, *Sects And Society* (London: Heinemann, 1961) pp 292,293.

(2) See *We're All Preachers*.

7.10 The Single Life

7-10-1 Christian Singles

There's no point in discussing all the pains, frustrations and angers which single Christians may feel. Each will have a different experience. Absorption with marriage to the neglect of true spirituality was the sin of the pre-flood world, and an obsession with relationships is a similar characteristic of our age, living as we are just prior to the second coming. In any thinking about marriage, therefore, we must be on our guard to avoid this kind of obsession. The point is, what guidance does the word give about the single state? Far too much of the

literature about singleness is no more than self-help psychology, trying to paper over the problem, offering some kind of surface solution, ameliorating some of the pain for a while. The Biblical solution is radical. Yet it really does offer the only thorough and realistic answer to the agonies of singleness which so many complain of. The real solution is like that to so many other Christian pains and complaints: we are here for a few brief moments compared to the infinity of the Kingdom, a few millimetres compared to an endless line. 99.99% of our eternal destiny will be joy and fulfilment beyond our present comprehension. Frankly, what do we expect but some suffering now? These brief moments are just a few quick blows of the hammer on our nature, preparing us to *appreciate* just a little what we will be given. There is an anonymous line which has gone round and round in my mind: "I vowed that naked I would follow the naked Christ". Would any of us, Christian singles included, really doubt that this ought to be our attitude? Are we so much on the animal level that we are in Christ only for what we can get out of Him here and now? The ultimate purpose of most peoples' lives is to have a fulfilling relationship, with the concomitant procreation this normally involves. The view of the world is bound to compete in our minds with the view of God: which is that the ultimate purpose of *our* lives is not to perpetuate and fulfil ourselves, but to manifest His glory.

If Christian singles allow the reality of the Lord's cross to sink in, that the peerless Son of God died for us, that He showed us personally the greatest love that a man could; and if we just begin to grasp some sense of the eternity and moral perfection of the Kingdom ahead...surely we will echo Paul's response: "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). Surely we will be willing, in our finer moments, to give our all; the shirt on our back, our career, our relationships in this petty human life. The world we live in teaches, shouts at us, sings to us, implies to us....that the greatest love there is, is the love between a man and a woman. But this isn't so. "Greater love hath no man this, that a man (the Lord Jesus) lay down his life for his friends. And ye are my friends..." (Jn. 15:13). And consider how David and Jonathan loved each other, as a type of the love between Christ and His church- with a love passing the love of women (2 Sam. 1:26).

Despite the self-sacrifice which receiving this love must entail, God gives us so much that we can legitimately enjoy: a beautiful planet on which to live, sometimes material blessings, sometimes fulfilling family relationships. By doing so, God is almost spoiling us. We deserve death, or a few years of intense physical and mental suffering. But God has given us an easy ride. And therefore, as children accustomed to too much, we tend to get grumpy when we don't get some of these extra things. Marriage, material ease, fulfilling careers...these things are all icing on the cake, sugar in our tea. We should *expect* to be without them. After all, we are called to carry a cross. The Lord spoke of His followers as those who had forsaken houses, wife, families etc. for His sake. He said that in this life, they would receive an hundredfold of "houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands"; but He makes a pointed omission of promising that the forsaking of a *wife* will be recompensed in this life.

7-10-2 The Singleness Phenomenon

We've got to face up to the issue. Well over 50% of all adults in the world are single. [\(1\)](#). But that's not all. Evangelical Christian groups offer research which suggests that the percentage of singles within their churches is much higher than that in the surrounding world. [\(2\)](#).

Why is singleness such an especial problem in our last days, and why is there little direct Biblical teaching about it? Singleness comes about from being called to the Gospel single, from being divorced or separating after baptism. But there are another group of effectively "single" people within our community: those whose marriages have become so cold that each partner lives a single life, working out their own relationship with God, just laying their heads down in the same house each night. Far more of this goes on than we realize or care to admit. Israel as a nation were the people of God. There was no real problem in finding partners. The New Testament church was comprised mainly of adults called to the Gospel in a married state. But there is another reason why singleness is a phenomenon of the last two centuries. Until modern times, everyone got married. Young single people were almost unknown. God's definition of marriage in Gen. 2:24 implies the same: a man would leave his parents and cleave to his woman (s.w. wife), and they would become (through the process of married life) "one flesh". The idea of single people living alone in their lonely flat in suburbia was unheard of. The Hebrew and Greek languages use the same words for "woman" and "married woman", and for "man" and husband". A "girl" means both a girl, a virgin and an unmarried woman (hence the confusion over Is. 7:14). The assumption was that all young girls got married; there was no concept of a voluntarily single woman. And throughout the world, people got married from economic and practical necessity rather than from falling in love and then choosing to get married. The first Biblical marriage was an arranged marriage, and so are most of the Biblical examples. It seems that this system fits our nature best. It has been observed: "Freewill in courtship was virtually nil...from about 1800 to virtually 2000AD there has been choice by freewill. Putting 200 years over 6000 years...free choice of marriage partners has been but 3.3% of the course of human history" (3). Interestingly, Benazir Bhutto (one time Prime Minister of Pakistan) chose to go through with an arranged marriage despite the opportunity of Western style courtship and freewill marriage. She commented: "...in love marriages, I imagined, the expectations were so high they were bound to be dashed. There must also be the fear that the love might die, and with it the marriage" (4). The risks of our Western-style freewill marriages are therefore very high. More Christian couples than we might imagine struggle with a disillusion with their marriage. Singleness for people of marriageable age is therefore a recent phenomenon. The majority of converts in New Testament times were adults and therefore married at the time of their baptism.

The fact is, the Genesis record describes how woman was taken out of man, and yet in marriage man and woman become "one flesh" again. A man will desire to "cleave" to his wife (Gen. 2:24), literally to chase, follow hard after. The desire to chase a woman and marry her is therefore a natural urge that will always play itself out. There is a natural desire within human beings to achieve this rejoining. The lonely world in which we live, with the breakdown of the extended family and local community, makes loneliness all the more poignant. The art of deep conversation is fast disappearing in the world, relationships become utilitarian rather than real. The single believer yearns more and more for a spiritual and physical soul-mate. And yet God, through His moral teaching (e.g. concerning not marrying unbelievers) has made it very difficult for His children in these last days to marry as He intended. The conclusion is clear: the singleness phenomenon is a very common method which God is using to spiritually develop His latter day family.

Notes

(1) Statistics taken from Gary Collins, "Singleness", in *Christian Counselling* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979) and from the Marriage Research Centre at the Central Middlesex Hospital, UK.

(2) There is another, related phenomenon to the singleness phenomenon: The percentage of single females in many churches is far greater than the percentage of single males. This is certainly reflected in our experience in the 21st Century. This phenomenon would repay closer investigation, Biblically and otherwise.

(3) S.M. Algar, 'Marriage, Failing Or Failed', *The Dawn Ecclesial Magazine*, Vol. 56 No. 6 (June, 1995).

(4) Benazir Bhutto, *Daughter Of The East* (London: Pergamon, 1988). She also makes the point that there is little "love" in arranged marriages. The way the Bible commands married couples to love each other was therefore far more revolutionary than we might imagine.

7-10-3 Some Christian Myths About Marriage

This section will consider the down side and myths about marriage. But be warned, the next chapter discusses the down side of the single life. There's something in our nature that yearns for the grass on the other side of the fence. Believers are either married or single. The married think of the benefits of singleness, and the single long for the perceived advantages of marriage. If our marital status frustrates us, we need to be especially aware of this. Many marrieds will reason: "I wouldn't be what I am now spiritually if I hadn't married", or "I could be so much more spiritual if it wasn't for my wife and family"; and many singles lament: "I'd be so much stronger spiritually if I were married" - forgetting, of course, that God wants us to be spiritual, and He arranges our situation to that end. But we simply can't argue from the counter-factual situation (i.e. speculating what might have happened if X or Y had or hadn't happened). The single brother, for example, doesn't *know* he'll be stronger if he marries. It seems true that many married believers (especially when faced with 1 Cor. 7!) magnify the benefits of marriage to rationalize their own position. They can't conceive of the possibility of consciously choosing the single life; to them, marriage was so obviously the right and only choice. They can't imagine what life might have been like if they had consciously decided to be single and live for the Lord.

Love Isn't Marriage

Many singles will tend to equate love with marriage, forgetting that many get married from an obsession with the idea of marriage and the marriage process rather than true love. This is one of the biggest single-Christian myths about marriage. Because of this, some will marry a unbeliever because they so want to get married at all costs. But marriage in the world is an endless search for the end of the rainbow; nobody has really arrived, despite their pretensions. As psychologists probe deeper and deeper into the human needs and experience, they continually arrive at the conclusion that there is something insoluble and insatiable within our human psyche that marriage and usual human relationships, unaffected by anything super-human, cannot affect. C.G. Jung concludes: "Human thought and relationships cannot conceive any system or final truth that can give the patient what he needs in order to live: this is, faith, hope, love and insight" [\(1\)](#). But we shouldn't need a psychoanalyst to tell us this. The Almighty explicitly and implicitly prohibits marriage out of the Faith.

Being aware of this, some single believers become convinced that if only they can marry a believer, almost *any* believer, their marriage will be wonderful. Again, they tend to equate love with marriage. They forget that love, joy and peace are fruits of the Spirit, developed in us by the word, irrespective of our marital status. And they need to remember that Paul had to encourage married brothers and sisters to love each other (Col. 3:18-21), he had to tell brethren not to get bitter with their wives because of the restrictions they gave them. He had to tell wives to submit themselves to their husbands rather than getting on with their own agenda.

This is the reality of married life in Christ; it's a struggle, just as the single life is. For example, sexual self-restraint is still required even within marriage (1 Cor. 7:3-5). The world's view of marriage is that such an intimate relationship, coupled with parenthood, will help a person's self-discovery and self-fulfilment. Yet surely *Biblical* marriage is about self-sacrifice, submission of one's personal and sexual desires to the will of the partner, putting another before oneself. Brethren so desperate for marriage should consider the implications of Eph. 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, *and gave himself for it*". It's that last phrase, in the Greek, which is the hard thing; because it's the same as used concerning Christ giving up His final breath on the cross. He died as an act of the will, He gave His life up, He controlled the very moment of His death as a huge act of the will; no one took His life from Him, He *gave it up* of His own will (Jn. 10: 18). This should make any brother think more than once about marriage. And it should make all of us think twice about encouraging any brother to enter into this relationship. Marriage isn't just a legitimate way of expressing our sexuality- although many will admit that this is really why they got married. And it isn't just a God-designed cure for loneliness. Marriage in Christ is a "mystery", something extremely deep (Eph. 5:32).

Christian Myths About Marriage

When it comes to marriage, there is amongst us what I'd call the happy ending syndrome. We can somehow feel that the young couple walk off into the sunset, to live happily ever afterwards in their cosy Christian world. But now, as a community, we're starting to see that this really isn't the case. Couples split up, or their relationships become dead, some concealing this more than others. Sadly, I'm a realist. It often makes me unpopular, but I can't live in a cotton-wool, Mickey Mouse world. I attend many baptisms, and of course I rejoice; but I can't ever stop my awareness that one in three baptized leave the faith [\(2\)](#) (and many others grow passive and indifferent). I can't forget all the fine friends I've had in Christ, who now no longer walk with us. I can't escape what I call the "Where are you tonight?" syndrome. And it's getting the same with Christian marriage. I rejoice, but I see the statistical realities very clearly. Those under 30s who marry in the world only have (at best) a 50% chance of keeping together; one in two break up. Within the Evangelical Churches, one in eight break up [\(3\)](#). And within the 1000-strong church of my youth, I once calculated something similar. And (realist again!) it has to be said that all these figures are worsening.

Of course, this wasn't true until the 1970s. What is fast becoming the Christian myth about marriage was absolutely true until then: Get married, have your children, you'll find great spiritual help for yourself, you'll help your partner to the Kingdom, you'll be a solid, reliable member of an ecclesia, your children will come into the church if you bring them up properly, take them to Sunday School and church gatherings, do the Bible readings together. Then they'll get married, look after you when you're old, and you'll be discreetly wiping the tears away from your eyes as you watch your grand-daughter baptized. This was the theory, this was all true, more or less. But not now. There's scarcely a Christian family without the emotional scars of marriage break up, of many children who've rejected the Gospel, or whose commitment is self-admittedly minimal. What was such a grand theory and what worked down through the generations simply isn't working now. Children don't come into the Truth so easily, do what you will for them. Marriages often *don't* hold together. Some of us sat down one evening and made a list of all the married brethren and sisters we knew. We came to the conclusion, from a total of around 450 married Christian couples, that on average between one in two and one in three raised Christian children are baptized [\(4\)](#). Yet our aim in having children is to produce saints, not church members. Of those who are baptized, one in

three give up their interest in the Kingdom- with all that may entail at the judgment. So having children with the hope they will come to the Kingdom is a risky business; a one in four chance in the UK, or worse as the last days progress. I'm sorry to say all this. I can almost feel the passive resentment of those who have sacrificed great things for the sake of having a family. But how many times can a man turn around, and pretend that he just hasn't seen? For how long can we hear what we want to hear, and disregard the rest? Perhaps what I'm saying is ahead of its time; if the Lord doesn't return imminently as we hope, it may be that the full shattering of the Christian myth concerning marriage and children will only be seen in the next generation. This isn't to say that the Biblical theory of homebuilding and child-rearing is faulty, or that we are wrong to attempt to follow it. Every generation has been increasingly morally bankrupt, and yet the power of Divine principles is such that successful family life *is* possible; of course it is. But I am simply pointing out that increasingly, our community is painfully failing in it; and when ruefully considering the road of family life, the single believer should bear this in mind. It's not a reason *not* to get married; but it may help dispel some of the myth that marriage is the less painful road than that of the single life.

One other observation is that many parents go through great turmoil in their own faith as a result of their children rejecting the Gospel. Thus some will end up saying things like " Perhaps they weren't called..." ; with the terrible implication that the Gospel, the knowledge of the cross of Christ and the Kingdom this made possible, is not powerful enough of itself to call a man to salvation. Those who have been called out of non-Christian backgrounds repeatedly find it difficult to believe that someone can hear the true Gospel from childhood, do nothing about it- and walk away scot-free. Having children and teaching them the Faith therefore creates a large emotional problem for the parent if they refuse it. All this said, it must be emphasized that there is nothing wrong with marriage in itself. There is a God-given beauty and comeliness to it which the failure of man mustn't obscure. The faithful have always lived in times when the surrounding world is collapsing morally, and taking many of the ecclesia with it. But for those who held to God's way, family life was and is always possible. I'm simply saying that the Christian experience of marriage isn't as positive as it once was, and those who long for marriage as the panacea for all problems would be naive to ignore this.

" But this I say, brethren..."

But put all these statistics, all these observations of Christians, on one side for the moment. It's clear from 1 Cor. 7 that in the *very* last days, the believers will be " happier" if they remain single, because " the time is short" (1 Cor. 7:29). The problem is, deciding whether we are actually in that very last period. There is good reason to think that in some ways we are; and yet there are also some prophecies which as I write these words just don't seem to have had the scale of fulfilment which their contexts suggest. " The time is short" . This can't really be argued with. " It is good for the present *distress*" (1 Cor. 7:26) uses the same word as in Lk. 21:23 concerning the distress of the last days. Some of us have no hesitation in proclaiming that the time of " distress" of Lk. 21 is upon us. But if it is, then we need to adjust our marriage attitudes accordingly. The above statistical analysis seems proof enough that the last days are truly coming upon us; no longer is marriage and family life working as it once did. Some who chose marriage are ending up, exactly as Paul predicted, with " trouble in the flesh" (1 Cor. 7:28). The obvious reaction to what I'm suggesting is that there are many examples of happy marriages. This is true; but it doesn't disprove my point, that if we are truly in the last days then marriage won't work well *now* as well or as easily as it did in the past. And the problems our young couples are facing is proof of this.

The True Satisfaction

Although married, David's family life was a source of grief to him. He comments that the men of the world "are satisfied with children", but for him, the only satisfaction would be when he resurrected to behold God's face and to be turned into that same image: "As for me, I shall behold thy face... I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (Ps. 17:14,15 RV). This was *his* satisfaction; the satisfaction of men of the world was simply in their children, and to "leave the rest of their substance to their babes", i.e. their grandkids. And David's perspective must be that of us all.

Notes

(1) C.G. Jung, *Modern Man In Search Of A Soul* (London: Ark, 1984), p.261.

(2) An analysis of numbers of baptisms against numbers of departures over the past 40 years of the *Dawn* magazine actually gives a worse figure.

(3) Figures from Helena Wilkinson, *Beyond Singleness* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995), p. 103. However, the effect of legalistic Christianity may well make these figures even worse. "Pollster George Barna discovered that born-again Christians in modern America have a higher rate of divorce (27 %) than non-believers (23%); those who describe themselves as fundamentalists have the highest percentage of all (30%). Indeed, four of the six states with the highest divorce rates fall in the region known as the Bible Belt" (quoted in Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Harper & Collins, p. 263). These figures I find hard to believe (especially the low rate of divorce for non-believers) but they are worth meditation.

(4) Our analysis revealed a distinct feature: there tends to be a much higher 'conversion ratio' of children in some churches compared to others. This might suggest that there is strong peer group pressure affecting the decision to be baptized, rather than young people making the decision of their own volition.

7-10-4 Spiritual Dangers Of The Single Life

Having said all that we have above, the single life is deceptively spiritually dangerous. Many in the world are increasingly opting against marriage- for selfish motives. There's nothing like living alone for bringing out the animal selfishness in daily life which we should utterly shun. Yet singleness not only tempts one to be selfish in practical ways. It can breed a despicable focus on self to the exclusion of sensitivity to all others. For some, there is the sense that *everyone* else is somehow OK, and they are the only person in the world suffering as they are. Much of the world's advice to singles is hopelessly self-centred. One 'Christian' strategy for singles includes: " On paper, describe your ideal mate...consider your best interests...God wants you to have a great future...appraise your needs" (1). This is exactly the opposite, it seems to me, of where our emphasis should be. The stress is all on self, self-benefit, and the idea that God wants to give us an easy ride now as well as future salvation. This kind of advice is sadly not absent from the brotherhood. The emphasis is all on *self*, and the idea that *one day* marriage will come. This inculcates a mind-set dominated by the " When I get married..." syndrome, a looking forward to that day rather than the Kingdom.

Single believers can become so absorbed in themselves that the selfless spirit of the cross is lost. Perhaps this is one of the greatest spiritual dangers of the single life. This is why 1 Cor. 7 doesn't advocate singleness in itself; it suggests a rejection of marriage *in order that* the subsequent energies can be directed into a relationship with the Lord Jesus. If we don't do this, then the single person will be consumed by their own sexual and emotional energy; they will become so obsessed with their single state that they fail to hear the call of service. Of course, Abraham wasn't single. But he had no seed, and his relationship with Sarah seems to

have been in some ways rocky. And yet his energy to serve shines through the Genesis records. Perhaps one reason for this was because of the way in which he didn't fix his mind upon (Gk.) the fact his body was dead (i.e. impotent) and unable to produce seed (Rom. 4:19). He wasn't obsessed with his state, yet he lived a life of faith that ultimately God's Kingdom would come, he rejoiced at the contemplation of Christ his Lord; and he filled his life with practical service. He wasn't obsessed with the fact that in his marital position he personally couldn't have children when it seemed this was what God wanted him to do; and this was very pleasing to God.

If single believers do 'fix their mind upon' getting married, their thinking will tend to revolve around one ideal person. And that person will not be the Lord Jesus. Their mentality will be dominated by 'getting', rather than growing in realization that we are here to give, give and give, not to receive. They become prone to allow their horizons to be filled with the possibility of finding this one person, and therefore their commitment to the rest of the body becomes minimal. Thus a wife-hunting brother might eagerly travel any distance to a church gathering where he knows there will be some eligible sisters; but not make the effort to attend Bible Class in his own church, comprised of elderly believers [purely fictitious example]. Single believers in this state will not be living life; they'll be living with the feeling that they've just got to hold on a bit longer, and *then* the glorious day of marriage will come. But living in this state of uncertainty takes away from real life; they are living in a state of temporary, half-conscious suspension until their dream comes true. And yet we ought to be running a race towards that moment when we will "win Christ" - not towards some short term objective like marriage. The spiritual dangers of the single life are really complex.

Beauty And The Beast

I've left until last what is perhaps the most evident of the spiritual dangers of the single life. We are built as sexual creatures. There is that desire, as explained in Gen. 2:24, for man and woman to come together, to become one flesh. It's no use denying the energy that is within us to that end. The Biblical way of expressing this energy in a sexual way is through marriage. If human beings don't express that energy, they become angry and bitter. And yet the great change in society over the past 200 years means that now many people live alone. The result of this is that they express their sexual energy in ways other than marriage. The world has become adept at providing a quick fix to sink that energy. But of course the quick fix syndrome has always been with us. Throughout Old and New Testament times, the quick fix was provided by temple prostitutes, their popularity so much the greater because they left men with the sense that they had been participating in something divine rather than carnal. So many of the warnings against adultery and fornication are in this context. Indeed, the Greek word translated "fornication" is *porneia*, from whence "porn". In most cases it doesn't refer to going too far with your girlfriend (not that we are condoning that); it refers to the use of temple prostitutes. Israel's endless fascination with the groves, idols and asherah poles of the Canaanite tribes was the Old Testament equivalent. So the repeated message is: '*Don't* take the quick fix, reject expresso-love, build up relationships, see sexuality in its intended context, not isolated as it is in pornography'. It seems that there were some in the first century who reasoned: "Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats", implying that satisfying our sexual needs was just the same as satisfying our physical hunger. Hence Paul's response: "[No...] the body is not for fornication" (1 Cor. 6:13).

It's possible that sometimes "fornication" refers to a way of life and thinking rather than just the specific physical actions. Thus 1 Pet. 4:3 speaks of how before conversion "we walked

(lived day by day) *in* lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine..." (10). It doesn't mean that all day every day Peter and those brethren had committed fornication; but it was a way of life that got a grip on their personality. And so it is today, although made much worse by the ingenuity of man. That sexual impurity is a state of mind was of course taught by the Lord Himself (Mt. 5:28). The temptation for many Christian singles is to be clever enough to keep their nose clean in terms of actual relationships, but to allow the mind to dissipate the sexual energy of our natures. Of course, sexual attraction and arousal is to some degree spontaneous, and there is therefore nothing sinful about it in itself. But the age old question arises: how far can we go? To answer this in physical terms would be inappropriate. It's the state of mind that is important.

Conclusion

So, we have strong sexual energy. It is difficult to live in this world without expressing it. This is obviously one of the spiritual dangers of the single life. God's intended way of our expressing it is through marriage. And yet marriage is fraught with problems, and seems not advisable in the last days, according to 1 Cor. 7. The single life is also extremely difficult, if by "single" we mean single as the world understands it; living without a partner. It's difficult to be spiritual if we are single, and it's very hard to keep in all our sexual energy. We almost *must* express it. When Jephthah's daughter realized she couldn't ever have sex because of her father's vow, she wept for two months (Jud. 11:37 GNB). This was some of that energy coming out another way. So from where we have reached, both Biblically and psychoanalytically, it seems God is putting us in these last days into a no-win situation. He's given us this sexual energy, which almost has to come out. But He suggests that in the last days, marriage will bring its share of problems too. Yet the single life has its great problems and temptations. But God wants our good, both now and eternally. He has provided a way of escape. Sorry for the cliff-hanger. But we'll consider it in the next two sections.

Notes

(1) Helena Wilkinson, *op cit* pp. 72-74.

7-10-5 1 Corinthians 7: An Exposition

I have to say in preface to this section that what follows is how I understand this passage in all intellectual and expositional honesty. I as a married man can make no pretension to being able to live up to the high standard which Paul seems to be suggesting. As with much in this book, I offer the following exposition more to stimulate Bible-minded and prayerful meditation, rather than as a prescriptive statement of how a believer must live.

The power of Paul's teaching about singleness is backed up by his personal situation. As a member of the Council who condemned Stephen, he would have had to be married. An unmarried Orthodox Jew would have been a contradiction in terms at that time. And yet he is evidently single in his Christian ministry. It seems fairly certain that his wife either died or left him at the time of his conversion, probably taking the children with her. If this is so, it gives extra poignancy to his comment that he had suffered the loss of all things for the sake of his conversion (Phil. 3:8). The chances are that he thought and wrote that with a difficult glance back to that Jerusalem girl, the toddlers he'd never seen again, the life and infinite

possibilities of what might have been... And it gives another angle on his description of his converts as his children.

The Corinthians had written letters to Paul asking about questions such as singleness. His reply, in 1 Corinthians 7, is as relevant to us as any of his letters to any other ecclesia. It's true that he says that his advice is prompted by " the present distress" and the fact that " the time is short" , reference to the 'last days' in the run up to AD70. We have shown above that our last days are the real, major fulfilment of the " distress" prophesied in Lk. 21, and that for those living just prior to the second coming, " the time is short" .

" It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence [in sexual matters]: and likewise also the wife...the wife hath not power of her own body...defraud ye not one the other [sexually], except it be with consent, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer: and come together again [sexually] that Satan tempt you not for your [abstinence]. But I speak this by permission, not of commandment" (1 Corinthians 7:1-6).

The second verse tends to be taken out of context, as if Paul is saying "To stop you using the temple prostitutes, you really should get married, because our sexual urges are just so strong'. But that would be at variance with Paul's repeated emphasis that it is " better" to be single, and that single believers should try not to marry (1 Corinthians 7: 7,8,27-29, 32-35, 38-40). The context of those first six verses seems to be a question concerning whether it was good for a believing couple to permanently stop sexual relationships, especially if only one of them wanted to do so. Paul seems to be saying: 'Ideally, yes. But the chances are you won't keep it up, one of you will succumb to fornication. So every baptized husband should have (sexually) his wife. Neither of them should refuse sex to their partner, on whatever ground, spiritual or otherwise. However, in such cases why not agree to abstinence for limited periods?'. " I speak this by permission, not of commandment" must be linked with 1 Corinthians 7 v.12: " Now to the rest speak I, not the Lord (Jesus)" . The implication is that verses 1-6 were not a repetition of Christ's teaching, neither were vv. 12 ff. But therefore we should read verses 7-11 as being 'the Lord Jesus speaking', i.e. Paul is repeating the spirit of Christ's teaching. The content of v. 7-11 concerns being single and not divorcing; it is significant that Paul says that what he said about marriage was him speaking " by permission" , but what he says about singleness is from the Lord Jesus Himself. Once this is grasped, it becomes irrelevant to suggest that Paul is only telling some in Corinth to remain single at one point in time. He is repeating the Lord's timeless message:

" For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good that they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn [in lust]" (1 Corinthians 7 v. 7-9).

Adam alone was " not good" . Adam and Eve together are described as " very good" (Gen. 1:31). Paul seems to have this in mind when he says three times that " it is good" to be single (1 Corinthians 7:1,8,26). But what's the point of this paradox? Perhaps Paul's point is: 'In the old, natural creation, it wasn't good that a man should be alone. But now, in the new creation, it's good that a man does try to live a single life, because as Adam married Eve, so we are now married to Christ'. Or it may be that attention is being drawn to the fact that God's provision of Eve was the first of God's countless concessions to human need. It was God's

intention, ideally, that Adam be single, therefore he was potentially " good" in his single state. But he couldn't handle it, therefore God made him a partner. And therefore Paul says that to live the single life is " good" . But in the same way as God made a concession to Adam, so He does to believers now; " but if they cannot contain, let them marry" . Whether we agree this makes marriage a concession to human need or not, the fact is that surely single believers should at least *consider* the single life. Likewise Paul's invitation to follow his example of being single in order to devote himself to his Lord must be taken as seriously as his other invitations to follow his example (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:33; 11:1). He knew that he was (in the words of Robert Roberts) " a Christ-appointed model" ; the record of his life is framed to give the picture of the ideal believer.

The triple description of the single life as " good" (1 Corinthians 7:1,8,26) uses a Greek word which means 'beautiful'. Yet many a lonely, longing sister might not see anything 'beautiful' about her singleness; neither would she go along with 1 Corinthians 7:34, which says that the unmarried woman has the advantage that she can single-mindedly give herself to the things of the Lord Jesus. It may seem to her that she would serve the Lord much better if she were married. And probably so. This raises the fundamental point that by " the unmarried" Paul doesn't mean 'the single ones in the ecclesia'. He is referring to those who had consciously decided to be single, and to channel their emotional energies into the Lord Jesus. Likewise " the widows" doesn't mean 'all those sisters in the ecclesias who have lost husbands'. It surely means those widows who had devoted themselves to the Lord Jesus rather than seeking another partner, after the pattern of widows devoting themselves to the temple (cp. Lk. 2:37). The fact he recommends some younger widows to remarry (1 Tim. 5:14) is proof enough that " widows" doesn't mean 'all widows'. It may be that single and widowed brethren and sisters made open statements of their decision to devote themselves to the Lord Jesus. 1 Tim. 5:9 suggests there was a specific " number" of widows in the Ephesus ecclesia who were financially supported by the ecclesia. This, then, is the beginning of the answer to the dilemma we are in: to devote ourselves to the Lord Jesus, and so become " unmarried" in the sense Paul uses the idea in 1 Corinthians 7.

" The gifts and calling of God..."

This particular sub-section I find very difficult to both understand and write about. Paul seems to be setting a standard which for me personally seems too high. But again, in all honesty, one has no right to interpret Scripture according to one's own level of comfortable spirituality. I openly admit that I find the standard Paul sets almost discouraging. I would rather understand it in another way, but in all honesty I cannot. So I resign myself to salvation by grace, and doing the best I can in response to that grace.

" But every man hath his proper (Gk. *idios*, his very personal) gift of God..." is often used as the get-out by many eager to justify marriage. They read it as if it means 'Well, if this is what you want, OK, but if you're cut out for the single life, well OK'. But again, this would be at variance with Paul's statement that " it is good" for all single believers to remain as himself, and that they should only marry if they can't contain. Remember that Paul repeatedly urges that the single life " is better" . This would be irrelevant if somehow we are each predestined to be either single or married. There is an element of choice implied throughout 1 Corinthians 7. This cannot be reconciled with the idea that God has given singleness to some people, as a kind of gift of spiritual strength regardless of their own effort.

But what does it mean, to have our own personal gift from God which affects whether we are

married or single? It must be connected with v.17, which is in the context of remaining in the marital position we were in at conversion: " As God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk" . The gifts are distributed at our calling. The ideas are again linked in Rom. 11:29: " The gifts and calling of God are without repentance" . This idea of us each being given a gift at the time of our conversion goes back to the parable of Lk. 19:13, where each of us, Christ's servants, are given a gift to work with. The goods of the Father are divided between the sons, for them to use as they think best (Lk. 15:12). " The Kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who *called* his own servants, and *delivered* unto them his goods" (Mt. 25:14). Note how the *calling* of the servants and the giving them the gifts / goods are connected [\(1\)](#). The idea of called servants is alluded to in 1 Corinthians 7:22. We have each been given " gifts" at our conversion. Our 'calling' is related to our situation at the time of our conversion. There is a parallel between God distributing gifts to each of us, and Him calling us (1 Corinthians 7:17). This is to be expected from the allusion back to the parables; the gifts are given to each of us at our conversion or 'calling'.

" Every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that" is in the context of answering questions about whether a believing couple should abstain from sexual relations and effectively live the single life. Paul is saying 'If at your conversion / calling you were single, then you should continue to be single. But if you were married, you should continue a normal married life, including sexual relations. God knows what He is doing. If He had intended you to be single, He would have called you as single'. And the context of 7:17,19 is similar; the question was concerning whether someone who was called to the Truth married to an unbeliever should leave them. The answer was 'No, if it's possible to live reasonably with them'. The reason was because: " As God hath distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every one, so let him walk...let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called" . In other words: 'If you were called in this position, well this is what the Lord gave you, marriage to an unbeliever was the gift, the talent, he gave you to work with; so better stay with the unbeliever and try to convert him. Then you will have some more talents to show to your Lord when he returns'. Our marital status at the time of conversion is being spoken of as our calling, as what we were given, one of the talents given to us, in the language of the parable. This thought alone should make whatever situation we are in seem less of a burden; it's part of the gifts, the talents, we were given at baptism. It's for us to work with it. And the same applies, Paul reasons, if you were called to the Truth as a slave. Don't fret about it, it's one of those precious talents of the parable; although naturally in that context, " if thou mayest be made free, *use it*" (7:21)- note the allusion to *using* the talents in the parable.

The idea of abiding in the same calling in which we were called is a major theme in 1 Corinthians 7 (vv. 7, 17-20, 24,27). Paul ordained this to be accepted in all ecclesias (1 Corinthians 7:17). Yet if we are honest, this is something we have completely overlooked as a community. Don't forget that Paul isn't saying 'If you're called single, well you shouldn't get married'. He's saying 'If you're called single, then it seems God intends you to give your life to the Lord, dedicate yourself to Him. Singleness is one of the talents you've been given; so use it as God intended. But I'm not insisting on this'.

Eunuchs For The Kingdom

We have made the point that Paul's teaching concerning singleness here is repeating that of the Lord. But where did Christ specifically speak about singleness? Surely it was when He spoke about men making themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom's sake (Mt. 19:12). The

surrounding verses concerning divorce are alluded to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10,11. The disciples' comment "It is not good (for single people) to marry" is picked up by Paul when he says it is "good" to be single unto the Lord. The Lord's response to "It is not good to marry" was to say that yes they were right, His single converts were intended to be eunuchs for the sake of the Gospel they had believed, but the world couldn't understand what He was saying. "All men cannot receive this saying, saving they to whom it is given" shouldn't be read as meaning that not all believers can accept singleness, only those who God has strengthened. It should be connected with Mt. 13:11: "It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven, but to them (the world) it is not given". The believers have been *given* the Gospel of the Kingdom (Jn. 17:8,14), the grace (gift) of God had been given to the Corinthians in the form of the Gospel, "the testimony of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:4,6). So "they to whom it is given" are all the believers; the world can't understand Christ's teaching here, but they (us) to whom it is given, will receive it. "He that is able to receive it, let him receive it" hardly sounds like Christ saying that if His followers wanted to be serious about what He was saying, they were welcome, but if not, not to worry. It is parallel to "he that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (e.g. Mt. 11:15; 13:9,43). This is hardly giving His followers the option to take Him seriously or not. Those who heard were His disciples (Mk. 4:24); those who didn't hear were the outside world. "There be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of heaven's sake" doesn't sound like Christ was referring to OT examples; "there be eunuchs..." . He was commenting on the statement that because of the likelihood that marriage wouldn't work, it was better not to marry. He is effectively saying: the world can't understand this, but you can: those who have heard the Gospel of the Kingdom and respond to it will be willing to make themselves eunuchs, i.e. not to marry. Paul is alluding to this, although he makes a concession, in saying that although this is the "commandment of the Lord" Jesus, he had permission to allow single converts to marry.

This is more radical for us, probably, than it was for the first century church. As we have said, people married young, often for reasons other than love, and there were very few single marriageable people. Once a man or woman was an adult, they got married; hence the lack of words to differentiate a man from a husband; every man was married. The majority of converts in the early church were adults, rather than children of believers. The majority of our early brethren were therefore married.

But Today...

But today things are quite different. The majority of our converts are called single. We have shown earlier that single people have a huge drive latent within them, which simply has to find expression. I believe the interpretation offered above is correct. It is God's intention that those converted single make a special commitment to devote themselves to the Lord. Therefore it was potentially possible that a huge amount could have been achieved, both in Biblical research and preaching, by the many single converts produced by the many converts from Christian families. But it seems we've missed our way here. We failed to read Mt. 19 and 1 Corinthians 7 correctly. And we pushed our single converts into family life without trying to fan their flame into yet wider and greater heights of devotion. And perhaps now the Lord is pushing us, through the increasing failure (relatively) of Christian family life, to re-think all this. If only a handful of single converts could seriously accept all this, the energy that would be unleashed into our preaching would be phenomenal. We would turn the world upside down by our preaching, as the early church did (on the admission of their bitter enemies). We would push back the frontiers of our Bible research. How many *more* things have we been blind to down the years, which are just waiting for some serious student to

discover, uninhibited by family ties, able to give him (or her)self without distraction to deep study?

The context in 1 Corinthians 7 v.7-9 is of discussing the question of whether married believers should abstain from sexual relations. Paul is saying 'No, because you should remain in the position you were in when you were called'. He then seems to add a parenthesis in v. 8,9: " I say therefore (i.e. I will therefore later be telling) the unmarried and widows" that it is better to remain single, because of this same reason- they too should stay in the marital position they were in when they were called. This explains why when Paul starts to talk about virgins, he writes as if he is addressing the case of single converts for the first time.

" Now concerning virgins [i.e. single converts]...I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress...it is good for a man so to be...art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless, such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you" (1 Corinthians 7 v.25-28)

" Such shall have trouble in the flesh" is proof enough that if single converts get married, married life won't be a bed of roses. They were called single because that was how ideally they can serve God. It was His plan that they should take the special step of devotion to the Lord. If we go against God's plan because we seek an easier way, He allows this; but we will have trouble in the flesh. This is a principle true not only of marriage. It may be that Paul's " thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7) was a " trouble in the flesh" as a result of realizing what God wanted through special revelations, but failing to fully do it.

" But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, therefore, that both they that have wives be as though they have none [alluding to Abraham and Isaac in time of persecution]; and they that weep [i.e. lamenting their singleness], as though they wept not; and they that rejoice [at finding a partner] as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy [paying the dowry], as though they possessed not; and they that use this world / age / present time [this is what making use of the concession for single believers to marry in the last days is] as not abusing it [the concession re. marriage]...I would have you without carefulness [alluding to the Lord's commands not to take 'care' about the things of this life; 'I want you to be obedient to the spirit of the sermon on the mount']. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord [not every single brother does this; this proves again that the " unmarried" refer to those who have consciously chosen to devote themselves to the Lord]...there is a difference also between a wife and a virgin [" difference" is the same word translated " distributed" in v.17; at the time of their calling, God gives the gift/ talent of being married to some of His daughters, and the gift of singleness to others]...she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband [this sounds as if Paul had in mind those whose 'distribution' at conversion had been to be married to an unbeliever in the world]. And this I speak for your profit; not that I may cast a snare upon you, but for that which is comely [Gk. 'beautiful'- the beauty of a life devoted to the Lord], and that ye may attend upon the Lord without distraction" (1 Corinthians 7 v. 29-35).

Attending upon (Gk. 'being a servant at table of') the Lord Jesus brings to mind Martha. Caring for the things that belong to the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 7 v. 32) alludes to Mary. And " without distraction" uses a word which occurs elsewhere only in Lk. 10:40, concerning how Martha was " cumbered" with her serving. The point of all this is to show that the married believer will tend towards the Martha position, which was a position rebuked

by the Lord, in favour of that of Mary. Paul is putting before single believers the real possibility of serving the Lord practically, like Martha, but with the undistracted devotion of Mary. The fact some sisters are called to this single life indicates that because they have the physical anatomy necessary to produce children doesn't *necessarily* mean that this is therefore God's intention for them. All too often one hears it said that we are built to have sex and procreate, and therefore God must therefore intend marriage. But not so in every case, says the Spirit in Paul!

" Without distraction"

There is a repeated theme throughout this discourse that the life of devoted singleness to the Lord is " happier" , " better" , more 'profitable' and 'beautiful' than the married life, and that Paul's enthusiasm for this is not a snare; trying to live this kind of life isn't a trap that will strangle you. These descriptions will not be found true by anyone who half-heartedly thinks 'Well, I'll keep single and be quite enthusiastic about the Truth, but as and when a likely candidate comes along, well...' - not that I would (indeed, I *couldn't*!) despise any who think like this. But what Paul is speaking about is a single convert who accepts their singleness is a talent to be worked with, not handed back to the Lord in exchange for another one (i.e. marriage). Having made this recognition, they no longer care for the things of the world, and devote themselves to pleasing Christ. There is, Paul is saying, a freedom in this level of commitment. We have seen that Paul's teaching concerning singleness is alluding to Christ's comment that those who were in a position to marry would be willing to make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom. The idea of self-castration, obviously intended to be taken figuratively by the Lord, was that once the decision was taken, there was no desire to go back. There wasn't a problem with expressing sexual urges. Paul describes it as " standing steadfast in (the) heart, having no necessity, but having power over his own will, and hath so *decreed* in his heart" (1 Corinthians 7:37). The Greek for " decreed" is normally translated to judge, to divide between, as if the two options (marriage and deliberate singleness) have been weighed up, and a choice consciously made. Again, those who live the single life in the hope that one day they'll marry will not experience the blessings of the " unmarried" state which Paul speaks of. Sadly, many go through much agony because of being in this interim state between singleness and marriage. If one makes a judgment one way or the other, at least some of the agony is taken away; although if we were called single, and have followed the argument so far, the choice ought to be clear.

We've seen above that there has to be expression of sexual energy. Paul seems to be saying that this can be dissipated in the consciously chosen life of devotion to the Lord. We are pushing out into unsailed waters here. The option of being a eunuch for the Kingdom offers, according to Paul, a beauty, a personal profit, a great happiness, a lack of anxious care about the things of this life. *And no-one can deny this unless they have tried it!* Paul is our great example in all this, one who finished his course with joy, who could say with confidence that he had counted all as dung so that he might win Christ his Lord.

A Little Of Both...?

But there were those who 'became eunuchs', who took this decision in their hearts, who still found that they needed support from the opposite sex. 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 are hard to interpret, but my suggestion is that they refer to some brethren who had become " eunuchs" but had what we might call girlfriends within the ecclesia, although they did not have intercourse with them:

" If any man think that he behaveth himself uncomely [lit. not beautifully, s.w. v.35 concerning the comely beauty of the devoted single life; it the beauty of the devoted single life is marred by your relationship with your girlfriend..] toward his virgin, if she pass the flower of her age and so require, let him do what he will...let them marry [if he feels bad about the fact that he has kept her waiting so long that now she is too old to get married to anyone else, remembering that women normally got married very young, then the brother should marry her]. Nevertheless he that standeth steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin [the Greek suggests keeping a person in a state, rather than the brother keeping his own virginity], doeth well. So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better" .

Notice that the emphasis is on the brother; the decision to marry or not was totally his. God speaks from the perspective of the day- the woman had no say. The man is commended, it seems, if he suppressed his own 'soft' feelings for the sister concerned, and decided to keep on with his devotion to the Lord. " Having no *necessity*" uses the same word as in 1 Corinthians 7:26 concerning the present " distress" of the last days (Lk. 21:23). There seems to be a word play here: 'You may feel a *necessity* to marry, but in the *necessity* of the last days it's almost a *necessity* not to marry'. It seems that the brethren in question had had long term relationships with these sisters but without intercourse, and, predictably, pressures were arising- not least from the brother feeling that he had rather 'used' the sister concerned. It may be that the same scenario is implied in 1 Corinthians 7:9: " If they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn" . This suggests that the people concerned had partners in mind, and they were trying to be eunuchs for the Kingdom whilst also having a close relationship with the opposite sex. Paul doesn't condemn this out of hand, but says that it's better to remain pledged to the single life, and only change if your feelings towards your 'friend' get so out of hand it will lead you into sin.

It may be that Timothy was another brother who remained single for the sake of the Gospel, but found it hard to carry it through. Paul exhorts him to flee the (sexual) lusts of youth (2 Tim. 2:22), even in middle age; and in the same context he warns him to endure hardship so that he will please Christ (2 Tim. 2:4). The only other time this idea of pleasing Christ occurs is in 1 Corinthians 7:32, where the eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom is said to concentrate on pleasing Christ. The Soncino Commentary on Ex. 33:11 likewise suggests that Joshua being described as a " young man" devoted to the service of the tabernacle implies in Hebrew that he was an unmarried man, devoted to the things of the Kingdom. However, it would seem that later he married. We will see that Hezekiah was another in this category.

Great Expectations

There is evidence that " the single life was highly honoured and respected in the early church, sometimes even going beyond the teaching of Paul" (2). Yet for us, marriage is given more respect than singleness. The single believer is seen as somehow incomplete; there is a sense that the married home owner in a stable job is somehow spiritually strong too. Of course, there are many unstable single believers; but let's not judge the status of singleness by them. The experience of the next generation may well shatter the perception that marriage is obviously the best way for any single believer, whether or not the Biblical exposition above is accepted. I am suggesting that the Lord and Paul are asking a very high level of commitment from us. It's so high that it seems strange to us. The reason, I suggest, is that 21st Century Christianity and first century Christianity are very different- in terms of

commitment, not doctrine. Consider the sort of thing that was accepted as common-place in the early church, and yet which today would be frowned upon as spiritual fanaticism:

- Converts joyfully selling all their lands and property, pooling the money, and dividing it among the poorer members. Yet we can scarcely raise the money to pay for poorer brethren to attend a Bible School.
- Husbands and wives regularly abstaining from sex so they could the more intensely pray and fast for a period of several days. Surveys of Christian prayer habits reveal that on average we spend around 10 minutes / day praying. And scarcely any fast.
- Elders who spent so much time in prayer that they had to ask others to do some practical work for them so they could continue to give the same amount of time to prayer (Acts 6:2-4).
- Young brethren, " the messenger of the churches" , who spent their lives full time running errands in dangerous situations throughout the known world.
- Over zealous brethren (in Thessalonica) who packed up their jobs because they were so sure the second coming was imminent.
- The expectation that the Gospel of Mark (at least) was to be memorized by all converts. Most Christians can scarcely quote more than 50 Bible verses- after generations of Bible study in our community.
- The assumption that all believers would make converts (1 Cor. 3:10-15).
- Widows were expected to remain single; if they remarried, this was acceptable (1 Cor. 7:39,40), but Paul describes it as 'waxing wanton against Christ' (1 Tim. 5:11) because it was a stepping down from the higher standard, which he defines as remaining single (1 Corinthians 7:40). This seems a harsh attitude to us. But this is what the Spirit taught.
- Believers were regularly persecuted, tortured, imprisoned and forced to migrate long distances unless they made what some today would consider only a tokenistic denial of their faith.

We have somehow hived off the first century church in our mind, as if to say to ourselves: 'Well, that was them, but we're in a totally different spiritual environment'. The same mind-set occurs when we consider the zeal of earlier believers. There is no doubt that the more we read the New Testament, the more we will see that the level of commitment required was high indeed. The fact many failed to rise up to it doesn't affect this. That single converts were expected to remain single would not therefore have appeared so strange, once the spiritual context of the New Testament church is perceived.

Notes

(1) The first century church saw the manifestation of this in terms of the Spirit gifts being given (cp. 1 Cor. 12:11; Eph. 4:16; 1 Pet. 4:10); but there is a non-miraculous application too, now that the gifts have been withdrawn.

(2) A. Comes, *Divorce And Remarriage* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), pp. 119, 125,126.

7-10-6 Eunuchs For The Kingdom

1 Cor. 7 and Mt. 19 suggest a conscious decision to be single, to make oneself a eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom (does this mean for the sake of the work of the Gospel of the Kingdom?). *If* we do this, then all the positive language of 1 Cor. 7 comes gloriously true: we are "better", "happier", more 'profited' than the married and singles who haven't dedicated themselves. This is what we are promised, and this is what we will receive. We'll know the answer to the (so insensitive!) comment from married believers: "So when are you going to settle down, then?" . It'll be this: "I reckon I'm more settled down than you are..." - although politeness will forbid us to actually say it. Our attention to the things of this world, career, home etc. will go right down, the fear of future uncertainty as far as relationships goes just disappears. Now there's something to live and die for, something to consume every waking moment (and our subconscious thoughts as we sleep). There's the joy, peace and comfort of having at least pledged in our hearts a total commitment- even though, of course, our pathetic nature will hold us back. No longer will we be plagued by the knowledge that we just don't control our sexuality as we should do. We are promised that if we are eunuchs for the Kingdom's sake, we will be able "to attend upon the Lord *without distraction*" .

It won't be possible to make this commitment to being eunuchs for the Kingdom, to decree in our heart, and then just go on with the average Christian life: attending a few meetings, doing our readings in 15 minutes a day. *We'll have far more energy than that*. It has been rightly said that physical sexual activity needs to be separated from sexuality as a whole in any self-analysis. This is true. If that sexuality is expressed, the need for explicit sexual activity is not there very strongly. And according to 1 Cor. 7, it is possible to express one's sexuality, one's marital energy (or however we want to think of it) in spiritual ways. People in love will do anything; find money for the 'phone calls, find time to write, to travel, to meet, shift priorities so things are possible. And these really are the sort of things, in relation to spiritual life, that our lives will become full of. Exactly how we express our released energy is of course an individual thing. I can personally provide you (unless more than I think take up the gauntlet I'm laying down!) with enough contacts to follow up to keep you busy all day every day.

The Sake Of The Gospel

The most obvious way for fit people to give off all their new energy is, I suggest, in the mission field. There are many countries full of isolated new converts who only get a visit once every few months, if that. The hassles of travel and arranging visas, of working to get the money, of preparing exhortations and studies for them, looking up Bible readings beforehand and sorting out some comments, learning a new language, encouraging them in local preaching, worrying about likely future problems in those young ecclesias...all this is a 24 hour / day job. *It can take your soul*, until you lay your head down each night with no energy left to fantasize about someone you met yesterday; and up early in the morning, no lolling in bed in the twilight, half-conscious world of meandering thoughts. And there is a joy, a peace in all this. You see it in Paul, framed in the NT records as our hero, especially as he neared the end in 2 Tim. 4. He speaks so often of his converts as his children; and this is *absolutely true*. This is how you will feel to those you convert. The sense of parental commitment, pride, jealousy, intense joy and sadness, all of these needs are *partly* met by the experience of preaching, converting and nurturing in the faith. This really *is* an option to having physical children; who may very well (on average) turn away from the things you

hold most dear, and perhaps pull you along with them.

Of course, the question will arise: 'But can a devoted spiritual life as eunuchs for the Kingdom *fully* compensate for all the human pains and desires for married life?'. Whether the compensation is complete in every aspect is to some degree irrelevant, because the promise of the Spirit is that we *have the potential to be* happier, better, more profited, less distracted, if we are devoted to the Lord rather than married. And in any case, this question makes the huge assumption that married life has no pain and that it fulfils all the desires we have when single. This is incorrect; it doesn't fulfil all those desires, and in any case it presents a new set of pains and struggles. It would seem that having spiritual children *does* compensate for having natural children- there is something eternal about spiritual parenting, whereas if our natural children don't accept the faith, our relationship can only be for this life. And even then it will be filled with the agony of knowing that we have brought them into being only for them to reject the love of God in Christ, and to have to face the consequences; for knowledge brings responsibility, the call of God is in the Gospel. Of course, there is the ineffable sorrow of one's converts turning away. But in a truly committed life, one is bound to convert at least some who will hold on.

Plastic Christians No More

The result of a lifestyle like this as eunuchs for the Kingdom is that our sensitivity increases dramatically; what I would call our *realness* increases. No longer will we speak and write empty platitudes and sound stern but irrelevant warnings, as plastic Christians going through the motions. There will be a fire in our soul. And it's a spreading flame, you'll find that without meaning to, you become an inspiration to others. No longer are we just hard-faced 'copers', coping with life, while we grow into a rock inside, locked up inside our armour. We become *real*, brethren and sisters that others feel they can relate to and pour themselves out to. I'm sorry if it lowers the tone rather, but there is an extract from a children's story which I feel sums all this up:

'What is REAL?' asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. 'Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?'

'Real isn't how you are made', said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real'.

'Does it hurt?', asked the Rabbit.

'Sometimes', said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. 'When you are Real you don't mind being hurt'.

'Does it happen all at once, like being wound up?' he asked, 'or bit by bit?'

'It doesn't happen all at once', said the Skin Horse. 'You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't

understand'. [\(1\)](#).

Paul at the end of his days was like the Skin Horse, a true pattern for all eunuchs for the Kingdom; and there are contemporary Christian examples. But as the story says, don't think that if you make this big commitment the new personality will come overnight. It *does* take time. There is a beauty, as Paul twice stresses in 1 Cor. 7, in the devoted single life; the sense are opened up, we can feel pain and pleasure without the self-absorption in these things which tends to be the result of a life dedicated to achieving one's own pleasure.

There are caveats which need to be sounded. As we have shown, it seems Timothy started walking out across this water, but faltered. And especially, we must beware of making zealous Christian activity an escapism; a way of running away from ourselves and our personality problems. We are not just asked to be eunuchs in our hearts (Mt. 19) or remain unmarried (1 Cor. 7). We are asked to be eunuchs *for the sake of the Kingdom* (Mt. 19), to concentrate on *pleasing Christ* (1 Cor. 7). We mustn't turn to zeal for the Gospel as singles in the world might turn to painting or alcohol or sport or their career; we mustn't use commitment to the Gospel as eunuchs for the Kingdom just to get ourselves out of our own inner problems, using it as some kind of self-help therapy. This is not what the Spirit is teaching. We are asked to weigh up the choice before us (1 Cor. 7:37) and decide in favour of a life dedicated to the Lord Jesus, to giving to others, rather than benefiting ourselves.

Singleness And The Church

The fact is, we live in a Christian community where the majority have got married, in ignorance of the option of singleness. Our community makes abundant use of the concession to marriage, so much so that we have come to assume that this is the norm. But if we are going to seriously follow Paul in his example, as he so often bids us (and 1 Cor. 7:7,8 says that this extends to his attitude to marriage), if we are really going to come to terms with Mt. 19 and 1 Cor. 7, then our community attitudes need to change. The pressurizing of singles to marry *must* stop if we are going to be serious about these passages. We need to get away from the idea that brethren and sisters aren't on the road to maturity unless they're married. Somehow the married leaders of our community must become aware that they are naturally going to relate better to married believers; they must find time in their thinking for the single community, especially those who may have purposefully devoted themselves to the single life. Particularly our perception of the usefulness of single sisters must change; their role isn't only to look after the kids in the crèche and make (those!) cucumber sandwiches for gatherings. The question has to change from " Why don't you get married?" to " Why did you get married?" . There must be partnership between marrieds and singles, without marrieds passively envying the freedom and wider-ranging devotion of the single eunuchs for the Kingdom. The relationship between Aquilla and Priscilla and Apollos and Paul seems a beautiful case study of this.

There has been a marked increase in emphasis on family-based church activities. Exhortations repeatedly refer to family life and children. This is not in itself wrong. My point is that if it is *over* emphasized, the atmosphere created within the ecclesia is that marriage and family are the ultimate form of service to God, that this is the expected path for single converts. Instead, the *option* of singleness ought to be talked about far more. And this shouldn't be so difficult, seeing that one never hears it spoken about at the moment. Of course, most of our writers and speakers are married, they're evidently not eunuchs for the Kingdom, and it's only human and natural that they will be shy to say anything that appears

to make their own life-decisions look somehow second-best. As with so many other problems facing our community, we need a true, thorough-going humility, both to the word and to our past blindnesses.

Notes

(1) M. Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (London: Heinemann, 1993), pp.4,5.

7-10-7 Hezekiah: Case Study

It is strange indeed that there seems no record of Hezekiah having a wife for the first 14 years of his reign. Those years saw remarkable activity: a single-handed (more or less) reformation of the apathetic ecclesia of Judah, institution of Bible Schools, efforts to strengthen the faithful remnant in the apostate Northern Kingdom, and constant travelling around the nation, inspiring and warning against apostasy. When he is told that he must die, Hezekiah's sorrow seems to have been partly because he had no child. Given his new lease of life, he marries the Gentile Hephzibah and has children- who turned out no good. It would have been totally unacceptable for a King to have no wife; it was almost like a King without a crown. It would have stood out so clearly. Yet it seems a reasonable assumption that Hezekiah chose to be a eunuch for the Kingdom's sake. Admittedly, it may be that we are going from one assumption to another, but there is the implication in Is. 56:3-8 that his example inspired others in Israel to make the same commitment. They are comforted by Isaiah: "Neither let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree. For thus saith the Lord unto the eunuchs that keep my Sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold (the same Hebrew word is used *five times* about Hezekiah, 2 Chron. 29:3,34; 31:4; 32:5,7) of my covenant; even unto them will I give in mine house, and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off" (1). Hezekiah had lamented that he would die without a seed (Is. 38:12 Heb.; Is. 53), and so did those who had also become (in their minds?) eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom. There was that human desire for a seed, a "house" to perpetuate their name. But they are promised a name in God's house (family) in the Kingdom, better than of sons and daughters in this life. This alludes to Ruth 4:15, where Ruth is described as being better than sons to Naomi. In other words, the Ruth: Naomi relationship, featuring as it did a willingness to deny marriage for the sake of the God of Israel, was a type of our relationship with God.

The eunuchs spoken of in Is. 56 seem to have voluntarily chosen it, they are spoken of along with the Gentiles who had voluntarily taken hold of the covenant (another Ruth allusion). Yet it seems that (because of Hezekiah's example?) they too were going back on their devotion; they were having their doubts. They like him in his mid-life crisis wanted to have a physical family, and were regretting that their name would be "cut off" because they had no children to perpetuate them. And Yahweh is comforting them, that their reward in the Kingdom will be to have an eternal name in God's family that will never be cut off. It could be objected that all the believers will have an eternal name in God's house / family. But their name would be "better than of sons and daughters" ; it seems that because the name given us in the Kingdom will be totally personal and related to our own character and experience of human life (Rev. 2:17), the name given to those 'eunuchs' of Isaiah's day will reflect the fact that they denied themselves a physical family in this life. Their pain, their giving, will be recognized eternally, their name / character will be preserved in *God's* family for ever.

It is possible that Timothy also went through a mid-life crisis in this area, as Hezekiah did. Paul's warning to middle aged Timothy to "flee youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22) was a sure reference back to Joseph fleeing from the advances of Potiphar's wife. The fact that Hezekiah and perhaps Timothy faltered in their devotion to the dedicated single life when they reached middle age does not mean that we should not consider this option. 1 Cor. 7 implies that in our last days, the result of *not* taking it will be "trouble in the flesh" anyway. One in three (or worse) fall away anyway, married or single.

Notes

(1) In its restoration context, it has been suggested that this passage was a comfort to Nehemiah, who appears to have been a (physical) eunuch, and hence barred from entry to the temple which he was devoted to. Hence his words: "Who is there, that *being as I am* would go into the temple...?" (Neh. 6:11). Isaiah is comforting him and those like him that they would eternally live in the temple.

7-10-8 The Single Life: Conclusions

It is often pointed out, quite rightly, that as a community we have tenaciously hung on interpretations of Scripture which when analyzed just don't hold up. We are so familiar with a certain form of words, often from the A.V., and we accept them on a surface level without analyzing them. And when they are analyzed, they really don't support the interpretation we have out on them. For example, "the right hands of fellowship", in its context, has nothing to do with baptism. Fellowship isn't "extended" through that outstretched hand; the context of the passage is totally different. "Fellowship" isn't given through that handshake in some metaphysical sense (as some of us were taught!). And in any case, note how we've slightly changed that text to suit the interpretation we put on it: "the right *hands* of fellowship" have become "the right *hand* of fellowship". And there are many many other like examples. The more the Lord shakes us in preparation for the coming day of truth and ultimate revelation, the more we will appreciate how much of our spirituality has been based on misconceptions. I'm *not* talking about matters of fundamental doctrine: I refer to matters of practice.

It's significant that every verse quoted to justify marriage is from the Old Testament. Clearly enough, the New Testament doesn't continue this theme- 1 Cor. 7 and Mt. 19 advocate the blessings of the single life rather than the married life, and the emphasis is on producing spiritual rather than physical children. It must be remembered that Israel were a theocratic state; every child born to Hebrew parents immediately entered the congregation of God, regardless of the spiritual effort of their parents. All children of believers automatically seemed to accept the Gospel. This put an entirely different context on the purpose of having children. To have many children was therefore a blessing because they would become the children of God. In some ways there is a parallel between preaching the Gospel in the New Testament was having children in the Old Testament. The righteous were therefore promised the blessing of many children. But this isn't the case now- there is no New Testament indication that the blessings we receive are in the form of children and wives. We are asked as a general principle to sacrifice human relationships for the sake of the Kingdom, rather than receive them (Lk. 14:26; 18:29). To say that marriage means that we can't respond so enthusiastically to the call of the Gospel is an irrelevant excuse, in the eyes of the Lord (Lk. 14:26). Those who said it evidently thought that the Lord would understand and appreciate that their marriage was important, and so they couldn't respond as He was asking. But Christ didn't appreciate their way of thinking as they thought He would (Lk. 14:20,26). Christ was referring back to the way that under the Law, a man was legitimately excused from fighting

the Lord's battles if he had recently married (Dt. 24:5). The Lord is teaching that He realizes that his followers will be inclined to think that the OT attitude to marriage was his; and true enough, many of us have gone right down this road. 'But', He effectively continued, 'that isn't the case. I don't think that marriage is any excuse at all for not responding to me with all your soul. I'm asking you to take up my cross, to follow my example, to hate [not just my paraphrase] wife and relations and houses etc. And that's that, I'm not ameliorating the standard I put before you' (although He later allowed Paul to do this). Quite clearly, the call of Christ is to give ourselves to His work at the expense of human relationships. Of course this doesn't mean that one can quit family life or take their responsibilities less seriously because they feel called to do the Lord's work; His work is to be found in family life, too. But my point is that the higher standard the Lord was teaching was to consider the single life. This explains why what NT teaching there is about family life is aimed at those who were already married at the time of their conversion. Yet we wriggle and wriggle to get round verses like Lk. 14:26: " If any come to me and (at the point of his calling and conversion) hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children...yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple" . Christ is clearly teaching that at the time of our calling (remember Paul's teaching that we should be prepared to remain in the state we were in when we were called) we must be prepared to resign hopes for marriage and family life, even our own physical life, for His sake. If we won't have this attitude, we can't be His. Who would argue with these words? We aren't here, in these few moments, to get anything. We're here to give, to sacrifice, to die. And if *at least in principle* we won't accept this; we might as well not bother. This is, I think you'll have to agree, a fairly accurate paraphrase of the Lord's teaching. We can't claim to follow a man who came to give and give and give, if we are dominated by a spirit of getting.

These things should more than explain the handful of OT passages which could appear to teach that family life is ultimately desirable. But we will briefly consider them individually.

Psalm 127

Psalm 127 is a Song for Solomon, and is a commentary on God's promise to build David a house, i.e. a family (this is the more common usage of the word): " Except the Lord build the house (family of David), they labour in vain that build it...it is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late...for so he (God) giveth his beloved (Christ) sleep (the death of Christ would bring about the building of the spiritual house). Lo, children (the house / family promised to David and Abraham) are an heritage (the inheritance, promised to Abraham) of the Lord (the heritage of Yahweh is His righteous people: Jer. 2:7; 12:7-9; 50:11; Joel 2:17; 3:2; Mic. 7:14; 1 Pet. 5:3): and the fruit of the womb is his reward...happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed (a common description of the acceptance of the righteous at judgment), but they shall subdue (AVmg.) the enemies in the gate" , in fulfilment of the promises to Abraham concerning his seed. There seems little doubt that Biblically, this is how we are to read this Psalm; it is a commentary on the promises to Abraham and David. Those children are God's heritage, His inheritance. The Psalm isn't saying that the children of a marriage are a heritage given to us by God. If that's the case, Christians are turning round to God and saying 'Well, actually I don't want this heritage you're giving me, I don't want these blessings, you can keep them'- because nearly every couple use birth control, thereby refusing the majority of the supposed " inheritance" God is offering them. "Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of" children (127:5) is surely to be connected with Ps. 126:6, where the sower [the preacher] returns with joy, "bringing his sheaves [converts] with him".

Psalm 128

This follows straight on from Ps. 127, and therefore Ps. 128:3 should be read in the same context: "Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine...thy children like olive plants round about thy table...that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the Lord". That man is the Lord Jesus; we are the children He has been given (Is. 8:18). Israel, his wife the vine, will be fruitful in the Kingdom (this is prophesied several times), and *we* are promised to sit round his table (Lk. 22:30). Israel in the Kingdom will be the vine that blossoms and buds, and fills the face of the world with spiritual fruit (Is. 27:6).

If we still insist on reading this passage on a literal level, then we have to say that many children equals blessing from God. This means that the barren sister isn't blessed; and it means that whenever people in the world have children, God is blessing them. And it also means that to use contraception is to throw God's blessings back in His face. Let's remember that the concept of blessing in the OT and NT are different.

The Law could not give life, but it offered temporal blessings, within the context of the Middle East in the two millennia BC, as a recognition of the principle that God rewards obedience. Thus they were promised long life, fruitful land and wombs (i.e. many children) if they were righteous (Dt. 7:13). But now, long life and fruitful land aren't seen by us as blessings. They were blessings relevant to the context in which they were given; and likewise fertility is to be seen in the same light. It seems inappropriate (to me, anyway) to talk about the blessings of children and a nice house. People in the world bless themselves with these things; and so do Christians. We are more human beings than we like to think. People have nice houses because they go up the ladder at work and take out a mortgage. And if we don't know why people have children, we need to read a school biology text book. It's nothing to do with God's blessing, it's just the outcome of life and normal human experience. If we are going to say that fertility is a blessing from God, and that therefore the blessings of the Old Covenant still apply today, then the reverse must also be true: barrenness is somehow a sign of God's displeasure and will only be taken away with contrition and repentance. Yet the barren sisters I know are among the most spiritual of all. From this alone it's clear that "blessings" and cursings don't operate today as they did under the Old Covenant. And likewise the zealot brother who dies in his prime has not failed of God's blessings just because he didn't reach the "long life" promised for obedience (e.g. Prov. 3:2).

The blessings of the New Testament are far more abstract. The blessings of being in Christ, the abundant blessings of being "in heavenly places", of knowing Christ our Lord (Rom. 15:29; Eph. 1:3); the blessing of forgiveness (Gal. 3:14; Acts 3:25; Rom. 4:7), all brought together in "the cup of blessing" we weekly drink (1 Cor. 10:16). We are given these on account of being in Christ, we have been already blessed with them (Eph. 1:3), they are not mediated as rewards for obedience. The spirit of the New Testament is to pick up the cross, to suffer the loss of all things in response to these spiritual blessings we have received (Phil. 3:8), rather than to receive physical blessings.

Prov. 18:22; 19:14; 22:6

"Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord...house and riches are the inheritance of fathers: and a prudent wife is from the Lord".

As we have said, it was "good" to be married under the Old Covenant. But we have shown

how Paul picked this up and turned it round, in saying that it was " good" to be single, and that marriage was worse than the single life. " House...riches...father...wife...inheritance" (Prov. 19:14) occur together in only one other place: When the Lord Jesus said that His followers must forsake these things to follow him. Again, He is making a deliberate allusion to the attitude of the Old Covenant concerning family life (as when He said that the idea of being excused from war because of marriage no longer applied to those who served Him). Here the Lord is saying that His people would not be receiving physical blessings from God as they had done under the Old Covenant, e.g. fertility, a good wife etc.; indeed, He expected them to sacrifice these things for the sake of His Kingdom.

" Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6).

This has been the flagship verse for those so keen to encourage single converts to marry and have children. But we showed earlier that it simply isn't true (now, anyway) to say that Christian children are " the next generation" . In the U.K., only one in three or four make it through to the end, as we showed in our earlier analysis. This fact alone torpedoes the interpretation hung on this verse; many a fine Christian couple have found this verse doesn't mean what they thought it did. If children are well brought up 'in the Truth' but they *do* depart from it, then we aren't reading this verse properly. So we need to analyse it. I have several suggestions:

1. The AVmg. offers an alternative when it suggests that if a child is trained up in *his* way, he won't depart from it. This would suggest that this verse is a wise practical observation: that a child's background in childhood will stay with him all his life. Or it may mean (see RV) that you can't treat children all in the same way: train up each child in *his* way. It may not *necessarily* be referring to spiritual things. The Hebrew for " old" means literally 'gray-headed'- it *doesn't* mean that if you teach a child the Truth in childhood, when he's a teenager, i.e. older, he won't leave it. The verse is saying that childhood training lasts right up to old age.

2. The Hebrew translated " he should go" is 340 times translated " mouth" , and 57 times " commandment" . It may be one of the many Proverbs which comments on the need for control of the tongue. If you train up a child in the way of his mouth, in the way of talking he should have, when he's older, he won't change.

3. Or taking " mouth" as an idiom for teaching, it could be saying " train up (Heb. 'dedicate') the child to the way of the commandments" . Proverbs is often a commentary on the Law; in this case, the Proverb would be teaching that the command to teach the Law to one's children (Dt. 4:9; 6:7; Ps. 78:5) should begin in childhood, and when he was old and gray-headed, he wouldn't depart from the Law.

4. " Train up" is always translated elsewhere as " dedicate" . It could be referring to the practice of dedicating a child to God, as Samuel and Jephthah's daughter were, and as provided for by Lev. 27. 'If you dedicate a child to the way of the Law, when he's gray-headed he'll still follow the Law' may be the idea; rather similar to the idea that a child brought up by Jesuits before the age of 7 will always be a Catholic until old age.

5. Following on from this possibility, it is worth mentioning that the Rabbis interpret this passage as referring to circumcision being easier when young. This is thoughtfully discussed

in Randy Morrisette, "' Train up a child" And Circumcision', *The Advocate* 8/1995 p. 182.

Whatever the verse means, it can't mean what Christians have taken it to mean, because it simply isn't true. And we have to remember that Israel were a theocratic state; children automatically entered the congregation (cp. ecclesia) by reason of their Jewish parents. So at best it is saying that such children's future spirituality will be influenced by their upbringing; it isn't saying that because of good upbringing, children will inevitably come into the Truth, come into the ecclesia. This isn't the context within which it was spoken.

The Single Life: Overall Conclusions

1. Marriage, in the last days especially, is not going to give all the answers to the problems faced by the single believer living in the 21st century.
2. But the single life is extremely dangerous spiritually.
3. Without marriage, single life is very difficult.
4. An answer is provided to these dilemmas by the teaching of Mt. 19 and 1 Cor. 7. These passages teach that if single believers devote themselves to the work of the Lord Jesus, somehow both the problems of 'undevoted' single life and the drawbacks of marriage are overcome.
5. Becoming a eunuch for the Kingdom's sake may well lead to problems in mid-life, as it did for Hezekiah, Timothy and others who were inspired by Hezekiah's example. Being a eunuch for the Kingdom mustn't be seen as just a form of escapism from personal problems.
6. There are many myths within our community concerning married life, based on a misunderstanding of some OT passages and a disregard or skimming over of some basic NT teaching. A third of those baptized fall away, and only about one in two or three children are baptized. The last days are taking their toll. The single life devoted to the Lord is recommended by the Spirit in 1 Cor. 7 and Mt. 19, especially for the last days. For those who feel morally unable to remarry due to their former wife being still alive, the devoted single life seems the obvious option.
7. The devoted single life fits in with the spirit of the New Testament, concerning sacrificing human relationships for the sake of the Kingdom. The spirit of self-sacrifice required of the follower of Christ is far higher than 21st Century Christians seem to think. "The Kingdom of God's sake" often has specific reference to the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom, and it seems this is the most obvious field of endeavour for those who chose to be eunuchs for the Kingdom's sake.
8. There is a beauty and a realness about the devoted single life. Paul is our example, including his attitude to marriage. May we like him finish our course with joy.

Further Reading

H.P. Mansfield, *Preparing For Marriage* (West Beach, SA: Logos), pp. 13-21.

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57.

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G. Andrews, *Sons Of Freedom: God And The Single Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975)

M. Clarkson, *Single* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1980)

J. Duin, *Sex And The Single Christian* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990)

M. Edwards & E. Hoover, *The Challenge Of Being Single* (New York: Signet, 1974)

M. Evening, *Who Walk Alone* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1974)

L. Harding, *Better Than Or Equal To?* (Milton Keynes: Pioneer, 1993)

K. Keay, *Letters From A Solo Survivor* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991)

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I. Tanner, *Loneliness: The Fear Of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973)

7-11 The Downward Spiral

There's a kind of feedback mechanism within the human psyche, whereby one bad decision or unGodly mindset tends to more easily repeat next time. This principle works itself out in various ways. For example, you could forgive someone for thinking that the Bible is written in a way which almost invites us to misinterpret it. I can recall many a doctrinal conversation with the likes of Jehovah's Witnesses, in which I've tried to show them that their idiosyncratic view of, e.g. the 144,000 or the status of the Watchtower magazine, just isn't supported in the Bible as they think it is. At the end, I want to say: 'Yes, I know that's what it seems to you, I agree; but the general teaching of the Bible, under the surface, is quite the opposite. But until you give your heart to wanting to find God's truth, that's how you'll always see it'. The superficial Bible reader will be deceived by God's word into believing things which are a false Gospel; a system of understanding which has an appearance of the Gospel, but which is actually an anti-Gospel (cp. 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6). The fact that so many apparently sincere Bible readers are so wrong shows that there is a power of delusion at work greater than those people just making a few mistakes in their Bible exposition. The super-human power of deceit which is at work is from God. The hobbyists, the part-timers, those who in their hearts are not wholeheartedly committed to God's Truth, are deceived.

General Principles

God works both positively and negatively. We are perhaps more familiar with the Bible teaching that God will confirm men in their efforts to be spiritual by the work of His Holy Spirit; but we perhaps shy away from the fact that the opposite process also operates in the

lives and minds of those who have turned away from God's Truth. It is evident that God does not force us to be righteous or evil in a robot-like sense. And yet it is also evident that if our salvation was purely by making the 'right' decisions and behaviour using our unaided freewill, then salvation (if ever we got it) would be by works and the steeling of human will power, rather than by God's gracious working in us through His Son. As a synthesis of all this, it seems that God expects men to make freewill decisions, which He then confirms. Those who turn from Him and put His word into second place in their lives are confirmed in this, until they are progressively caught up in a downward spiral of declension. On the other hand, those who try to be lead by God's word are progressively lead ever higher in an upward spiral of spirituality, whereby God eases the way to obedience, shields them from temptation, and opens their minds to the Truth of His word (e.g. 2 Chron. 30:12; Ps. 119:173; Prov. 16:3; 2 Thess. 2:17). I have extensively discussed this issue elsewhere ⁽¹⁾. The antithesis to all this is what I now want to talk about: the way in which God will make obedience more difficult and cloud men's understanding of His Truth. It is possible that God will lead us into the way of temptation (as He did Adam), even though the process of temptation is internal to our mind (James 1:13-15). Surely the Lord had this in mind when he bade us pray: "Lead us not into temptation (down the downward spiral) but deliver us..." (Mt. 6:13). Jonah is a classic example of a man slipping into the downward spiral- he goes down to Joppa, down into the ship, down into the very bottom of the ship, and finally down into the depths of the sea (Jonah 1). Sin, but its very nature, leads to more sin- e.g. adultery is a fire, once committed it tends to burn ever more fiercely to a man's destruction (Job 31:12).

Confirmation In Sin

There are times when God has influenced men not to respond to the evidently wise words of other men, in order to fulfill His purpose (e.g. 1 Kings 12:15; 2 Chron. 25:20). Take Amaziah. A prophet warned him not to pursue a certain course of action- but commented: "But if thou wilt go, do it, be strong... God shall make thee fall" (2 Chron. 25:8). God was willing to confirm and even encourage Amaziah in a wrong way- if this was Amaziah's choice. Therefore God has the power to influence the minds of men in this way, and He uses it. "He taketh away the heart of the chief of the people, and causeth them to wander" (Job 12:24 cp. 42:7). And God uses this ability to make men refuse to respond to the evident Truth of His word (e.g. 1 Sam. 2:25). Yet in all this, God is only confirming men in the path they chose to tread. The very experience of sin confirms sinners in that way: "the way of the wicked seduceth them" (Prov. 12:26). The more men sin, the more sin God counts to them, even if they may not have actually committed it. Thus Lk. 11:50 warns the first century Jews that the guilt of killing all the Old Testament prophets would come upon them when they killed Christ- even though they themselves hadn't killed them. This was prophesied centuries before: "Add iniquity unto their iniquity; and let them not come into thy (imputed) righteousness" (Ps. 69:27). In the same way as God will add sin to the sinner's sin, so He will add His gift of imputed righteousness to the man who at least tries to be righteous. It was through this principle that God could count Abraham as if he had actual sacrificed Isaac, even though Abraham didn't physically do it. He was willing to do it, and this was counted as if he had done it. And the reverse is also true.

The changeover from the downward spiral to the upward spiral ought to have begun at baptism; but as with some of the Roman believers in the first century, a believer can slip back into the downward spiral: "Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness" (Rom. 6:19 NIV). The life of sexual impurity is an "ever increasing"

downwards path; the endless quest for new relationships and sexual novelty doesn't need to be described.

The principle of the downward spiral is true on a racial level as well as a personal one. As human history goes on, it is inevitable that man's perversion both of himself and of God's word will get progressively worse. It is for this reason, I suggest, that we now have widespread pressure to accept sexual immorality as acceptable behaviour for Christians- pressure which comes from people who genuinely believe that they are reflecting the will of God as expressed in the Bible. Their sincerity is not at question; but evidently they are willing victims of the downward spiral of declension which Paul recognized 2000 years ago.

Paul expressed his concept of this 'upward' and 'downward' spiral in two words: "the spirit" and "the flesh". "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh (this doesn't mean the Spiritual believer won't sin; but he won't be on the downward spiral at the same time as he's on the upward spiral). For (in some of the early believers in Galatia) the flesh lusteth against the Spirit...and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye (weak believers) cannot do the things that ye would (this isn't a sympathetic lament from Paul, because of what follows:). But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law...they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts (i.e. they shouldn't have been experiencing the "lust" between the flesh and spirit which they were). If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk (live each moment) in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16-25). It is apparent that in the early church, there were those who had slid back from the upward spiral (life in "the Spirit") to the downward spiral of "the flesh". The tragedy is that mainstream Christianity today has so morally retreated that it effectively teaches that the way of "the flesh", this downward spiral of justifying sexual immorality as acceptable, is in fact the way of the "Spirit", in that they believe that their newfound moral 'freedom' is part of a more mature spiritual level which they have reached.

The Mosaic Law required that Israel leave their homes undefended in order to go to the sanctuary to "appear before the Lord". This was intended to be feasible because the Lord would drive out all the nations in the land (Ex. 34:24). Yet Israel failed to drive out the nations; and thus made it far harder for themselves to obey the command to leave their homes and go to the sanctuary. Failure to obey one command made obedience to others far harder; and the same principle operates today.

The Deceptive God

God does not just disregard those who turn away from Him. He deceives them, and leads them into a downward spiral of moral and doctrinal declension. The idea of "the God of Truth" deceiving people may seem strange at first. But consider the following evidence:

- God deceived prophets to speak things in His Name which were actually false (1 Kings 22:20-22; Ez. 14:9). He chose Israel's delusions by making their idols answer them (Is. 66:3,4). He laid a stumbling block before the righteous man who turned to sin (Ez. 3:20), driving him along "slippery ways in the darkness: they shall be driven on, and fall therein: for I will bring evil upon them" (Jer. 23:12). Jeremiah feared God had deceived him (Jer. 20:7)- showing he knew such a thing was possible. Dt. 13:1-3 warns Israel not to believe prophets whose prophecies came true although they taught false doctrines, because they may have been raised up to test their obedience. God deceived Israel by telling them about the peace which would come on Jerusalem in the future Kingdom; they didn't consider the other

prophecies which were given at the same time concerning their imminent judgment, and therefore they thought that God was pleased with them and was about to establish the Messianic Kingdom; when actually the very opposite was about to happen (Jer. 4:10).

- Israel evidently had a saying, that "Under (God's) shadow we shall live among the heathen", alluding to how Israel in the desert had dwelt under the shadow of God's Angelic cloud. Jeremiah mentions it in Lam. 4:20. But Jeremiah also observed that God's protective cloud had now turned into a cloud through which no prayer could pass - He had covered His people with a cloud in His anger, "that our prayer should not pass through" (Lam. 2:1; 3:44). So we are under either the cloud of Divine protection, or the cloud of His wrath which is a barrier to prayer and relationship with Him. His protecting cloud can turn the other way.

- God "mingled a spirit of perverseness in the midst of" Egypt (Is. 19:14). God acted upon their minds and perceptions to confuse them. When we read that God gave His *good* spirit (Angel?) to instruct Israel, the implication perhaps is that He was and is just as capable of giving an evil or confusing spirit to others (Ex. 9:20).

- We frequently read of the sins *by which* men sinned (e.g. 1 Kings 16:13 "the sins of Baasha and the sins of Elah by which they sinned, and by which they made Israel to sin"). How do you 'sin by a sin'? Surely in the sense that sin leads to sin.

- The Lord's cryptic manner of speaking at times yielded "hard sayings"; and yet He utters most of them in conversation with His critics. Thus having said that "If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death", and the Jews predictably responded with misunderstanding and confusion, He goes straight on to utter an even harder saying: "Your father Abraham... saw my day, and was glad". And they again come back at Him with the anger born of misunderstanding. And so He rounds off the episode with a yet harder saying: "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn. 8:51-58). In all this He was using "hard sayings"- which have come down to us as 'wrested scriptures, 'difficult passages'- in order to drive the unbelievers further down the downward spiral. And He does the same today, with the same passages. Because the Jews didn't "hear my word / logos", therefore they couldn't understand His speech, i.e. the words as individual words which He spoke (Jn. 8:43). They stumbled over each word, as a child struggling to read a text way too advanced for her. Because they didn't hear His logos, the essence of Him. This is why the simplest minds which firmly understand the logos, the essential idea, the bigger picture, don't find the "hard sayings" to be hard for them, they aren't stumbled by them. But the word-by-word theologian does stumble at them, if he doesn't believe the simple logos of Jesus.

- The foolish heart of Israel was darkened / blinded, the Greek implies (Rom. 1:21). God gave them a mind which wanted to practice immorality (Rom. 1:28), and therefore they received a recompense appropriate to the delusion which they had been given (Rom. 1:27 Gk.) . Note that their punishment was to be given and encouraged in their sinful tendencies (diseases like AIDS are the result of upsetting nature's balance rather than the recompense spoken of in Romans 1). Christian men in the first century gave themselves over to sexual immorality (Eph. 4:19), and therefore God "gave them over to a reprobate mind" (Rom. 1:24,26,28). "Blind yourselves and be blind", God angrily remonstrated with Israel; yet God had closed their eyes, confirming them in the decision for blindness which they had taken themselves (Is. 29:9,10 RVmg.).

- If the faithful "had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have

had opportunity to return" to it (Heb. 11:15 RV). God would have given them the chance to return to the world if this is what they had set their minds upon.

- The Lord spoke in parables so that Israel would be deceived and therefore would not come to salvation (Mk. 4:12; Lk. 8:10 cp. Acts 28:26). This fact is hard to get round for those who feel God isn't responsible for deception. Isaiah spoke likewise (Is. 6:9,10; 29:10,11). The Angels will work in such a way as to allow the world to be deceived at the end of the Millennium (Rev. 20:3,8).

- It is God who makes the Gentile nations labour in "vanity: and a bridle that causeth to err shall be in the jaws of the peoples" (Is. 30:28 RV). Clearly enough, God causes people to err by putting a bridle in the jaws to pull them in a certain direction.

- The apostate among God's people, both in Old and New Testaments, sunk to the most unbelievable levels, but sincerely felt that they were doing God's will. These things included killing righteous prophets (Jn. 16:2), turning the breaking of bread service into a drunken orgy (1 Cor. 11:21), and turning prostitution within the ecclesia into a spiritual act (Rev. 2:20). For believers to come to the conclusion that such things were the will of God surely they were not just misinterpreting Scripture. There was an extra-human power of delusion at work. We have seen in the above verses that God is responsible for this kind of thing. Note that the Bible knows nothing of a super-human devil who does all this.

- 2 Thess. 2:9-11 is the classic proof. God plagued the first century ecclesia with false brethren who could work impressive miracles; because "they received not the love of the truth (they treated it as a hobby)... God shall send them strong delusion, that they might believe a lie". God deceived brethren in the run up to AD70- it's that plain. And the events of AD70 are typical of our last days.

- 2 Thess. 2 has many connections with the Olivet Prophecy. The idea of believers being deceived at the time of Christ's "coming" connects with Mt. 24:5,11,24 describing 'the majority' (Gk.) of the latter day church being "deceived". 2 Thess. 2:11 says that this deception is sent by God because they refuse to love the Truth. The conclusion is hard to avoid: in our last days, the majority of believers will be deceived because we don't "love the truth"- it's no more than a hobby.

- God "enticed" [RVmg. "deceived"] Ahab (2 Chron. 18:19).

- God worked false miracles at the time of AD70, according to 2 Thess. 2:9-11. This means that the 'miracles' claimed by Pentecostals and the like may be actual miracles; God allows them to be done because He wishes to deceive such people.

Case studies

Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Ex. 7:22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7,34,35). And yet God hardened his heart (Ex. 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:8). The references to God hardening Pharaoh's heart generally occur after Pharaoh had first hardened his own heart. The fact Pharaoh hardened his heart was a sin (Ex. 9:34), and yet God encouraged him in this. God offered Pharaoh a way of escape after each of the plagues; all he had to do was to agree to let Israel go. But the conditions got tougher the longer he resisted God's demand: he finally had to not only let Israel go, but also provide them with sacrifices (Ex. 10:25). Likewise when Nebuchadnezzar

lifted his heart up, God hardened it (Dan. 5:20).

Shimei was a wicked man who hated God's servant David. God told him to curse David (2 Sam. 16:10). Afterwards, Shimei repents and acknowledges that by doing so he sinned (2 Sam. 19:20). And although David recognized that God had told Shimei to curse him (2 Sam. 16:10), David tells Solomon not to hold Shimei "guiltless" for how he had cursed him (1 Kings 2:9). Again, a man is encouraged by God to do the sinful act in which he has set his heart.

Balaam was one of God's prophets. Balak, an enemy of Israel asked him to curse Israel, in return for money. Balaam really wanted to curse Israel and get the reward, but God wouldn't let him. Balak sent a messenger to ask Balaam to come to him. Balaam asked God whether he should go. The answer was that he should not go. Then the messenger came again; and this time, God told Balaam to go with them, but only to speak God's word. It was as if God was pushing Balaam down the road to spiritual ruin. The end result of Balaam meeting Balak was that he advised Balak to make Israel sin with his women, which would mean that God would curse Israel. And for this Balaam was condemned. If Balaam had not gone with the messengers in the first place, he would not have fallen into this sin. But God told him to go with them (Num. 22:20).

The Lord's words to Judas: "Do that for which thou art come" (Mt. 26:50 RV) can surely be read as nothing else than confirming a wicked man in the evil way he had chosen to take.

Israel: Prime Example

The principles which we have discussed are embodied in the experience of Israel. All their history is recorded for the learning of the Christian church of today, in their role as spiritual Israel (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11).

Abraham was called to leave Ur and travel to Canaan, the land promised to him. If his heart had remained in his native land, God would have worked in his life to make it possible for him to return to it, and thereby reject God's covenant with him. The fact Abraham wasn't given this opportunity indicates his faith (Heb. 11:15). This shows that God gives us the opportunity to renounce our faith if that is what we want in our hearts (cp. Balaam).

The descendants of Jacob / Israel were not righteous, although they were God's people. The law of Moses was given to them "because of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19). And yet the very existence of the Mosaic Law generated sin, and thereby the experience of God's wrath upon His people (Rom. 4:15). So why were Israel given the Law? In some ways (and this isn't the only reason) to confirm them in their sinfulness. The original Mosaic Law was "holy, just and good" in itself (Rom. 7:12). But later, God gave Israel "laws that were not good" (referring to the Halachas of the Scribes?) so that they would go further away from Him (Ez. 20:25). He must have done this by inspiring men to say things which were genuinely communicated by God, but which were false. As men turn away their ears (of their own volition) from the truth, so God will turn their ears to fables (2 Tim. 4:4). If you turn away your ears from truth, Paul says that you are turned unto what is untrue (2 Tim. 4:4). He doesn't say that a person turns their ears away from truth and then turns their ears to untruth. By turning away from truth, God confirms the person in that- and He turns them towards untruth.

On their journey to Canaan, the Israelites worshipped idols. Because of this, "God turned, and

gave them up (over) to worship the host of heaven...I gave them up to the hardness of their hearts" (Acts 7:42; Ps. 81:12 AVmg.). God reached a stage where He actually encouraged Israel to worship idols; He confirmed them in their rejection of Him. And throughout their history, He encouraged them in their idolatry (Ez. 20:39; Am. 4:4).

Israel were told to work with God to drive out the nations who lived in Canaan, because if those people remained there, they would be a spiritual temptation for Israel. But Israel sinned, they willfully followed the idols of Canaan rather than the God of Israel. And therefore God said that He would not help Israel in driving out the nations any more (Jud. 2:20,21). It was as if He was confirming them in their desire to succumb to the temptations of the surrounding nations.

Later on, Israel requested a human king. God was Israel's king, and therefore their desire was effectively a rejection of God and Israel's special relationship with Him. And yet God gave them a human king. If they had a human king, it was harder for them to be God's Kingdom, to personally realize that God was their King, that He was the one to whom they owed all allegiance and duty. And yet God gave them a human king, because this was the path they had chosen. 1 Sam. 12:14,15 states what is apparently obvious: "If ye will fear the Lord, and serve Him (as your true king) and obey His voice...then shall both ye and the king...continue following the Lord...but if ye will not obey the voice of the Lord...then shall the hand of the Lord be against you". Surely this means that if Israel kept on obeying God, He would help them to keep on obeying. But if they disobeyed, He would be against them, with the implication that this would result in them being even more disobedient.

The confirmation of Israel in their evil way was brought to its climax in the crucifixion of Christ. The leaders of first century Israel initially recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah (Mt. 21:38 cp. Gen. 37:20; Jn. 7:28). They saw (i.e. understood, recognized) him, but then they were made blind by Christ (Jn. 9:39). It was because they "saw" Jesus as the Messiah that the sin of rejecting him was counted to them (Jn. 9:41). This explains why the Roman / Italian nation was not held guilty for crucifying Christ, although they did it, whereas the Jewish nation was. And yet there is ample Biblical evidence to suggest that these same people who "saw" / recognized Jesus as the Christ were also ignorant of his Messiahship. "Ye both know me, and ye know whence I am...Ye neither know me, nor my Father...when ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he" (Jn. 7:28; 8:19,28) were all addressed to the same group of Jews. Did they know / recognize Jesus as Messiah, or not? As they jeered at him on the cross, and asked Pilate to change the nameplate from "Jesus, King of the Jews", did they see him as their Messiah? It seems to me that they didn't. In ignorance the Jewish leaders and people crucified their Messiah (Acts 3:17 RV). And yet they knew him for who he was, they saw him coming as the heir. I would suggest the resolution to all this is that they did recognize him first of all, but because they didn't want to accept him, their eyes were blinded, so that they honestly thought that he was an impostor, and therefore in ignorance they crucified him. And yet, it must be noted, what they did in this ignorance, they were seriously accountable for before God.

Practical Implications

If we accept the above thesis, we can better understand why God has allowed His word to be written and translated in such a way as seems almost intended to mislead. Likewise Ex. 16:20 says that the manna, symbolic of God's word, "bred worms and stank" if it was not used properly. The Scriptures, we are told, can be "wrested" by those who claim to believe them,

until the "unstable" 'believer' is destroyed morally (2 Pet. 3:16). The only other occurrence of the Greek for "unstable" is a few verses earlier (2 Pet. 2:14), where it is used in a sexual context. The implication is that those 'believers' who want to justify a deviant sexual lifestyle will find that they can "wrest" the Scriptures to suite them, but in so doing they will be working out their own destruction. This is the category who turn God's grace into license for sexual sin (Jude 4). Sin is a deceiver (Heb. 3:13); hence the Bible personifies our nature as a deceiver. "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 16:25).

There are other examples of the Bible purposefully giving scope for serious misinterpretation. Thus God allowed "Gehenna" to be interpreted rather than transferred as a proper noun; nephesh has so misleadingly been translated "soul" in the AV, when all it usually means is 'person', 'body' or 'being' (modern Bible versions render it like this). Likewise, "satan" just means "adversary"; and many fanciful ideas would have been stillborn if this was how it had been translated. All the passages quoted above clearly teach that God is the one who deceives men who reject His Truth. He is the originator of both light and darkness, goodness and disaster (Is. 45:5-7). This leaves no room at all for the popular idea that 'satan' refers to an evil being responsible for human deception and spiritual failure. The Biblical picture is that moral and doctrinal apostasy is the result of man's very own nature and the confirmation of God working in tandem.

There are whole verses whose translation in nearly all versions might seem to hopelessly confuse the seeker for truth (e.g. "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise", or "When he cometh into the world, he saith...a body hast thou prepared me", Lk. 23:46; Heb. 10:5). Amazingly, these bad translations have never been a serious impediment to even the most simple person who genuinely wants to find the Truth. I find this nigh on a miracle. From this alone it seems clear that the genuine seeker of Truth will always find it, but the Bible is written in such a way, and its translation has been over-ruled in such a way, as to deceive the insincere or uncalled reader into thinking that they have found the Truth when actually they haven't.

It is often commented by some that doctrinal differences are not so important, and that it is wrong to limit fellowship to only those who accept and practice the basic doctrines which constitute the saving Gospel. The implication of this attitude is that we should count ourselves as lucky if we have the true doctrine of Christ, but not think that such differences affect our standing before God. But the fact is, if you agree with the thesis presented above, those who hold false doctrine have been deceived by God into the doctrinal positions they are in, and their deception is a sign of His displeasure with their 'hobbyist' approach to His word.

Of course, it isn't only apostate 'Christians' who are deceived by God. Such deception can be frequently seen operating in the weak believer who may apprehend perfectly every doctrinal aspect of the true Gospel- and in some ways at some times, we're all weak. Bible reading is skipped, prayer pushed into the background, meals gulped down with no further thought for the Father who provides, self-examination never tackled... and yet the brother or sister feels they have come to a higher spiritual level, whereby as they understand it even from the Bible (e.g.) God quite understands if we marry unbelievers, or (e.g.) they come to the 'realization' that actually friendship with the world, or total commitment to our careers, is really serving God, or that really, doctrine doesn't matter.... And so their real fellowship with God slips away, but they are convinced that actually they are spiritually growing into a higher relationship with God. God, working through their deceitful natures, has deceived them. For

this reason the Truth is in one sense the most dangerous thing in the world. It can destroy us, blow us apart; God can terribly, terribly deceive us, until at judgment day we gnash our teeth in white hot rage against Him and ourselves (Is. 45:24).

God has written the Bible in such a way, whereby the majority of readers are deceived by His way of writing into thinking that they have the Truth when they don't. Once we appreciate this, the wonder of the fact that we can have, in basic terms "the truth of the Gospel" should really touch our hearts. "We know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him" (1 Jn. 3:19). "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:20). The Truth of Christ is precious, very precious, it is a tremendous privilege that we have been shown it, and therefore we must search for it and then hold it like diamonds, study it, meditate upon it, make it our life. For it will gloriously save us, or miserably destroy us if we neglect it. "But we are not of them who are drawn back (by God) unto perdition; but of them that believe toward the saving of the soul" (Heb.10:39 Gk.).

To be caught up in the downward spiral [as we all are at times] doesn't mean that there's no way out. The hearts of Pharaoh's servants were hardened (Ex. 10:1 cp. 9:34), and yet they did in fact soften when they beg Pharaoh to let Israel go (Ex. 10:7; 11:8). Yet each refusal of Pharaoh to soften his heart made it harder for him to soften it the next time the opportunity was presented. Conditional language is always used about Pharaoh-*if* he were to refuse to release Israel, more plagues would happen (Ex. 8:2; 9:2; 10:4 cp. 8:21; 4:23 RSV). In fact God wanted Pharaoh to come to realize that there is none like Yahweh in all the earth- and that was actually why He did not immediately kill Pharaoh, but rather appealed to him through the plagues. That's how I read the enigmatic Ex. 9:24: "For now I should have put forth my hand, and smitten thee... and thou hadst been cut off from the earth". Fretheim paraphrases this: "If I had not had the intention of your knowing that there is none like me in all the earth... then I should have put forth my hand and cut you off from the earth. This is what you have deserved". (4). The hardening of Pharaoh's heart didn't mean that he was thereby *bound* to chose wrongly each time. Indeed, the plagues themselves were designed to warn Pharaoh and thereby appeal to him to change, in order to avoid worse plagues. Thus the land was 'smitten' in Ex. 8:2 as a foretaste of the 'smiting' of the Egyptian firstborn (Ex. 12:23,27). The 'covering' of Egypt with frogs in Ex. 8:6 and locusts in Ex. 10:5,15 looked ahead to the 'covering' of the Egyptians at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:28; 15:5,10). The East wind which blew the locusts in and then to blow them away again, until "not a single locust was left" (Ex. 10:19) is just what happened to the Egyptians- the East wind blew the waters to and fro, and left not a single Egyptian soldier alive (Ex. 14:21,28). And of course the plagues begin affecting everyone, but then focus in on the Egyptians and then on the personal possessions of Pharaoh. In Pharaoh's case, it would be true to say that God's hardening activities gather momentum, like a swimmer sucked closer and closer towards the waterfall. There has to come a moment when the pull is now too strong, and the plunge is inevitable. It is that moment which perhaps we need to fear more than anything else in human experience. It happened to Israel- their hearts too were hard, and in the end, after a period, God have them over to their hard hearts (Ps. 81:11,12)- the implication being that even whilst He hardened their hearts, He kept them by grace from the full consequences... but in the end, the final inevitable drag towards the waterfall set in. This is why there were times when even repentance, as a change of mind, could not save Jerusalem from destruction (Jer. 4:28; 15:1-9; 16:12; Ez. 7:1-9). This was the moment *after* the inevitable tug towards the waterfall beings, but before the actual plunge. It's Saul cowering before the witch of Endor, lying face

down in the dirt that fateful night... and again I say, *this* is the human condition we should most dread.

Notes

(1) See *The Upward Spiral in James And Other Studies* (London: Pioneer, 1992).

(2) A.P. Bell and M.S. Weinburg (op cit.) found 20%: Cameron and Proctor found 17%: K. Cameron, P. Cameron and K. Proctor, op cit.

(3) Bell and Weinburg, op cit.

(4) See Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991) p. 124. Brown, Driver and Briggs in their *Hebrew Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996 ed.) p. 774 understand the implication of the Hebrew likewise.

7.12 Conscientious Objection To Military Service

7.12.1 Words To A Russian Christian At His Military Tribunal

You've already made up your mind, you know what you're doing and why. You're facing them as a Christian conscientious objector. You know we're all with you in prayer, your position goes round and round in our minds. Just one or two thoughts to take with you. I hope some of them find a lodgement in you, somewhere. God has chosen you for His Kingdom, He's started work on you quickly. He is faithful, He always has been to all His people, and He will be faithful to you, He won't allow you to be tested above what you can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). You know this, but really really really it's true. God wants you to be in the Kingdom. He will almost will you to get there. Therefore *whatever* happens, *however* it happens, He will never leave you or forsake you. Remember that. *Whatever* happens, *however* it happens, He'll be there. Really. And He'll pull you through to the end, right through to the Kingdom. *Whatever* happens, *however* it happens.

When you suffer like this at the hands of this world, " this present evil world" , you are sharing the Lord's experience in his death. And if we suffer with Him, we will reign with Him- one day, yes, *one day*, but a day that really will come. A day that will last for ever. One day we will see Him, our eyes really will see his face. He will say to us " Well done" . We will sit down with Him. Really. It's all true.

Somewhere deep down, hold on to all this. That faith deep down inside you, hold onto it, that's something they can't take from you. That knowledge you have, that love of Christ for you, is absolutely indestructible. He feels for you now, really, I know He does. He's not a hard man. Remember the parable? It was the lazy man, the one who never showed anyone his talent, who never would've gone to a tribunal, who kept the Truth all secret, it was only him who thought the Lord Jesus was a hard man. He's not a hard man, really He's not, and He feels for you. Remember how Stephen saw Christ *standing* when he was praying. Usually Christ sits at God's right hand. But the Lord really felt for poor Stephen then. And He stood

up for him in pleading before God. And He's the same yesterday, today and forever, you know that.

That something deep down, which the world can't get to at all, was so clearly there in the Lord as He faced the court and as He hung on the cross. I get the sense that in one part of Him, there was a terrible torture, the fear God had forsaken Him, the panic that humanly, *whatever* happens, *however* it happens somehow things weren't going as He thought they would. But I get the sense that there was also, at the very same time, a great calm in Him. He knew, absolutely, that He would rise again. He prophesied it. He came to the end and He said " It is finished" . " Into thy hands I commend my spirit" . He was in control, He was in some ways so calm. He absolutely knew that the next moment would be the resurrection. He knew He would come through. And He was so sure that it shone out of Him, we even see it through the words of the Gospels, through that black print on white paper. In our little crosses, like facing this tribunal, it's the same.

There's a kind of inevitability about the cross. When you read the Gospels (especially Luke), you get the sense that the cross *must* come, especially as you read of Him journeying up to Jerusalem for the last time, and the Lord Jesus knew that at the end of the road there would be the cross. You remember how He says things like " I must walk today and tomorrow because it can't be that a prophet perish outside Jerusalem" (Lk. 13:33). But " he steadfastly set his face" , didn't He. Even the Samaritans saw it. I know you know your Bible. You remember it don't you, they didn't receive Him because His face was set to go to Jerusalem, it was written all over Him, that He had set His mind on the work He must do and the victory which was ahead [even when He was heading away from Jerusalem during the course of that final journey, He's still described as going to Jerusalem, Lk. 17:11]. He often uses that kind of language, implying that it all had to be. And Peter in Acts (those early speeches) gives the same impression, that it all had to be as it was, *but* afterwards there was the winning through, the glorious victory, the rising again. And so this tribunal is inevitable. We've passed through the hoping that somehow it wouldn't happen, haven't we. Now we see there's no third road. It's either this, or quit. It *has* to be, doesn't it. Like the cross *had* to be. But the salvation *had* to be, as well. At the end of it all, when finally we're through it all and in the Kingdom, I think we'll look back with that sense that it all was as it was, it was as it *had* to be, and here we are, we're here now.

This must have been the feeling the Lord Jesus had when He resurrected. I kind of think of Him 'coming to' wrapped in linen, miraculously coming out of them, and then standing there. I think I'd have shouted for joy and ran out into the morning. We were saying the other day about " Into thine hand I commit my spirit" . They were the Lord's last words, and He was quoting Ps. 31:5: " Into thine hand I commit my spirit; thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth" . If His last words were " Into thine hand..." , probably His first thoughts as He awoke were " thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth" . You know how it is, when you're spiritual the first thing you think when you come round in the morning is something spiritual, a kind of half-prayer. And so it must have been with the Lord, He came to, and He somehow had those words on His lips, " You've redeemed me, O God, you are the Truth, the faithful One, as I always believed!" . And then it says that when Peter went into the tomb, He saw the graveclothes lying neatly folded. I know we don't know, but I have this picture in my mind of the Lord Jesus rising from the dead, saying that little prayer, and then *folding the graveclothes* and then walking calmly out into the morning, dressed like a gardener (remember how Mary didn't recognize Him). No shining white clothes like the church pictures show. Just an ordinary looking man.

It's just superb, absolutely superb, isn't it. He *folded up the graveclothes*. It's wonderful. He was there suffering one minute, crying out, with His throat dry, absolutely sure God was with Him, absolutely sure of the ultimate outcome; and then the next conscious moment He just rises up, knowing He's made it, says that little prayer *and folds up His clothes neatly*. Maybe, you know, in the way His mother showed Him as a child. We all tend to do those kind of little domestic things as we saw our mother do them. [And yes, we as men weren't ashamed to shed a tear]. It's fantastic, it's superb, that this God is our God, and He will be our guide even unto death, and will bring us through in the end into the Kingdom. And the Lord Jesus, you know, the one who played as a child, the one who was left alone in Gethsemane, the one who died for us, for you, who rose for us, the one who was so gentle, so calm, who just rose up, prayed *and folded up His clothes*; that same Jesus is our Jesus, really, He's just the same, that sensitivity, that calmness, that power, that absolute ability as *Lord of all*, that gentleness with us.

Summarized from words to a Russian Christian at his military tribunal.

" There is little in [Christian] faith and practice to commend them to the man of the world, and so to ensure its adherents being shielded from trouble. But deliverance *has* come, and men have been instrumental in bringing it about. But over and above all human effort, there stands out clearly and unmistakably the supreme fact of God's protecting care. Again and again the way seemed barred; difficulties arose which humanly speaking seemed insurmountable; everything that could be done by human thought and endeavour had been done, and yet failure seemed inevitable: but " the way of escape" was provided in every case. " God is faithful, and hearkeneth unto the cry of His children" .

Frank Jannaway, reflecting on exemption from military service in the 1914-1918 world war.

7-12-2-1 Christadelphian Conscientious Objection

Extracts From " Conscientious Objection"

The above book, published by the U.S. Govt. Printing Office in 1950, is the official U.S. Government analysis of the various groups in North America who sought exemption from military service in World War 2.

" ... [Christadelphian] members always applied to the Government to be relieved from military duty in consequence of religious and conscientious scruples. In order that they might be identified, they adopted the name " Christadelphian" . *They have consistently maintained that their faith prohibited participation in the armed forces...the Christadelphian church as a whole was perhaps the most strict of the non-resistance groups...the Christadelphians did not work against the war; each one simply took his individual stand...a very definite stand was taken by this church...a table has been prepared which lists the denominations in the order of the ratios of conscientious objectors in camps to the total membership. This reveals, in general, the degree to which the registrants [members] of these churches objected to service in the armed forces...ratios per 1000 of church membership: Christadelphian, 49, Jehovah's Witnesses 7, Church of God 1...it would appear from table No. 25 that the members of the Christadelphian church followed more closely than any other denomination the doctrine of*

their denomination as it related to conscientious objection...ratios of camps assignees [i.e. conscientious objectors] to church membership show the Christadelphians highest" .
[Emphasis mine throughout].

7.12.2 Conscientious Objection To Military Service:

Food For Thought

True Christians have always described themselves as "conscientious objectors" to military service. And so we always should be. Indeed, so we *must* be. But perhaps we need to think more deeply about what exactly we mean by this phrase. Following is the essence of a conversation with an intelligent and reflective Conscript Officer, which hopefully will provide food for thought:

C.O.: So, you want exemption for this man because you say he has a conscientious objection to military service? So, his conscience would be guilty if he served, and as a member of your church he wants to be in a situation where his conscience would not be infringed, yes?

D.H.: Yes, more or less, that's our case.

C.O.: So are you saying that when this man joined your church he got this conscience which forbade him to serve in the army?

D.H. [And I had to be careful here]: Not quite. We get our conscience from an individual study of the Bible, not from belonging to our group.

C.O.: So if conscience is an individual thing, which surely it is, then how can you say that your whole church has the same conscience? Is conscience really a personal thing, or imposed on people by your church?

D.H. ['Good point', I felt like saying]: Conscience *is* a personal thing, and no, we *don't* impose a conscience on those who are baptized, but if God's word is believed by us, then on some basic issues our conscience will all be formed in the same way.

C.O.: But a conscience, if you really have one, also tells you to *do* something, e.g. some men feel their conscience compels them to fight; but it seems your emphasis is on what your conscience won't let you do. But that's very convenient for you; many young men would say that their conscience won't let them go into the army. But the proof of a conscience is surely that it tells you to do something positively.

D.H. ['Another good point', I felt like saying]: You're right, and I'm sorry that our emphasis has been on what our conscience *isn't* free to do. I'm sure that ***** really is compelled by his understanding of God's word to *do* good works, and I'd like to think that this positive way of life is what he finds incompatible with army service. I also believe that true Christians live by their conscience in whatever situation they are in, both men and women; for example, recently one of our sisters resigned from her job in a printing office because they were printing literature which she felt was wrong. She's a very positive person; someone who goes around trying to show the Truth of Christ just isn't involved in printing material which is

against His way. So I can truthfully say that it's not only male Christian believers who start raising issues of conscience.

I don't feel I did too well in this discussion. Some of my emphasis *was* misplaced; conscience isn't a 'bought position', nor should we put all the emphasis on our inability to do certain things lest we get a guilty conscience. Of course, we must *hold on* to a good conscience; but I really feel we would be wrong to give the impression that we spend our lives running away from the possibility of a guilty conscience, driven on along the road of some endless possible-guilt trip. This isn't what the followers of the One who died to set men free ought to be like.

The possession of a good, cleansed conscience will mean that we will positively act in such a way that to bear arms will be an impossibility for us. We will be *compelled* to live the spiritual life by the sheer excellency of the knowledge and experience of God's grace, by the certainty of our Hope in His Kingdom, by our realization that we are on the way of God, and no other way can be travelled at the same time. We *know* we have passed out of darkness into His marvellous light, we are *already* citizens of His Kingdom, not that of this world (Col. 1:13). We have each, with unveiled face, beheld God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. And so *a light will shine from us*, as it did from Moses, so that men will sense that there is something special about us, not only something different, but some small reflection of the Man to whom we have committed all.

There was something about Peter and his fellow fishermen which made even the most unsympathetic make a mental note ("took knowledge") that they had been with Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 4:13). This was the fulfilment of Jn. 13:35, which using the same root word, teaches that the (Jewish) world would "know" the twelve as the Lord's men *if they reflected His love*. So there must have been something in the love that somehow shone between those men as they stood there before that court, which in a manner impossible to describe, revealed them as Christ's. This same, difficult-to-describe sense will exude from every one who is the Lord's, in whatever context we are in: factory, office, unbelieving family, prison, tribunal. The greatest tragedy is for the close associates of a Christian to have no such sense; to be surprised to be told by a third party that the man they work with is religious. To keep the candle-light under a bucket is in fact to have no light; for a candle goes out under a bucket. To be a secret candle in a dark world just isn't possible.

So, bearing arms is not for us; not only because we fear being in a situation where we might pick up some twinges of guilt by what we're doing, but because more positively we are *compelled* to live a life which of itself precludes aggression. Without wishing to de-emphasize the terrible traumas being experienced by those presently facing conscription, we are *all* marked men and women; we *each* must stand up and be counted in the small things of life, day by day. In this sense we are brothers-in-arms with our young brethren who face tribunals. We are *all* lights in a dark world, and none of us, if we are in the light, can be hid. None of us can be passive. It's not that we need look for opportunities to show our light; the very fact we are of God's Kingdom, not that of this world, will provide opportunity enough *in itself* to show this forth. The spirit of Christ within us, our experience of the matchless and surpassing *love* of the Lord Jesus Christ, will constrain us, compel us, to show forth the life and being of *none less than the peerless Son of God*.

"The walk and conduct of Jesus we regard as the rule for all true believers. if these desire to know what they should do in certain trying situations, let them seek to realize what He would do if so placed, and the answer found according to the word is the course for them to pursue

without regard to consequences. Such a course as this, though, is condemned *in toto* by the flesh: but what of that? Our advice to the brethren is, Be not enrolled...fear not their threats. They can only go so far in their violence as God permits, who will doubtless overrule the times for the good of His people, and His own glory"

John Thomas, 1861, writing in the context of conscientious objection to military service in the American Civil War

7.12.3 " A good conscience" : A Biblical Analysis

There is a clear NT theme: that the believer always has a good conscience (Acts 23:1; 24:16; Rom. 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:12; 1 Tim. 1:5,19; 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:3; Heb. 9:14; 10:22; 13:18; 1 Pet. 3:16); this clear conscience is a gift from the time of baptism (Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:21; Heb. 9:14 cp. 6:1; Rom. 6:17). If a believer loses that good conscience, he has fallen from grace. Those who leave the faith have a conscience which is wounded (1 Cor. 8:12), defiled (1 Cor. 8:7; Tit. 1:15), seared (1 Tim. 4:2). It's hard to find a consistent Biblical definition of conscience. " Conscience" in the Biblical sense often refers to how God sees our conscience, rather than how we feel it. Therefore only rarely does the Spirit speak as if " conscience" is something which is good one moment, and bad the next; it is something which we have on a permanent basis. Thus to say " I watched TV last night with a good conscience, but I had a bad conscience that I didn't give out any tracts today" isn't really using " conscience" in it's Biblical sense. Paul repeatedly emphasizes that he has *always* had a good conscience (presumably, from the time of his baptism, when he stopped kicking against the goads, Acts 9:5).

7-12-3-1 A Biblical Definition Of Conscience

The conscience which the Bible defines is not necessarily our intuitive sense of right and wrong; that twinge of guilt which we may have after certain thoughts or behaviour. All men (and animals) have such a streak in them; yet a good conscience is associated with holding the true faith (1 Tim. 1:3-5,19 3:9). It is impossible for those outside the faith to have a " good conscience" in the Biblical definition of conscience. It therefore doesn't just refer to a lack of guilt twinge. Paul must surely have had twinges of guilt over his behaviour at times (not least over the bust up with Brethren Barnabas and Mark, Acts 15:39 cp. 2 Tim. 4:11); and yet he insists that he always had a good conscience. Hezekiah likewise lived with a good conscience but was at the same time aware of his sins (Is. 38:3 cp. 17). Paul likewise claims that the Jewish forefathers served God with a pure conscience (2 Tim. 1:3 NIV). Yet the Jewish fathers, dear Jacob particularly, must have had plenty of twinges of guilt over their years. Indeed, all the Jewish fathers had a bad 'conscience' because of their sins (Heb. 9:9; 10:2). Surely Paul must mean that they had such a firm faith in forgiveness that *in God's eyes* they had a pure conscience.

Our natural sense of right and wrong is hopelessly corrupt; our heart is so deceptive that we don't really know how deceptive it is (Jer. 17:9). Many of our daily sins are probably committed due to our deceptive sense of right and wrong. Paul says that although he knows of nothing that would stand against him at the judgment, this doesn't justify him, because the Lord sees differently to us (1 Cor. 4:4 RSV). David likewise knew that his own self-examination was unable to give him an accurate picture of his status before God; " Who can understand his (own) errors?" (Ps. 19:12). All too often one hears it said: 'It's OK in my

conscience, so there's nothing wrong with it'. Yet my comment is that our 'conscience', our natural sense of right and wrong, won't jump outside of us at judgment day and stand there and judge us. There is one thing that will judge us: the word of the Lord (Jn. 12:48). Morality isn't relative; there is such a thing as ultimate right and wrong, regardless of what our intuitive sense is.

And yet 1 Cor. 8-10 and Rom. 14:23 seem to teach that what may be right for one man in his Biblical definition of conscience may be wrong for another in his conscience. According to this principle, God blessed the Rechabites for their obedience to their conscience, even regarding something He had not specifically commanded (Jer. 34:19). "Conscience" seems to be used in these passages in a way similar to how we generally use it in modern English. These verses seem to suggest that conscience means our personal sense of right and wrong. However, Corinthians and Romans speak specifically about the food / drink question. They don't talk in general terms about the principles of conscience. There was a right and wrong here; it was quite OK to eat meat, *any* meat. Indeed to think otherwise, Paul demonstrates, reflected a weak understanding of the Gospel and a respect of idols very close to believing those deities had real existence. However, whilst ideally all believers should have accepted this, there were some weak ones who just couldn't. If they ate the meat, it would be a sin for them, and therefore the stronger believers were not to do anything which might encourage the weak to eat such meat. Here we see a concession (another one!) to human weakness. The standard was: idols don't exist, Christ died to free us from Mosaic regulations; God created this meat to be thankfully received by you; *therefore* eat! But a concession was made; God allowed men to justify their refusal to accept His teaching. He (the Almighty!) respected their human sense of right and wrong, with the proviso that if they did what was against their conscience, He would count it as sin. I doubt whether we can certainly infer that this principle applies to other issues apart from meat. God made an allowance there, at that time, on the question of meat. He may well do in many contemporary issues, but it is His prerogative to judge this, not ours. In any case, the existence of different 'consciences' was a sign of immaturity in the early brotherhood. Many issues which we tend to class as 'matters of conscience' would be better classed 'matters of personal judgment / allowance'. Whilst God does not aim at robot-like spiritual uniformity between us, we mustn't give the impression that if it's OK in your conscience, then it's OK with God. We all have the same clear conscience, and should all respond to that in the same way when it comes to moral issues. There is clear Biblical guidance on issues like how we spend 'our' money, whether we watch certain films etc.; as there was on the meat question. If we have a truly cleansed conscience with God and we believe this, our way of life will become clear, without any struggles of 'conscience' or indecision. But all this depends upon having a clear Biblical definition of conscience.

The Good Conscience

The good conscience is Biblically defined in Hebrews 9, 10. Here the writer is basing his argument on how those under the Old Covenant still had a guilty conscience after their sacrifices, because the blood of animals could not take away sin; the yearly Day of Atonement required them to confess their sins once again. Their conscience was not made perfect (Heb. 9:9). In his overpowering way, Paul drives his logic home: not only is our conscience cleansed by the one sacrifice of Christ, but we are in a more exalted position than the OT worshippers; we are in the very position of the High Priest who on that Day of Atonement entered the Most Holy; *we* can enter the Holiest with *boldness* (cp. the nervousness of the Priest) because our consciences are cleansed with Christ's blood. And

because of this, "let us draw near" (Heb. 10:22), the language the LXX uses about the priestly serving of God; now *we* can do the priestly work, because our consciences are cleansed. We are not like the OT believers, who had a bad conscience because of their sins and needed to offer an annual sacrifice for them, as a result of their conscience. We, Paul is saying, by contrast, have no more conscience of sins. According to this Biblical definition of conscience, the conscience is cleansed, and we partake of that cleansing by baptism. At and in that sacrament, we make a pledge to keep that good conscience (1 Pet. 3:21 NIV); perhaps we need to point this out more to baptism candidates. We are once and for all forgiven. Our emphasis must be on confession of failure, not feeling guilty and rushing off a quick prayer, as if this will get us forgiveness. We have been cleansed and covered, we are in the new covenant of grace. Only by breaking out of this can we lose the gracious position in which we stand: we have a conscience which is free of guilt, if we truly believe in the power of the cross and our relationship to it through baptism.

Piling wonder upon wonder, Paul also makes the point that the Lord Jesus made *one* sacrifice for all sins for all time, and therefore we don't need to offer any more sacrifices or use a human priesthood; we are already totally forgiven of all our sins. Sin was completely overcome by the Lord's victory; "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever (in their conscience) them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14 cp. 9:9). "Their sins and iniquities [there seems no hint that this only refers to pre-baptismal sins] will I remember no more" (Heb. 10:17). If we sin wilfully after knowing this, there is no more sacrifice for sins- because that sacrifice was only ever made once (Heb. 10:26). At our baptism, our conscience was cleansed of all sin. There is further evidence, apart from the reasoning of Hebrews, that all our sins, past and future, were forgiven at Calvary:

- On the cross, sin was ended, iniquity reconciled, everlasting righteousness brought in (Dan. 9:24). One sin offering was made for all time.

- We must forgive one another even as God for Christ's sake *hath* forgiven us (Eph. 4:32); not waiting for our brother to repent before we forgive him, but forgiving in advance, in prospect, even as we were forgiven. This takes this issue out of the realms of theology into the painfully practical.

- Our sins were / are forgiven by the blood of Christ- not by our repentance or words of prayer. "God's forgiveness is not just a wiping clean of the slate [from hour to hour]...if it were, prayer would be immoral- a mere incantation to bring about a magical result: and we need to be continually wary of the pagan conception which would reduce it to such a level" [\(1\)](#). These words are so true. Whenever a twinge of guilt arises, we rush off a quick prayer for forgiveness- and then, at the end of the day or the week, we are left with a doubt as to whether our spirituality is valid or not. If this is our experience, we are all too similar to Israel of old; offering the sin offering (cp. praying for forgiveness), feeling guilty, coming to the day of Atonement (cp. the breaking of bread), still feeling guilty, realizing that as the sin offering couldn't cleanse sin, neither could the sacrifice at that feast, offering more sin offerings... It can become the ritual of a bad conscience, stumbling on because there seems no other way to go. But our sins (yes, yours, that snap at your wife, that curse as you spilt your coffee) really were forgiven through the Lord's work on the cross; we really do have access to this through *really believing it*- and therefore expressing our faith in baptism. Our prayerful response to failure should be to confess it (1 Jn. 1:9), and also profess our faith in the redemption already achieved for us.

All our sins were forgiven when the Lord died for us; both past and future. By baptism we identify ourselves with this work, and we are thereby in a position where we have "no more conscience of sins" (Heb. 10:2,22), knowing that all is forgiven, and only if we fall from grace will this become untrue. Thus YLT speaks of "the conscience" in the NT, as if it is something specific which we have, rather than an occasional twinge of guilt. We have this Biblical conscience "toward God"; this is how He sees us (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1 Pet. 2:19; 3:21). Thus we may have a guilty feeling about something, we may doubt our salvation, but our conscience in God's eyes is pure; we are still cleansed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Because we have a clear conscience, God will punish those who persecute us (1 Pet. 3:16 RSV). 1 Pet. 3:21 teaches that baptism saves us not because in itself it means that we are free from the deeds of the flesh ("putting away the filth of the flesh" uses words which elsewhere carry this connotation), but because it gives us a good conscience in God's eyes- according to the Biblical definition of conscience.

Notes

(1) L.G. Sargent, *The Teaching Of The Master* (Birmingham: C.M.P.A., 1961), p.277.

7-12-3-2 The Grace Of God: Too Good News

In the same way as we seem unable to focus our attention for very long on the ultimate issues of life, so we find it difficult to believe the extent of God's grace. He is extravagant with His grace- God "lavishes" grace upon us (Eph. 1:6-8). The covenant God made with Abraham was similar in style to covenants made between men at that time; and yet there was a glaring difference. Abraham was not required to do anything or take upon himself any obligations. Circumcision [cp. baptism] was to remember that this covenant of grace had been made. It isn't part of the covenant [thus we are under this same new, Abrahamic covenant, but don't require circumcision]. Perhaps this was why Yahweh but not Abraham passed between the pieces, whereas usually both parties would do so. The promises to Abraham are pure, pure grace. Sadly Jacob didn't perceive the wonder of this kind of covenant- his own covenant with God was typical of a human covenant, when he says that *if* God will give him some benefits, then he will give God some (Gen. 28:20). Although he knew the covenant with Abraham, the one way, gracious nature of it still wasn't perceived by him.

All flesh is as grass, and yet the Lord speaks as if God treats us as better than the grass "which is today in the field and tomorrow is cast into the oven" (Lk. 12:28). Israel had consented to be "bidden" to the feast; and according to Oriental practice, to accept an initial invitation to a feast was to commit oneself to respond to the final notice of it. But "they would not come", and yet despite this insult, their divine host had sent forth yet more servants to beg them to come. The Lord puts behind Him the insult of our rejections, and graciously pleads with us- even God pleading with men. The whole history of Israel is eloquent proof of this grace of God. Consider how the believers were assembled praying for Peter's release, and then when he turns up on the doorstep, they tell the servant girl that she's mad to think Peter was there. Or how the Lord Jesus did such wonderful miracles- and people asked him to go away (Mt. 8:34). We too have this element within us. We would rather salvation and forgiveness were 'harder' to attain. The popularity of Catholic and Orthodox rituals is proof enough of this. It always touches me to read in the Gospels how the Lord Jesus cured wide eyed spastic children, crippled, wheezing young women, and sent them (and their loved ones)

away with a joy and sparkle this world has never known. But the people asked Him to go away, and eventually did Him to death. A voice came from Heaven, validating Him as the Son of God; those who heard it involuntarily fell to the ground. But the people didn't really believe, and plotted to kill him (Jn. 12:37). They turned round and bayed for His blood, and nailed Him to death. He cured poor Legion; and the people told the Lord to go away.

There's something in our nature which shies away from the true Gospel because it's too good to believe. Paul had this struggle with the Jews, both in and outside of the church. They heard the offer of life from the Lord Himself, and rejected it: " This is an hard saying: who can hear it?" (Jn. 6:60). It was just too good to believe. There is something in our natures which is diametrically opposed to the concept of *pure* grace. We feel we must *do* something before we can expect anything from God. And yet in condescension to this, the Father sometimes almost goes along with us in this. Reflect how the disciples, with all the petty pride of the practical man wishing to do something practical for the leader he adores, earnestly asked the Lord: " Where wilt thou that we go and prepare that *thou* (singular) mayest eat the Passover?" (Mk. 14:12). He told them to find a certain man, and ask him where the Master would eat Passover *with His disciples*. He would show them an upper room furnished and already prepared. *'There'*, the Lord added with His gentle irony, 'prepare for *us*, not just me but you as well, to eat. Even though I've already arranged it all, and I'm inviting *you* to eat with *me*, well, I understand you must feel you do your little human bit, so there *you* prepare; although I've already prepared it all'. 'What love through all his actions ran'. This was grace and understanding and accommodation of men *par excellence*. Another cameo of it is found in the way Martha clearly believed Lazarus was now decomposed, and it would make a smell if the stone over his tomb was rolled away. "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?" was the Lord's response (Jn. 11:40). Clearly she didn't have that faith. So, on one level, she shouldn't have seen God's glory revealed in the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn. 11:4). And yet we read straight away that then, Lazarus was raised- despite Martha's 'unworthiness' of it. Such was the Lord's love for them all.

And this Lord is our Lord. All our sins were forgiven on the cross, and by baptism we rose up into heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 2:6), we were translated into His Kingdom (Col. 1:13), we are *now* kings and priests (Rev. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:5,9 cp. Ex. 19:5), we *have* eternal life (1 Jn. 5:13). We struggle with these kind of passages (and there are so many more). We try to find some theological explanation that makes these words not mean what they say in plain English (or Greek, or Russian, or Shona). It's too good to believe; that all our sins are forgiven, that we stand in God's grace, in sure Hope of His Kingdom. But this is what faith, real faith, is all about. There are some aspects of our spiritual experience in which the Father and Son are far harder than we might expect; but there are many others where they are simply far softer and more thoroughly positive than we can almost accept. Even John the Baptist had this problem; for it seems that when in prison he heard of the Lord's gracious works, he wondered whether this really was the One whose coming in fiery judgment he had preached.

The Grace Of God

I'd like us to reflect on the following examples of where God's mercy is far greater than the mercy of man- even if we are talking about very loving and spiritual people. Consider these windows into the grace of God:

- Elijah told God that only he was faithful, and the rest of the ecclesia of Israel had turned away. God said that in *His* eyes, there were another 7,000 faithful. Paul uses this as an

example of how all of us are like that 7,000- those saved by God's grace (Rom. 11:4,5). So Elijah was a spiritual man; but by His grace, God thought much higher of Elijah's brethren than Elijah did.

- Job felt that " though I were perfect, yet would I not know my soul" (Job 9:21)- he felt the impossibility of trusting his own conscience. He felt he wasn't perfect, and that he was condemned (Job 9:20; 10:2)- although actually God saw him as perfect (1:2). Job felt that God was searching around for his every sin (Job 10:6)- although compare this with how positively God spoke to Satan about him. Clearly God in His grace was more positive about Job than he himself was.

- Paul lamented on his deathbed that all the believers in Asia had turned away (2 Tim. 1:15; Gk. *apostropho*, to apostasize). But at roughly the same time, the Lord Jesus wrote to seven ecclesias in Asia, commending some of their members for holding on to the Truth. Paul was a man of great love, who really tried to see the best in his brethren, having been touched by the grace of God. He even would have given up his eternal life, so that the Jews would be saved (Rom. 9:3 cp. Ex. 32:32). But even Paul, in the time of his greatest spiritual maturity, thought that all the Asian Christians were apostate; when in the Lord's eyes, this wasn't the case.

- David realized all this, centuries before. He was given a choice of three punishments which could befall him. He refused to choose. " Let us fall now into the hand of the Lord; for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man" (2 Sam. 24:14). This has always struck me as magnificent. God is kinder than men. It's better to be punished by Him than by men. This puts paid to the Catholic conception of God as a merciless torturer of wicked men. Clearly the doctrine of eternal torments was invented by men, not God.

- We mustn't judge our brother, because " to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand" (Rom. 14:4). It may be that Paul's implication is that God is more likely to uphold His failing servant than we would be; therefore, let's not condemn our brother, because God is more generous-spirited than we are in His judgment.

- It could even be that the mercy of God Himself is even greater than that of His Angels. I say this on the basis that He warns Israel not to provoke the Angel, because the Angel would not pardon their transgression if provoked (Ex. 23:21). And yet Yahweh Himself was provoked and yet He did pardon Israel (Ps. 78:38-40; 106:43-46).

It's no wonder, then, that we tend to doubt the reality of our own salvation. We're harder than God is, both on ourselves and on others. It's also no wonder that we have such a terrible tendency to be hard on our brethren. Of course, God does have a harder side, which we as sinful men can never overlook. We can, like Abraham, think that there are more righteous in the city than there really are. But fundamentally within God's character, the aspect of mercy is greater than that of judgment (James 2:13). Struggling for adjectives, Paul wrote of the God " who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, (who) hath quickened us together with Christ (by grace are ye saved) ...that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us" (Eph. 2:4-8). He *delights* in showing forgiveness and mercy; He loves doing it (Mic. 7:18). As a French proverb says, it's " *son metier*" - 'what He's good at, and loves doing'. Let's try to catch something of this spirit of the grace of God. Let's try to adopt God's perspective. For what does He require more of a man, " but to do justly, and to *love* mercy (as God does,

7:18), and to walk humbly with thy God" ? (Mic. 6:8).

7-12-3-3 A Good Conscience: " Purged...to serve"

We have a conscience which in God's eyes is cleansed of sin, knowing that our sin has been overcome once and for all, and that we have access to this through baptism. Our hearts were purified by that faith (Acts 15:9); we were cleansed from the conscience of sins (Heb. 9:14); all things became pure to us (Tit. 1:15; Rom. 14:20). This is a good conscience, Biblically defined. When Paul said he had a pure conscience before God, they smote him for blasphemy (Acts 23:1,2); there is an association between a clear conscience and perfection (Heb. 9:9; 10:14). A clear conscience therefore means an awareness that in God's eyes, we have no sin. Thus Paul's conscience could tell him that he was living a life which was a response to his experience of God's grace / forgiveness (2 Cor. 1:12). The conscience works not only negatively; it insists that we *do* certain things. It may even be that the goads against which Paul was kicking before his conversion were not the pricks of bad conscience, but rather the *positive* directions from God that he *ought* to be giving his life to the service of His Son. Whilst we may still have twinges of guilt, and sins to confess, from God's viewpoint the slate is clean, and has been since our baptism. It is impossible to believe this without some kind of response:

- We are purged in our conscience so that we might serve the living God (Heb. 9:14)
- On account of our cleansed conscience, we like the priests " draw nigh" to God (Heb. 10:22); the language (in the LXX) of priestly service
- The result of a good conscience is love- and love isn't inactive (1 Tim. 1:4,5)
- Actions are a proof that we have a good conscience (1 Jn. 3:18-22)
- Having the cleansed conscience of sins compels us to be obedient to Governments (Rom. 13:5)
- Paul *served* God with his good conscience (2 Tim. 1:3)
- A good way of life and a good conscience are bracketed together in 1 Pet. 3:16
- For the sake of our conscience, we should endure persecution *after the pattern of Christ on the cross* (1 Pet. 2:19-22). He did not hang there fearing a bad conscience; it was his clear, sinless conscience before God which motivated him to endure.

It ought to be clear from all this that there is a compelling power in realizing our forgiveness; the wonder of the fact that God looks at us as in Christ, as without sin, as having a good conscience cleansed from sin, will of itself constrain us to serve Him. There is, therefore, a link between conscience and behaviour. It isn't so much that we only do certain jobs or refuse army service etc. because we *fear* a bad conscience, or we fear we *might* get into a situation where we *might* get a bad conscience; the surpassing excellence of our experience of God's grace will positively bring forth a way of life in us which of itself precludes certain occupations (e.g. munitions), bearing arms, etc.

The Positive God

The motivation we have for refusing the call of this present, passing world is so great. The glorious, wondrous Truth of our salvation and this "good conscience" is really beyond articulation in human language. If we can just catch sight of it for a moment, if we can see the burning zeal of God Almighty for our salvation, His Name coming from far burning with redemptive zeal, as Isaiah saw it, if we can enter into the passion of the struggling Saviour as He groaned for *our* forgiveness, or into the *power* of His resurrection and endless life; then the motivating power will rush through our veins: to rise up and respond, to be separate from this world and separated unto the things of the Kingdom. "We are *more than conquerors* through him that loved us". A fine phrase; *more* than conquerors; not just conquerors. I could heap up example after example of this positive, more than positive, way in which God deals with us.

Paul in Romans does it better than I ever could; his logic is so incisive. He reasons, for example, that if God so loved us that He gave His Son to die in agony for us, before we were born, "while we were yet sinners", how much more does He show His love to us now that we have accepted the Lord Jesus? And further, if the love of God was shown so powerfully through the *death* of Christ, how much more (if we can even begin to comprehend it) was achieved through the *resurrection*? And even yet further (and this is classic Paul), if the gift of His Son on Calvary was the supremest expression of God's love, to give us a place in the Kingdom is absolutely certain; if God didn't spare His Son's death, to have mercy on you and me at the judgment requires far less from Him than what He has already given; and so surely He will give us that place which we seek; and not only a place in the Kingdom, but *all things*; because the gift of Christ on the cross was the greatest gift, therefore "all things" is less than that, and therefore surely He will give them to those for whom Christ died. And so the logic goes on and on and on. And "what shall we say to these things?". The answer is- a good conscience.

The very way the Bible is written reflects God's positive attitude towards His people, and His repeated imputation of righteousness to us. Just consider these examples⁽¹⁾:

- The disciples are said not to have believed "for joy" (Lk. 24:41). But the Lord upbraided them for their arrant foolishness and plain unbelief. They slept, we are told, "for sorrow"- when they should have stayed awake as commanded. Despite His peerless faith, the Lord Jesus marvelled at the extent of other's faith (Mt. 8:10); and the Gospels stress how sensitive He was to the faith of others (Mt. 9:2,22,29; 15:28; Mk. 5:34; 10:52; Lk. 7:9,50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). Yet measured by His standards, they probably hard knew what faith was. Yet He "marvelled" at their faith, even uttering an exclamation, it seems, on one occasion (Mt. 8:10). Their sleepiness is excused in the statement "for their eyes were heavy" (Mk. 14:40), even though their falling asleep at that time was utterly shameful. The chief rulers are described as believing on Christ (Jn. 12:42), even though their faith was such a private affair at that time that it was hardly faith at all. such a Lord of grace gives every reason for us to have a good conscience before Him. Despite the fact that when the crisis of the cross tested their faith, the disciples really didn't believe, the Lord spoke so positively of their faith, despite knowing that they would all scatter from Him: "My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God and do it" (Lk. 8:21). He spoke of how that band of rough, mixed up men were filled with the joy of little bridesmaids because He was among them (Lk. 5:34). Now this is an essay in imputed righteousness. When He most needed them, they fell asleep. Yet He kindly says that their spirit is willing but their flesh was weak (Mk. 14:38); yet elsewhere, the Lord

rigorously demonstrates that mental attitudes are inevitably reflected in external behaviour, and therefore the difference between flesh and spirit in this sense is minimal.

- Whether the woman of Mk. 14:8 really understood that she was anointing His body for burial is open to question. But the Lord graciously imputed this motive to her. The women who came to the garden tomb weren't looking for the risen Lord; they came to anoint the body (Mk. 16:3). But their love of the Lord was counted to them as seeking Him (Mt. 28:5).

- Job was anything but patient. "What is mine end, that I should be patient?" (Job 6:11 RV). He justified his "rash" words on account of his sufferings (6:3). "Why should I not be impatient?", he argues (21:4 RV). And yet... "You have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful" (James 5:11). Surely "the end of the Lord" was that He imputed righteousness to His servant, counting an impatient man as patient? This surely strengthens our faith in His grace, so that we can have the cleansed, good conscience.

- David was, in God's opinion, a man after His own heart, who fulfilled all His will (Acts 13:22). Yet this is the God whose ways are not, and cannot be, ours. Yet this is how humble He is, and how positive His view of a faithful servant.

- At the shores of the Red Sea, it seems Moses' faith wavered, and he prayed something at best inappropriate. All we read is God's response: "Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward" (Ex. 14:15). It seems that Moses' 'cry' isn't recorded- by grace. Likewise it seems Zacharias probably said far more than "Whereby shall I know this?" when Gabriel told him he would soon have a son. It would seem the conversation went on for so long that the people outside wondered why he was staying so long. Presumably he remonstrated with the Angel with other, graciously unrecorded words, and thereby earned the punishment of dumbness (Lk. 1:18-22).

- The people sacrificed in high places *because* there was no temple (1 Kings 3:2). But this is really a generous excuse. It wasn't God's intention there should be a temple for worship; there was *one* place where the Name dwelt, therefore the lack of a temple did *not* justify worshipping in the high places; and several times the people are criticized for doing just this. And yet the record in this place is so positive and almost justifying of the people.

- Israel made a captain and set about to return to Egypt (Neh. 9:17). But this is omitted in the historical record; it simply says that this is what they *thought* of doing (Num. 14:4). The depth of their apostasy is graciously unrecorded.

- Asa is recorded as serving God just as well as David, when actually this wasn't the case; but God counted him as righteous (1 Kings 15:11). The incomplete faith of men like Baruch was counted as full faith by later inspiration (Jud. 4:8,9 cp. Heb. 11:32). Sometimes the purges of idolatry by the kings is described in undoubtedly exaggerated language- such was God's joy that at least something was being done? Israel never really wholeheartedly committed themselves to Yahweh, and yet 2 Chron. 20:33 positively and hopefully says: "As yet the people had not prepared their hearts unto the God of their fathers". They never did.

- The Lord saw the zeal of the mixed up, uncertain, misunderstanding disciples as storm troopers taking the city of the Kingdom of God by force- knowing exactly where they were coming from and where they were going (Mt. 11:12).

- The descriptions of the faithful in the Kingdom use language which is surely exaggerated; they overcame *even as* the Lord overcame (Rev. 3:21). They are described as clothed in white linen, just as was the Victorious Saviour straight after His death (Mt. 27:59). A comparison of our struggles with the Lord in Gethsemane, let alone the cross, reveal that we do not overcome as He did. We have not resisted unto blood in striving against our own sin. We will have the right to the tree of life (Rev. 22:14); yet our salvation is by pure grace alone. We are "meet" to be partakers of the inheritance, we walk worthy of the Lord Jesus unto all pleasing of him (Col. 1:10-12), the labourers receive the penny of salvation, that which is their right (Mt. 20:14). We are either seen as absolutely perfect, or totally wicked, due to God's imputation of righteousness or evil to us (Ps. 37:37). There is no third way. The pure in heart see God, their righteousness (to God) exceeds that of the Pharisees, no part of their body offends them or they pluck it out; they are perfect as their Father is (Mt. 5:8,20,29,48). Every one of the faithful will have a body even now completely full of light, with no part dark (Lk. 11:36); we will walk, even as the Lord walked (1 Jn. 2:6). These impossible standards were surely designed by the Lord to force us towards a real faith in the imputed righteousness which we can glory in; that the Father really does see us as this righteous. Men have risen up to this. David at the end of his life could say that he was upright and had kept himself from his iniquity (2 Sam. 22:21-24). He could only say this by a clear understanding of the concept of imputed righteousness. Paul's claim to have always lived in a pure conscience must be seen in the same way.

The Example Of Israel

"Some" Jews didn't believe (Rom. 3:3); the majority, actually, but the Father is more gentle than that. The whole tragic history of God's relationship with Israel is a sure proof of His essentially positive character. Right at their birth by the Red Sea, the Almighty records that "the people feared Yahweh, and believed Yahweh, and his servant Moses" (Ex. 14:23). No mention is made of the Egyptian idols they were still cuddling (we don't directly learn about them until Ez. 20). Nor of the fact that this "belief" of theirs lasted a mere three days; nor of the fact that they rejected Moses, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. "There was no strange god" with Israel on their journey (Dt. 32:12); but there were (Am. 5:26). The reconciliation is that God counted as Israel as devoted solely to Him. The Angel told Moses that the people would probably want to come up the mountain, closer to God, when in fact in reality they ran away when they saw the holiness of God; almost suggesting that the Angel over-estimated their spiritual enthusiasm (Ex. 19:21-24 cp. 20:18). Likewise the Angel told Moses that the people would hear him, "and believe thee for ever" (Ex. 19:9). Things turned out the opposite. At this time, God saw no iniquity in Israel (Num. 23:21). He fulfilled His promise at Sinai that if they were obedient, He would make them His people; and He did, counting them as obedient. Yet the events of the intervening forty years hardly sound like Israel being obedient; He "suffered their manners" forty years (Ps. 95:10; Acts 13:18). Yet this is how they were counted (Ex. 19:5 cp. Dt. 27:9). He saw them as a young woman 'going after' Him in the wilderness years, attracted to Him (Jer. 2:2). Even when we do read of the sin of Israel at this time, God *grieved* over the carcasses of those He slew (Heb. 3:17).

Even when God punished Israel, He seems to later almost take the blame for their judgments; thus He says that He left some of the Canaanite nations in the land to teach Israel battle experience (Jud. 3:2 NIV), whereas elsewhere the presence of those remaining nations is clearly linked to Israel's faithlessness, and their survival in the land was actually part of God's punishment of Israel. He almost excuses Israel's apostasy by saying that they had not seen the great miracles of the Exodus (Jud. 2:7). "The portion of the children of Judah was too much

for them" (Josh. 19:9) almost implies God made an error in allocating them too much; when actually the problem was that they lacked the faith to drive out the tribes living there. Likewise "the coast of the children of Dan went out too little for them" (Josh. 19:47), although actually "The Amorites forced the children of Dan into the mountain: for they would not suffer them to come down to the valley" (Jud. 1:34). When Dan fought against Leshem, this one act of obedience is so magnified in Josh. 19:47 to sound as if in their zeal to inherit their territory they actually found they had too little land and therefore attacked Leshem. But actually it was already part of their allotted inheritance. Yet God graciously comments: "all their inheritance had not fallen unto them among the tribes of Israel" (Jud. 18:1). Further such examples at the time of the conquest could be furnished; they are epitomized in the conclusion: "The Lord gave unto Israel all the land...and they possessed it, and dwelt therein...there stood not a man of all their enemies before them" (Josh. 21:43,44). But their enemies did stand before them, they didn't possess all the land. Yet God puts it over so positively, as if it's a story with a happy ending- when actually it's a tragedy. Even when rebuking them, God sees them as in some ways "perfect" (Is. 42:18-20). Israel were like Sodom, and yet they weren't treated like Sodom (Is. 1:9,10). They were Jeshurun, the upright one, but they kicked at God (Dt. 32:15). Their request for a human king was, as God Himself mightily demonstrated to them, an utter rejection of Him, and He grieved because of it. And yet when God gave them a King, He expresses His decision in quite a different tone: "I will send thee a man (Saul)...that he may save my people out of the hand of the Philistines: for I have looked upon my people, because their cry is come unto me" (1 Sam. 9:16). God speaks as if the gift of Saul was akin to the provision of Moses, to save poor Israel from their unwarranted persecution. Actually, Saul was slain by the Philistines- in His foreknowledge, the Almighty knew all about Saul. But in His pure grace, He doesn't reflect this in the way He speaks at this time.

Later, just because Judah were a bit better than Israel, the Spirit says: "Judah yet ruleth with God, and is faithful with the saints" (Hos. 11:12). But just two verses later: "Yahweh hath also a controversy with Judah" (Hos. 12:2). And poor Israel are pitied by the Spirit "as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused" (Is. 54:6). This is incredible. Israel treacherously went after every young man of the nations she saw, it was her who grieved and refused God; and yet here, the gracious Sovereign puts in all round the other way, as if she was the sweet young wife who was refused and subsequently lived life with a broken soul. There is a powerful logic in all this. If this was the love of God for His people Israel, how much more does He love us who at least try to respond through His Son? It is a struggle for us to really believe all this. It was the struggle of the Egyptian shepherd girl of the Song who just couldn't accept Solomon's protestations of love. She felt that her perfume had lost its fragrance (Song 1:12 Heb., cp. Jud. 16:19 Hebrew). She felt ugly before Him, unworthy of His love. And yet she struggled against this sense of unworthiness. She saw His love, and fain would believe it.

But our own experience of God's grace should surely indicate that for us, it needn't be such a struggle. We really can believe it, and have a thoroughly cleansed and good conscience because of it. This God of absolute grace and enthusiasm for our redemption really is our God, and is manifested in our Lord Jesus. When finally He appears, we shall be able to say that "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him"; He will be the character that we expect Him to be. The Christian who thinks his Lord is a hard man will find Him like this; but to us who know Him as the Lord of all grace, this is how He will surely be. In the meantime, our experience of Him and His character will in itself lead us to the positive expression of His Name in every aspect of our existence: from our objection to violent military activity, to our

speech, even right down to our body language.

Notes

(1) There is more discussion of this in *Enduring To The End* (Endpiece).

7.12.4 Corruption And Bribery In The Mission Field: Breaking The Sabbath To Save Life?

In recent times our brotherhood has started to suffer serious, life-threatening persecution. The exciting growth of the Gospel in the poorer areas of the planet and especially the Moslem world, has been matched by the growing strength of Islamic fundamentalism and opposition to our witness. This exciting and yet worrying situation has inevitably led to many challenges for our thinking, especially in the area of corruption and bribery in the mission field.

Let's begin with a real life example. A young married couple are arrested and sentenced to death for the sake of their conversion to Christ. They are in prison, having been cruelly tortured, and are to be executed. A possibility arises to pay a bribe to enable them to escape from the prison and the death sentence. A brother is holding his mobile phone, talking to one of our contacts who is standing around the corner from the prison. The contact basically says: " Can you give xxxx\$ to get them out of prison. Please answer immediately and send the money to XYZ if so" . What is the brother going to answer? He has to decide immediately. There may not be another chance to save those lives.

We appreciate that such situations are perhaps new and unsettling to many Western Christians. We naturally seek for Biblical guidance that we might do what is right before God, when faced with the issue of corruption and bribery in the mission field.

- There are times when circumstances do change the appropriacy of behaviour which in more normal life we should practice. Take lying as an example. To lie is wrong. We should be truthful. Of course. But think of Rahab. She lied- and her lie and acts of deception are quoted in the New Testament as acts of faith! Further, Rahab implied that the Israelite spies were her clients- "there came men unto me" (Josh. 2:4) appears to be a euphemism- and she gave the impression that of course, as they were merely passing clients, how did she know nor care who they were nor where they went? Her male interrogators would've found it hard to press her further for information after she said that. So she not only lied but she gave the impression that the messengers of the Kingdom of God were immoral- in order to protect both them and her. Of course the way she left a red cord hanging from her window, as if almost inviting people to imagine the spies had been let down over the wall from her home on the wall, was a tremendous act of faith and witness by her, but she presumably kept to her story that they were her anonymous clients. For she was still living in her home when the city was taken. Her witness was thus an indirect one to those who wished to perceive it, but it was made within the context of a major series of untruths. The Hebrew midwives lied to the Egyptians- and were blessed for it. And we could give other examples. If we probe further, and ask WHY such lies were acceptable and even required, we find that often those lies were connected with saving life. To do anything that would cause the loss of human life when it is

in our power to save it is dangerously close to murder. If it is in the power of our hand to do good, surely we should. Otherwise we are likely to be saying " Be ye warmed and filled!" , yet do nothing. We do of course emphasize the need for prayer- and we have arranged days of prayer and fasting for these cases. But this does not absolve us from the need for action. Rather, it seems, do those prayers open up ways practically for us to seek our brethren's good. And some of those ways involve bribery.

- It is a Biblical principle that we should do unto others as we would have done to us. Most Western readers of these words have likely never been badly beaten up, tortured or threatened with imminent death. Those of us who have can testify that one's natural reaction is to seek for the preservation of their body and life as far as possible, and we would all seek for someone to come and help us. Even the Lord went through these very emotions in the context of His crucifixion. If we were in those brethren's position, or if our children or loved ones were, we would surely do all we humanly could to help them.

- The Bible reveals God's mind on bribery in the Old Testament. He said that a judge should not TAKE a bribe, nor should anything be done to pervert the cause of justice- so long as that justice was based on the true justice of God. For the Hebrew judges were to judge on God's behalf, i.e. as a reflection of His judgment. In fanatical Islamic regimes we are not dealing with such a system. We are not perverting the cause of justice. For there is no justice. Our obedience to the laws of the land is only so far as they don't conflict with the law of Christ. Radical Islamic justice does clearly conflict with that law. If it is in the power of our hand to save the life of our brethren then we feel it is unethical not to do so. Besides which, there is no Biblical command which we can find which forbids the giving of bribes.

- It may help to consider what our community would do in the case that one of us were kidnapped and a ransom demanded, on pain of the death of our kidnapped brother. I think we would all have no problem in donating to that cause to save his life. The case of brethren and sisters unfairly and wrongly accused and sentenced to death for righteousness' sake, yet releasable for money, is effectively the same position.

- We do not consider that we are to merely allow evil in the sense of calamity or disaster to overtake us; we are to do what we can humanly to save life. If a brother or sister is seriously ill, we do not tell them that they must just sit at home and await God's will to be done whilst we pray for them. We pray for them and seek to get them into a hospital; and if they need money for this, we would try to raise it for them. Doing what we can to save the life or preserve the health of our brethren is to us effectively the same thing.

- Another real life case may provide helpful food for thought. A sick brother in a poor Eastern European country needed regular dialysis, without which he would have died. Due to the situation in the country there were only a limited number of machines available. Whoever paid enough money to the doctors got to use the dialysis machine [and it has been the same with getting blood for blood transfusions]. We gave him the money, he gave it to the doctors, and he lived. Those without such money eventually died. In such cases, bank notes bought or saved life- under God's good hand and grace. In the Western world, we would have paid money for the brother to have private treatment. Again, God would have used our bank notes to preserve a life. But the 'cost of living' is just paid in a different form in some countries.

- There are many situations in the mission field where corruption and bribery is so rife that money is effectively taken from one by officials, and the line between theft and bribery

becomes very hazy. Take a corrupt airport. You go to passport control. You are told you have a false passport, are a spy, will be imprisoned. You protest your innocence. They ask to see how much money you have. You put all your banknotes on the counter. The official picks up say \$100 and says " OK? You give me this, I let you go? OK?" . Now is that a bribe or just daylight robbery? Most brethren of any experience in preaching in the poorer world will have been in these types of situation. Money is demanded for something that is unreasonable and untrue. But is that bribery in the mission field, or theft? Going back now to our brethren imprisoned and sentenced to death for the sake of their conversion. This is unjust and unreasonable. Someone somewhere down the line asks for money to let them out. Is it a bribe, or daylight robbery? We believe we have no option but to give the funds to save the life of our brother, just as the brother in the airport has no real choice but to say " OK, take the \$100 bill if you want" .

- Biblically, there are examples of where Divine principles are at times in conflict. The purpose of this is surely to develop our consciences. Did one keep the Sabbath, or break the Sabbath in order to save life? Save life and break the Sabbath was the Lord's position. And this is the position which we adopt. We do not seek to break the laws of any country in an arbitrary manner. We have deeply analyzed our consciences and Bible teaching. We have not adopted the position which we have hastily nor emotionally. We have soberly concluded that we can only be obedient to the laws of man in so far as they do not contradict the law of our Lord, for whom the salvation of the life of His brethren was of paramount importance. The Lord said that He had a choice of saving life or destroying life, were He to prefer to keep the Sabbath laws above the need for preserving life. Clearly He saw failing to act to save life as tantamount to destroying life. We must give our Lord's words their due weight here in our decision making. To not act to save life, to excuse ourselves for whatever reason, is effectively destroying life, or, as Mark's record puts it, " to kill" (Mk. 3:4; Lk. 6:9). We can't therefore be passive in this matter. The context of the Lord's statement was in response to questions about whether something was " lawful" or not; it was the age old question, 'Is it a sin to do X, Y or Z?'. His answer was as ever in terms of a principle- that our guiding principle must be the saving and healing and preservation of human life. Would our decisions about, e.g., an imprisoned brother, save or destroy his life? The answer is clear; to get Him out of a death sentence would save his life. It is in this light that our Lord re-interpreted the Law, and invited us His people to rise far above mere legalism. He was faced by critics who sought to find " an accusation [a legal term] against Him" . They were looking for Him to make a specific breach of the Law. And the Lord sought to lead them to a much higher level, to look at life in terms of living by principles rather than in terms of obedience or disobedience to stated laws. The Lord parallels refusing to heal a withered hand with murder. Why? Because in essence, to ignore a person's wellbeing is to treat them as if they don't exist; as if your ignoring of their need in practice is in fact murder. This is how serious are the issues which face us when we face up to brethren whose lives we can save for the sake of money. The attitude of the Pharisees was that the Lord was infringing a letter of the law and therefore was guilty of death. They murdered Him on the sabbath days; and thus they chose to destroy life rather than save it. The word for " to kill" in Mk. 3:4 is so often used in the Gospels about the killing of Jesus. They failed to take His exhortation. The crucifixion of God's Son was thus a result of legalism; it was because of His attitude to the man with the withered hand that the Pharisees first plotted to kill Jesus (Lk. 6:11). Whatever our individual conscience on these matters of corruption and bribery in the mission field, let us not " be filled with madness" as the Pharisees were at the fact the Lord approached human behaviour in terms of principles, rather than reducing everything to a common right / wrong scenario. The principle is clearly the saving and preservation and enriching of others' lives. Surely we

should each allow each other to articulate this fundamental issue as we each have occasion to do so.

7.13 The Same Old Scene vs. Newness Of Life

We live in a world tired and bored with itself. Each day, week, month and year is for them just the same old scene. Flat emotions, a radical indifference to others, the sensation of drifting, numbness, a resigned acceptance of a world gone mad... And we too, in our weak moments, can feel the same. Why am I living? What is this circus all about? Can one person among five billion make a difference on this planet? What is a human being, but a tiny blip in the billion-year progression of history? “Carl Jung reported that a third of his cases suffered from no definable neurosis other than “the senselessness and emptiness of their lives”. He went on to name meaninglessness the general neurosis of the modern era” [\(1\)](#). And this isn’t only true of the richer worlds. Poorer people, locked into a cycle of struggle for survival, doing repetitive work, riding crisis after crisis towards no meaningful end, are in just the same problem. Everyone, rich or poor, predictably sequence their lives, and the syndrome of ‘the same old scene’ inevitably develops.

One of the hardest things about God to believe is that really, all men matter...you matter. I matter. How we speak, what we do and think, is incredibly significant to God. It is a staggering thought that the Creator of heaven and earth should care about how an obscure individual man behaves toward poor widows, orphans, his wife... Perceiving that we are *so important to God* means that for us, life needn’t be the same old scene, weighed down in the mire of mediocrity. For us, there is newness of life in Christ; the urgency to the daily round that comes from truly knowing our desperation; a dynamic relationship with a passionate, feeling God; a life that shares His undying passion for the lost; an emotional prayer life; and the constant energising that comes from our grasp of the Gospel. These are the headings under which I want to consider why for us, life is far from that ‘same old scene’.

7-13-1 Newness Of Life

The Lord Jesus died and rose as our representative. Therefore we live out His life, His death, His rising again to new life; and so as we sing, “into *my* life *your* power breaks through, living Lord”. The life that He lived and the death that He died become ours (Rom. 6:10 RV). We identified with that life, that death, at baptism. But it’s an ongoing thing. We live in *newness* of life. The life in Christ is not a stagnant pond, but rather living water, spring water, bubbling fresh from the spring. And this is what we give out to others- for “he that believeth in me, out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of springing water” for others (Jn. 4:10; 7:38). We can experience the newness of life of Christ right now. His life is now made manifest in our mortal flesh (2 Cor. 4:11), insofar as we seek to live our lives governed by the golden rule: ‘What would Jesus do...?’. The life that He had and now lives is the essence of the Kingdom life. Who He was and is, this is the definition of the Kingdom life. It’s why one of His titles is “the kingdom of God” (Lk. 17:21). And it’s why it can be said that we ‘have’ eternal life now, in that we can live the essence of the life we will eternally live, right now. Is. 42:9,10 says that we sing the “new song” now, because we sing / meditate of the “new things” which will be in the Kingdom. In that day, we will “sing a new song” (Rev. 5:9; 14:3). And yet this is undoubtedly picking up on the way in which we can *now* sing the ‘new song’, every morning, in newness of life (Ps. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1). Likewise, all things will be made new at the Lord’s coming (Rev. 21:5), and yet those in whom the new

creation is worked out already have all things made new in their spiritual experience (2 Cor. 5:17,18). The Kingdom will hardly be the same old scene. There is and will be something dynamic in our relationship with the Father and Son. The Lord Jesus spoke of how He 'knows' the Father and 'knows' us His sheep in the continuous tense (Jn. 10:14,15)- He was 'getting to know' the Father, and He 'gets to know' us. And this is life eternal, both now and then, that we might *get to know* the one true God and His Son (Jn. 17:3). The knowing of God and His Son is not something merely academic, consisting only of facts. It is above all an experience, a thrilling and dynamic one. There is no "new thing under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9)- all in this world is born to roll downhill. And yet in Christ, all things are made new in an ongoing sense. The emotions and feelings of meaninglessness are commented upon in great detail in Ecclesiastes. There is a thrilling duality in that book- the contrast between life as it is "under the sun", and the contrasting imperative for the believer to live life God's way. The exhortation is to live life *God's* way with all our zeal, exactly *because* of the vanity and 'same old scene' nature of the natural life.

The Thrill Of Grace

It can be, though, that we perceive even our service of God as the same old scene- the same round of daily Bible readings (although, why not try reading from another version or in another language?), the same cycle of ecclesial meetings and Bible schools. The same faces, the same issues. But our experience of grace means "that we should serve in *newness* of spirit and not in the oldness of the letter" (Rom. 7:6). We don't *have* to serve God in the sense that He grants us salvation by pure grace, not by works. The blessing of the Lord has nothing added to it by human toil (Prov. 10:22 RVmg.). But just because we don't *have* to do it, we do. This is the power of grace; it doesn't force us to monotonous service, but should be a wellspring of fresh motivation, to do perhaps the same things with an ever fresh spirit. The pure *wonder* of it all needs to be felt- that *for nothing but pure faith* the Lord will grant us eternal redemption for the sake of the Lord's death and resurrection. Which is why Rom. 6:4 says that because of this, and our appropriation of it in baptism, we therefore live in *newness* of life, a quality of life that is ever new. Through His death, a new and living way is opened (Heb. 10:20). We share the ever fresh life which the Lord lived from His resurrection. It does us good to try to imagine that scene- the Son of God, coming out of the grave at daybreak. He would have seen the lights of Jerusalem shimmering away in the distance, a few kms. away, as everyone woke up and went back to work, the first day after the long holiday. Getting the children ready, caring for the animals...it was back to the same old scene. But as they did so, the Son of God was rising to newness of life, standing alone in the fresh morning air, with a life that was ever new, with a joy and dynamism that was to know no end...His feelings are beyond us, but all the same, distorted by our nature, by our spiritual dysfunction, into *our* lives *His* life breaks through.

Our Desperation

If in the daily round we can know *how* desperate we are, the urgency of our spiritual situation, we will appreciate the more finely what the Lord has done and is daily doing for us, and will be motivated to make an urgent, joyful response. As a student at London University I recall an over-zealous evangelical spraying on a wall: "Jesus is the answer". But a few days later, someone scrawled underneath: "OK, but what's the question?". And this is simply so. The whole wonder of God's truth as it is in Christ is totally lost on us unless we see our desperate need; unless we perceive the problem. And the wider wonder of it will only be appreciated, the thrill felt, if we feel something of the whole of humanity's desperation; if we

see the tragedy of human existence without the Truth.

One way of realising the seriousness of our sin is to recognise that each sin we commit, we could have avoided. We must hang our heads, time and again. In the very end, we can blame neither our circumstances nor our natures, even though these are factors in the committal of each sin. We must each bear total personal responsibility for every sin, both of commission and omission. We must hang our heads. James, as he often does, foresees how in practice we may reason that fervent prayer isn't possible, because...we are angry, low, tired, don't feel like it. So we tell ourselves. But James cuts across all this: "Elijah was a man subject to like passions [RVmg "nature"] as we"- and yet *he* prayed earnestly (James 5:17). We can't excuse our lack of prayer by blaming it on the "passions" of our natures. Men like Elijah had the same nature as we do, and yet they prayed fervently.

Job fell into the trap of thinking that his terrible situation somehow allowed him to speak whatever words came into his head. Consider:

-“Doth the wild ass bray when he hath grass? Or loweth the ox over his fodder?” (6:5). Job felt he hadn't been 'fed' and so he was entitled to “bray” and “low” over his misfortune.

-Because “my calamity [is] heavier than the sand of the seas, therefore have my words been rash” (6:3 RV).

-“Therefore I will not refrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit” (7:11).

-“I will give free course to my complaint. I will speak in the bitterness of my soul” (10:1 RV).

-Zophar criticises Job being “full of talk” and speaking “the multitude of words”, “for thou sayest, my doctrine is pure” (11:1-4)- as if Job felt that because he held true doctrine he was justified in pouring out words as he did.

-“Why should I not be impatient?” (21:4 RV).

-“Today is my complaint bitter. My stroke is heavier than my groaning” (23:2)- i.e. his complaining was due to his sufferings.

-“If I hold my peace, I shall give up the spirit” (13:19 RVmg.).

Job felt that the situation he was in *forced* him to use the words he did, and certainly justified it [we may well have used this reasoning ourselves when justifying the use of bad language]. But in the end, Elihu on God's behalf rebuked him for his wrong words. And Job himself recognised: “I am vile. I will lay mine hand upon my mouth” in regret of his words (40:4). “Wherefore I loathe my words and repent” (42:6 RVmg.). He realized his mistake: he had thought that the situation justified his words. Now he hung his head and admitted that there was no justification for speaking in the way he had. Especially in the matter of the tongue, we can so easily justify ourselves; ‘I only said / did it [or didn't do it] because...’. And it is all so child-like. Once we leave off *all* attempts at self-justification, we will face up to our sins. Let us kneel at our bed sides and *confess without reserve* our sin. And we will thereby realize the more finely our utter desperation. And the vital force, the nerve, the most essential idea of Christianity will be unleashed in us afresh: that we are desperate sinners, and the Son of God,

as one like us, died to save us from our desperate situation, and to grant us a gracious place in His Kingdom. And we will respond, not therefore in mediocrity, but in lives of active grace and dynamic service.

A Feeling God

Insofar as we realize that God is not passive, but has feelings toward us far more deep and passionate than we can ever know, so far we will realize that life with Him is a daily, passionate experience. It is indeed newness of life. It cannot be 'the same old scene'. Consider the passion of God: "For a long time I have kept silent, I have been quiet and held myself back. But now, like a woman in childbirth, I cry out, I gasp and pant" (Is. 42). "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart is changed within me; All my compassion is aroused" (Hosea). "My heart is changed" explains why God could say "they shall return to Egypt" and then later "he shall not return into the land of Egypt" (Hos. 8:13 cp. 11:5). Likewise "I will love them no more...I will love them freely" (Hos. 9:15 cp. 14:4). The prophets are full of such emotion and passionate intensity and newness of life. The prophets are not just predictions of the future. They reveal the passion of God's feelings for His people. At the very time when He condemns them for their adultery against Him, their ingratitude, their worthlessness, He cries out His belief in the blessedness He will one day grace them with.

Can one person on a speck of a planet in a speck of a solar system in a mediocre clump of a galaxy really make a difference to the creator of that universe? As David looked to the heavens, he felt what surely we all have: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him...?". Reflect how Almighty God created a bush to give Jonah shade from the sun; and created a tiny worm to take it away, to teach Jonah something. We *matter* to God. Our lives and experiences and the things in our lives are important to Him, down to the micro level [a worm, in Jonah's case]. And we should reflect this in the way we treat others- *all* men. And of course, we matter and mattered to the Lord Jesus, to the extent of Him laying down His life in the way that He did- for us. "The saints in the earth" are those "in whom is *all* my delight"; this was the mind of Jesus toward us (Ps. 16:3). People should matter to us; their lives, their feelings, their eternal destiny. I am not preaching some kind of humanism. Rather, appealing for us to reflect the same senseless, illogical, caring and saving spirit of our Lord and our Creator. He rent the heavens to come down and save us. And the extent of that rending and coming down was in the death by torture of His only, beloved Son. We can push pass people in a line, or on transport, ignore the old lady who slipped on the ice, the child lost in the bus station or taxi park; the driver needing a tow...because we are just too busy. Because, even, we are busy on the Lord's business. So we tell ourselves. The reality is, we just don't care, or, we don't care very deeply. And we can remain untouched by the tragedy of all those who have not known, as we see them streaming before us on a city street, as we look out over the thousands of lights on a city night. From Nairobi to Moscow to Mumbai...all the way back home. It should concern us, worry us, that we have what they so desperately need. To say 'they're not interested' is, for me, just an excuse. Of course they're not (nobody is)...*until they meet you or me*, until we have gotten them to see, to listen, in whatever form, to the Truth we have. The Angels in Heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents. A solitary act on this speck of a planet reverberates throughout the cosmos. One solitary life...thrills Almighty God. Just because He doesn't show His feelings doesn't mean this isn't so. The prophets especially, and the parables of Jesus, help us to see beyond the mask of His silence, the mask of a sky above us that rarely reflects the Creator's feelings. The life of the Father was manifested unto us in the Son (1 Jn. 1:2), and He has shared that life

with us. God's life is essentially activity; it is hardly the same old scene, even though to the unspiritual observer it may seem He acts repetitively.

“He was moved with compassion”

One of the repeated features of the Lord's witness was His compassion towards humanity: “When he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. [Mk. 6:34 adds at this point that He *therefore*, as a result of that compassion, started to “teach them many things”]. Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest...” (Mt. 9:36-38). It was their spiritual as well as their material and human need which evoked His compassion. I have to say that this spirit of urgent compassion is not as strong in our community as it should be. There seem few if any tears shed for the tragedy of humanity. The world's desperation seems written off as ‘they’re not interested’ rather than felt as a tragedy that should evoke our emotional and practical response. When Jesus saw the leper who wanted to be “clean”- not just ‘cured’ or eased of his discomfort- He made an emotional response. He put forth His hand, touched him, and made him clean- because He was “moved with compassion” (Mk. 1:40,41). Mt. 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mk. 5:19 and Lk. 7:13 all record other times when the sheer humanity of the situation evoked the Lord's compassion: e.g. the woman in the funeral procession of her dear son, or the hungry crowds, unfed for 3 days...

Yet the Lord's compassion is clearly intended to be ours, who are to live and move and feel “in Him”. The Lord of the servant “*was moved with compassion* and forgave him”- the very words used about the Lord being “moved with compassion” for the spiritual and human needs of the Galilean Jews He lived amongst in His life. But the point of the parable was: “..shouldest not thou also have had compassion...?” (Mt. 18:27,33). If we have seen and known His compassion, ought we not also to show that compassion in the same way as He did and does? His compassion must be ours. The Samaritan of Lk. 10:33 was clearly intended to be interpreted as the Lord Jesus. He “had compassion” on the dying man of humanity, not counting the personal cost and risk; and then the Lord bids us each to go and do likewise. Our ‘doing likewise’ will issue in us too sensing the tragedy of those who have not heard, of those without a shepherd, of those who have fallen out of the way. We will be like the Father who was likewise moved with compassion for his wayward son (Lk. 15:20). The crowds of unknowing people who stream before us each day, the sad fact that true Bible believing Christians are hopelessly outnumbered in this world, that those you live and work with are dying in ignorance of the wonderful eternity that *could be* for them...that they live their lives in the darkness of selfishness, as existence rather than real life, without the light of the knowledge of the glory of God as it is in the face of Jesus Christ...all these things will powerfully *move us* to witness after the pattern of our Lord.

Notes

(1) Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), p. 144.

7-13-2 Passionate Christian Living

Personal Pleading

Often the prophets break off from predicting coming condemnation to *plead personally* with their hearers to repent [this explains some of the strange shifts of pronouns in the prophets]. This is a prototype for the even more passionate Christian living which we should be experiencing. Take Micah. Chapter 2 is a message of judgment against Israel. And then Micah pleads: “And I said, Hear, I *pray* you, O heads of Jacob...is it not for you to know [the coming of] judgment?” (3:1). Likewise: “For this will I wail and howl, I will go stripped and naked: I will make a wailing like jackals...at Beth-le-Aphrah have I rolled myself in the dust” (Mic. 1:8,10 RV). Rolling naked in the dust...this was the extent of Micah’s passion for the repentance of his audience. He comes to the point where he would fain make sacrifice for Israel, even to the point of offering his firstborn son, so strongly did he take upon himself the sins of his people. But he tells Israel that even this will be no good; they must repent themselves: “Wherewith shall I come before the Lord...shall I come before him with burnt offerings....shall I give my firstborn for my transgression?...what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly...and to humble thyself [in repentance]” (6:6-8). In all this, Micah came close to the spirit of the Father and Son. For the Father *would* give His firstborn for their sin.

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

And there are many other Biblical examples of such genuine pain at the lostness of this world, and their refusal of the Gospel’s grace; not least our Lord Himself weeping over Jerusalem, the very prototype of passionate Christian living. Think of how He was angry [i.e. frustrated?] , “being grieved for the blindness of their hearts” (Mk. 3:5). Are we just indifferent or evenly smugly happy that men are so blind...? Or do we grieve about it to the point of angry frustration? Remember how Moses and Paul would fain have given their eternal life for the conversion of Israel, this is how they felt for them. Reflect too again on

Jeremiah; how he responds to the prophecy he has to utter against the hated Philistines by begging the Father to limit these judgments, presumably on account of their repentance: “O thou sword of the Lord, how long will it be ere thou be quiet? Put up thyself into thy scabbard, rest, and be still” (Jer. 47:6). Think too of how he almost interrupts a prophecy he is giving to Israel about judgment to come by appealing for them *therefore* to repent (Jer. 4:13,14). Our handling of the prophecies of judgment to come should have a like effect upon us: they should inspire us to an inevitable witness. Each of our days cannot be just ‘the same old scene’ when we see the world in this way.

Passionate Prayer

In his time of dying, Stephen saw the Lord Jesus *standing* at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55). But about 13 times in the New Testament, the point is made that the Lord *sits* there, unlike the Mosaic priests who *stood* (Heb. 10:12). Jesus was passionately feeling for Stephen; and He just as emotionally and passionately feels for us in our struggles. This alone should lift us out of the mire of mediocrity and reboot our passionate Christian living. Prayer will have meaning and power. It won’t just be the repetitious conscience-salver it can descend into.

A window on what communication can be with our creator is provided by considering the ‘imprecatory Psalms’; those where the writer wishes terrible judgments upon his enemies. It is possible to understand these Psalms in terms of the promises to Abraham- that God will curse those who curse the true seed of Abraham. They can therefore be seen to be merely asking for the promises to Abraham to be fulfilled against God’s enemies. But another angle on this problem is to consider how the Psalmists talk to God in a far ‘rougher’ way than we do. They pour out their feelings, their anger and frustration with their enemies, their inability to understand how God is working...and they let it all hang down. They seem to have no reserve with God; they talk to Him as if He is their friend and acquaintance. David pleads with God to ‘avenge my cause’ (Ps. 35:23), he protests how he is in the right and how he longs for God to judge him. And so do the prophets, in the interjections they sometimes make in commentary on the prophecy they have just uttered. The emotion which David often seems to have felt was “Damn these people!”, but he pours this out to God and asks *Him* to damn them. When we like David feel our enemies are unjust, we can:

1. Seek revenge. But this isn’t a response we can make, Biblically.
2. Deny the feelings of hurt and anger. And yet, they surface somehow. And we join the ranks of the millions of hurt people in this world, who ‘take it out’ in some way on others.
3. Or we can do as David seems to have done. Take these feelings, absolutely as they are, with no rough edges smoothed off them...to God Himself. Pour them all out in prayer and leave Him to resolve the matter.

This latter option is how I understand the imprecatory Psalms. Those outpourings of human emotion and passionate living were read by God as prayers. The writer of Psalm 137, sitting angry and frustrated by a Babylonian riverside, with his guitar hanging on a willow branch, being jeered (“tormented” Ps. 137:3 RVmg.) by the victorious Babylonian soldiers who had led him away captive...he felt *so* angry with them. Especially when they tried to make him sing one of the temple songs (“sing us one of the songs of Zion”). And, as a bitter man does, his mind went from one hurt to another. He remembered how when Babylon had invaded, the

Edomites hadn't helped their Hebrew brethren (Obadiah 11,12). They had egged on the Babylonian soldiers in ripping down the temple, saying "Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation". And so in anger and bitterness this Jew prays with tears, as he remembered Zion, "O daughter of Babylon...happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock" (:8,9 RV). God read those angry words as a prayer, and in some sense they will have their fulfilment. For these words are picked up in Rev. 18:8,21 and applied to what will finally happen to Babylon. Her spiritual children will be dashed against the rock of Christ, the stone of Daniel 2:44, at His return. He will dash in pieces the Babylon-led people that oppose Him.

This makes these Psalms a challenge to us, in that they show how our earlier brethren poured out their souls, their anger, their doubts and fears, their joy and exuberance too...to the God who hears prayer, to the God who feels passionately for us, who feels for *our* feelings, even moreso through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we must ask whether our prayers are of this quality, or whether we have slipped into the mire of mediocrity, the same standard phrases, the same old words and themes... and even worse, could it be that we perceive that God only sees and hears the words we say to Him in formal prayer, and disregards our other feelings and thoughts? Seeing He sees and knows all things, let us therefore pour out all that is within us before Him. And we will find it wonderfully therapeutic when struggling against anger and hurt.

The Power Of Basics

The Lord said that a scribe (one who knows well the Old Testament scriptures) who also knows the Gospel of the Kingdom is like a man who brings out of "his treasure" things new and old (Mt. 13:52). But Jesus had just defined the "treasure" as the Gospel of the Kingdom (Mt. 13:44). If we make that 'treasure' *our* personal treasure, the most valuable thing in our whole being, then out of the basic Gospel that is in our hearts we will bring forth things "new and old". Our treasure is where our heart is (Mt. 6:21). Having this treasure will inspire passionate Christian living. Yet the treasure is the basic Gospel, i.e., that Gospel lodged in our deepest hearts. The old things of basic certainties; and the new things relating to our increasing appreciation of what they really mean, these will come out of us in our lives and feeling and being. The treasure of "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" is in our earthen vessels, and it is the basic message which we preach (2 Cor. 4:5-7). So, one source of "new things" comes from sustained meditation upon the fundamentals of our faith, making the treasure we found in a field *our* personal treasure, our pride and joy.

So the power of our basic Christian doctrines should never cease to inspire us to passionate Christian living. I can testify to this, as can so many who have been baptized even a few years. That Christ really will come, soon; that now is my salvation nearer than when I first believed. That the feet of Jesus of Nazareth will surely stand on this earth again, and His Kingdom be eternally here; that He truly was a man of my passions and nature, and yet overcame. That I and my innate selfishness are the real 'satan', not someone or something else. That death is death, that this brief and fragile life is the time to serve the Lord, with no fiery hell beneath us, but instead the sure hope of God's grace. That through baptism, I truly am part of the seed of Abraham and a partaker in Israel's Hope. And that by the grace of God's calling, I am delivered from the fog of error which dogs so many about these things. And that there is, in the end, one body of true believers world-wide believing as I do; that the sun that bids me rest is waking my brethren 'neath the Western sky, so that the voice of

praise is never silent. There are times of total desperation and disappointment with myself, with my nature, with this world, with humanity, with my brethren. In my hard moments, in the hours and days of such utter and essential loneliness, that only the Lord Himself knows through all these, the power of our basic Christian doctrines has revived me, sparked again a light in the black, bringing me to know again the personal presence and power of Jesus my Lord. And it can and will do for you, too. Not for us 'the same old scene'. Working on the highway, drilling through the hardtop, hour after mindless hour; changing those nappies, preparing the same food at the same times, day after endless day as we take the same route to work each day, walking to the textile mill, across the railroad tracks, boarding the same bus, coming off at exit 42; in all these things we can be more than conquerors. His yoke is easy, His burden light (Mt. 11:30); for all our daily, repetitive work in this world is to be done *as unto Him*. This is a wonderful, wonderful provision. But not only is the daily grind transformed into His service. Into our otherwise wasted and pointless lives, *His* life breaks through. His life of unending passion and urgent, feeling concern for the lost; of daily 'knowing the Father', of pouring out our unshareable self, our very soul, before Him; of realising time and again the gripping wonder of His grace, and serving therefore and thereby in newness of spirit and passionate Christian living.

7-14 Click Click, Quick: The Impact Of The Internet On Spiritual Life

Over a trillion emails are sent annually; a trillion gigabytes of digital data is created annually; and our computers have more and more capacity to store stuff. 1 in 3 of earth's 6 billion are now online. In America alone, 44 million digital photographs are snapped each day. Text messages are into the billions per year. It's tempting to misquote Dan. 12:4 about all this: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased. The age of digital communication is one of humanity's biggest paradigm shifts since the invention of printing or perhaps even the wheel. And it has a distinct impact upon us in spiritual terms; despite the illusion we all have that actually, *I* am not that affected by all this. Even if it's true that we personally aren't, we live in a global village which is, and thus we *are* affected.

The Nature Of Communication

Online man needs access to a piece of hardware in order to communicate. He becomes a nobody without that piece of plastic and silicon. People say things by email and text which they wouldn't face to face. The perceived anonymity of digital communication means that we tend to assume that what we're writing on that screen isn't really me. The speed and ease of the communication tempts us to overlook the huge emphasis which the Bible places upon direct, inter-personal dialogue: Debate your cause with your neighbour *himself*, and disclose not the secret of another (Prov. 25:9). All too often, people have a lot to say by email- but refuse to meet in person to discuss the issues. This sin was so much harder to commit before the net came along! We're far bolder online than we are in person. A woman may express her interest in a man online in a way she'd never dream of doing in person. We must remember that how we treat people on the internet is indeed how we are treating them in reality- and how we treat our brethren is how we treat the Lord Jesus, and we will be judged against that standard. Internet communication tends to lead to a yawning gap between our real self, and the shadow self we project there. This dysfunction is not what God intends- for He intends our words to be a true reflection of us. We are not to relate to others behind masks or avatars, but to be ourselves- just as He is ultimately true in His communication to us in Christ. ♦ The

Lord Jesus alone could say, with full meaning, I am . Who He appeared to be, was who He essentially was. Because Jesus was always showing His essential self- and this is in some ways an exhausting and almost unbearable way to live- He tended to connect easier to the real selves in His hearers. This was what gave that compelling, radical bite to the communications of Jesus. Truly, the more real, the more credible. And for all our internet communication, we must ask whether this is of itself really bringing people to Christ.

It s good, of course, that our communications all being recorded and accessible by others make us more accountable. Ecc. 10:20 was true millennia ago: Don't criticize the king, even silently, and don't criticize the rich, even in the privacy of your bedroom. A bird might carry the message and tell them what you said. How much more true is that in the internet age, when the clicking of one button can forward our words world-wide! By looking through your own sent items over the years, and certainly by reading through the messages from others youve received, you learn soon enough that were not the rational, logical creatures we think we are. Thats an illusion. Theres something broken in man. It s an observable fact- observable by reading through years of emails from yourself and your contacts- that we say one thing at one time, or to one person, and change our tune later, or in talking with others. And so Ecc 7:21,22 click into place: ♦ Don't pay attention to everything people say- you may hear your servant insulting you, and you know yourself that you have insulted other people many times. This isn t to say words are unimportant ; rather is it a recognition that we all sin with our tongue [our fingertips, these days], but the tongue can no man tame . We bless God and curse men. Truly, these things ought not so to be, but James seems to tacitly recognize, as does Ecclesiastes 7, that this is how it is with humanity. And in this context, James warns that we shouldn t wish to be teachers, for in many things we offend all by our words (James 3). This is not a resignation to complacency- its just a recognition of our humanity when it comes to our words. We shall be judged by our words; and so its by grace alone that we, who each one offends by words, shall be saved. It s so easy to sift through the years of communications, and catch out our brother or sister in this matter. You said this then, and then that, and now this ... can be applied to us too. As we judge, so we shall be. But the fact our communications are largely through words, and our computer memories are large enough now to store years of such communications... ♦ should lead us to a greater *self* examination, integrity and accountability. I know a fine brother who deletes his emails after a month, exactly because of this problem of being tempted to remember others words against them. And we need to not be misled by the email world into thinking that we *must* respond to them all. Some of us would spend our lives doing nothing else than replying to email otherwise.

But positively, the process of putting your feelings into words deepens introspection and increases self-awareness. And self-examination can be no bad thing if its not confused with navel gazing. But the emphasis upon written words shouldnt lead us into over-interpretation of others words. The sheer mass of words we have to face daily can even lead us into an over-interpretation of *Gods* words. Most believers down the centuries have been illiterate; they simply wouldnt have fallen out over matters of fine interpretation as we tend to. That of course isnt to say that Gods words arent to be taken seriously; Im thinking more of the dangers of an inappropriate, literalistic attitude to words in general, separating them from the bigger picture we need to see.

The Nature Of Relationships

Now, we dont deal with people much face to face- we take money from an ATM, we shop online rather than in a store. And people hardly know how to behave themselves in real life

interaction- hence the growth of divorce rates, indeed broken relationships on about every level. There is no doubt that Scripture emphasizes the place of person to person contact- e.g. If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves (Mt. 18:15 cp. Prov. 25:9). It is this personal contact which enables the development of love, patience, mutual understanding, forgiveness. The very speed of internet communication militates against the development of true patience. It has been estimated that 80% of communication is non-verbal. When we communicate without seeing, touching, *smelling* even the other person, we will have the illusion that communication has happened when often it hasn't, or has happened in a dysfunctional, partial sense. My dear friend John Stibbs used to sign off his emails with a quote: The worse thing about communication is the illusion that it's happened. Living in rural Africa in the 1980s, I used to be amazed at how the Africans would walk huge distances to relay a message face to face, or simply to extend greetings because someone had asked them to. But that is the right and natural way to communicate. Communication through written words alone leaves many gaps in our understanding of them- and we inevitably fill those gaps, that vacuum created by the lack of physical presence, with our imaginations and fantasy. These unreal images of others only lead to disappointment, anger, and the ultimate breakdown of relationship. You imagine the person is what you want him or her to be; we fall in love, or out of love, with the image of them we've created in our own mind. Then anger develops as we come to perceive bits missing, or elements of hypocrisy, in the one we formerly trusted. When we are hurt, our (internet) personas often reappear more strongly to cover the hurt done to our person.

The sheer complexity of human persons means that we cannot ultimately judge them. Through online communication, we see our brother's various personas, sometimes his true, reborn self coming out; and our images of others derive as much from ourselves as from them. It amazes me that we humans succeed in accurately communicating with each other online as much as we do. The more one perceives the complexity of the person and the personas whom we meet, the more apparent it is that we cannot claim to be their judge. And the more evident it is that the judgments which human beings constantly make about each other are so superficial and often inevitably false. Further, if we truly believe that we ourselves are in Christ and impute His person as being the essence of our real self, then we must likewise impute His righteousness to our brethren. Thus Peter could say that he imputed Silvanus to be a faithful brother (1 Pet. 5:12). If only we could consistently live out this truth, then all internet-carried friction between brethren would be a thing of the past.

In one form or another, we can copy and paste the same message to one person as we do to another. And worse, we can even effectively plagiarize the words or concepts of others and repeat them in our communications to others. It is no longer purely us in communication. We have allowed the world to squeeze us into its mould, rather than being personally transformed by our relationship with the Lord (Rom. 12:2 J.B. Phillips). The internet moulds people terribly. Very few are naturally good with words and self-presentation. The significance of written words has become such that word-smithing is almost an art form. It's not so much what you say or what you yourself feel that matters- it's all important *how* you say it. This has bred a culture of camouflaging the most awful feelings and attitudes in nice speak; and any who don't respond in the nice speak language are somehow marked down in society's judgment of them.

Whilst on the one hand, the internet generation live vicarious lives, living out other's lives and experiences as if they are living them, on the other, people are left devoid of themselves. We become faceless, Facebook notwithstanding. The importance of real personality, and of

persons, becomes diminished. They feel inadequate, and the information overload they suffer often leaves them perplexed and unsure of their own judgment. They retreat into self-absorption. You need only hear the relative silence in the huge Chinese internet cafes, where 1000 people sit glued to their screens, lost in themselves, easy prey to pickpockets, oblivious to anything else, as if they're gambling their lives away in some clock-less casino. All this of course is quite the opposite of the Biblical picture- of active ecclesial and personal family life, outgoing caring for others, active self-sacrifice for the Lord's cause rather than navel gazing and imitating others' style. This is why I'm no fan of the out of church Christian movement. Christianity is meant to be lived in a community. Indeed, God has created salvation in a community, in the body of Christ. Work out your [plural] salvation... for it is God who is working in your midst [as a body](Phil. 2:12,13). Virtual relationships may play a part, but I don't believe they're a real substitute for the Christianity Jesus intended. The internet age has led to children no longer knowing how to entertain themselves without some kind of black box. And if basic creativity is stifled in youth, where does this leave them as adults? They will be prone to being entertained, to follow the initiatives and leadership of others- which is very often lacking in spiritual basis. Real creativity and originality, it seems to me, are squashed by the internet.

Being Ourselves

The challenge to us all is to be truly ourselves, so that we can bond as we are intended to with our brethren. The internet must be used very carefully in this process. Humans so desperately thirst for this real contact, this real authentic fellowship; but they don't let themselves receive it because they too aren't transparent. Paradoxically, we often shy away from transparency in the interests of safeguarding harmony. How many marriages have run into the problem of not talking about something because the subject always causes friction and argument! And how many ecclesias have refused to allow open minded discussion in the interests of unity? This harmony and unity is a fake. It's as superficial as a couple having sex before they are married, or a marriage in which the real issues are never addressed, the trading of chit chat on Facebook & it's the too easy road, which avoids the difficult encounter of persons which there must be to make any relationship authentic. But the real transparency is brave and unafraid, not for ever calculating what to reveal or not reveal. There will never be the authentic fellowship which God intends unless we can rise up to this transparency, with all the initial awkwardness of seeing both ourselves and our brethren standing naked, as it were, before each other.

The Son of God spoke of how He knew the Father and was being known by the Father using *continuous tenses*; He was *growing to know* the Father, as the Father was growing to know the Son. And so it is within our far more human relationships; fellowship is not something static, a dry theoretical state that exists because we profess allegiance to the same theological tenets. It is a meeting of persons, a coming together in the unity of Christ our Lord. The fellowship we are intended to share in Christ is not merely a sharing of ideas; we are not to view people as simply a screen name who claims to believe various ideas; but rather as real, live persons. To be interested in people as persons rather than as holders of ideas, bearers of labels etc., means a complete revolution in the thinking of many modern people. Our Lord surely viewed the mob crying for His blood not as a mob but as people; those who listened to Him likewise were not just an impersonal crowd, or class of pupils, but a collection of persons. His teaching of them was therefore not so much lecturing, zapping text messages to them, as a personal dialogue. And immediately one reflects uncomfortably how our beloved community has focused so much on lecturing and platform speaking, mere words; and how

we have chosen to combat incorrect word usage, rather than first seeking to understand why a person holds that false view.

Whenever we try to be righteous, we often alienate ordinary, sinful people. Yet why, then, did Jesus connect with them by being righteous? Surely because it was somehow so evident that He was not acting out a persona; He was being absolutely Himself, not acting out a part, with no hidden agendas. This was the beauty of His character; just as nature is beautiful because it simply is what it is. So self-evidently, who He was within, was who He showed Himself to be. The more we are ourselves, the more likely it is that we will connect with our contacts. People who only live out their personas create an impersonal atmosphere around them, whereas the person who lives and shows their real self encourages those around him or her to also feel themselves to be persons. I would go even further and suggest that the more we live as who we are, God Himself will become more personal to us.

Information Overload

The amount of information now available is colossal- web sites are in the billions. And the amount of information we receive from our worldwide contacts is also vast, too much for us to realistically process. It all leads us away from the personal, daily Bible study and meditation which have been the groundrock of every true Christian community. This access to so much information also tends towards judgmentalism, and endless interest in the lives of others rather than seeking to meaningfully care for others and glorify God in our own personalities. The fast moving nature of the web means that we are so easily caught up in gossip- for so much of the information we receive is effectively little more than gossip about people rather than about God and His Son. Like food, ♦we need to "decrease quantity, increase quality.

And of course the point must be made that the internet leads to a huge wasting of time if misused. Our time isn't really ours. It's God's gift to us. My throw away your TV- it's the world's greatest timewaster is a campaign that now needs extending to profligate use of the internet. If the aim of our lives is spiritual mindedness, how does endless online self-absorption and clicking on irrelevant timewasting really help towards that? Information isn't wisdom. Wisdom is *applied* knowledge, and that's something Google doesn't come up with.

The emphasis on information, in the form of words, is so disproportionate that it leads to an overly abstract approach to life. We are wired to attach meaning to events; but when events are just words on a screen, we won't attach meaning to them as we are intended to. And real response, concrete life decisions in response to events, become muted. At best we may respond to a need by clicking on a PayPal account and sending some funds somewhere. This isn't to be despised, but the life of love is so far more than that. It's about interaction. All the references to the Lord Jesus coming down from Heaven I believe can be read on the level of describing how at age 30 He came down from His spiritual aloneness with the Father, and went out into the world of humanity, declaring God's salvation openly to them. And we too are to come down, to come out to others; the word is to be made flesh in us as it was in Him. The information revolution can lead us too easily to assume that all we have to do to preach is write a website. But it's encounter with persons, with the word made flesh rather than just the word, which often leads to real conversion. When people are faced with more information than they can process, they become unable to make decisions or take action.- there's ♦ a chronic lack of real action in modern society. There's more and more talk about the cases of need we hear about- but where's the action?

The inertia of indecision is a huge problem. Your own example of making clear choices, doing what is right before God rather than what is wise and smart in human eyes, will reveal a sense of clarity about you which will become inspirational to your online brethren. Yours will not be one of those many lives that is paralyzed by constantly postponing the choices, by indecision, like Israel on Carmel, hopping backwards and forwards between two opinions (1 Kings 18:21), between your persona and your true person, which is Christ in you. Ultimately, the choice is not one between abstract principles, differing blocks of text on a screen; it is between Christ as a person, and all the other things which would lead us away from Him. The essential choice is always between Christ in you and her mother, your instincts, their self-perception imposed upon you, your self-interest. And in those choices there is no third road; we are hard up against a T-junction, hour after hour. We chose either life or death (Dt. 30:19); we cannot serve two masters (Mt. 6:24). Insofar as you at least live a life that reflects this recognition, you will be a challenge to those around you.

An over full computer will give you error messages, run slower, take longer to process information, and eventually crash. Our minds are similar. Information overload leads to making mistakes, letting things slip through the cracks, sluggishness, losing true creativity, and even breakdown. Perhaps this is one reason why although like Corinth we may have 10,000 instructors in Christ, replete with their internet-garnered knowledge, we have not many fathers. Or so it seems. Few truly decisive, creative, active leaders of men and women. None of us [even women!] are really very good multitaskers when it comes to communication. That's why in many countries it's illegal to talk on a cell phone whilst driving. But talking to a human passenger doesn't harm your driving so much. Invisible communication demands a lot from us- more than we think. We're mentally exhausting ourselves with all these relationships and communications. My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways (Prov. 23:26) was the verse my Bible dropped open to when, over 25 years ago now, I dried myself off after my baptism, opened my Bible and asked God to give me a verse to guide me. The internet steals our mind, too easily. We don't *need* most of the information it fills us with.

There's an old Christadelphian phrase that one rarely hears these days: Our corner of the masters vineyard. I like it. Whilst avoiding selfish parochialism at one extreme, we have to realize our limitations. The internet may be the world-wide web, but *we* aren't world-wide, 24/7 masters of reality around the globe. We live in one location, and perhaps it is there that we have been called to be the light of our world. We aren't called to be judge and jury on what goes on elsewhere.

Click Click, Quick

The very speed of internet communication means that we can be simultaneously in touch with information coming in from around the world. We may assume we can cope with this; but we are not God, and inadvertently, the internet tempts us to play God, rather than seek to manifest Him in our limited flesh. The internet lulls us into the assumption that what we read on that screen is true. But only the simple believe every word (Prov. 14:15). The speed of information and communication can easily lead to things assuming distorted importance in our minds- e.g. getting terribly worked up about a supposed outbreak of false teaching or immorality on the other side of the planet. Of course we have to find a balance between genuine concern for others world-wide, and a recognition that we shall only ever get part of the story up on our screens. The speed of communication leads to the unnaturally quick development of relationships in the wider sense- I don't only refer to romance. And like small

children, best friends one moment and sworn enemies the next, such relationships often don't last. The stable, life-long friendships which should characterize our being in the body of Christ are in sadly short supply amongst us. E-mail relationships happen at our convenience. We check e-mail when we want and reply when we want. But real life relationships aren't like that. As a Christian, we don't just drop people. We are to be there for them just as God is for us.

I want it, and I want it now is the credo of our age. The high speed nature of internet life grates against the Biblical concept of delayed gratification. And when it comes to seeking to understand the Bible, the temptation is to search the net for others' views- whereas it is the honour of [future] kings to search out such matters, through daily Bible study and prayerful reflection (Prov. 25:2). We are now bombarded by written words. "The typical business manager is said to read one million words per week. That's the equivalent of one and a half full-length novels per day . [Source: <http://www.gdrc.org/icts/i-overload/infoload.html>]. Inevitably, we end up skim reading. But we can let this rub off upon our reading of *God's* word- where we were reading Divine words, God's love letter to us, and every word of God needs to be given its full weight. Because words have become devalued, we are no longer sensitive to all the details; and we will miss so much of God's communication to us if this is how we approach *His* word.

The speed of everything, coupled with the information overload, can lead to impaired judgement based upon overconfidence. It also fills our mind, and gives us the illusion that all must be achieved so quickly. And maybe that accounts for the rudeness and abruptness which characterizes the internet generation. I don't wish to sound like my dear mother- but really, people *have* become so rude and abrupt nowadays. Our generation seeks instant everything; instant wealth, success, fulfilling personal relationships, instant gratification. And they get miffed when they don't get it. All this reflects a total lack of character. For those who are aware of their real selves, the man Christ Jesus within them, there is the strength to realize that nothing comes instantly; the real self is the product of slow, certain development.

The Potential

Moses used his bronze age technology to make a brazen serpent to communicate God's salvation to a whole people. But later, it was turned into an idol (2 Kings 18:4). There's huge potential in the internet for preaching, and for binding together the body of Christ world-wide as never before in history. Cindy and I find ourselves praying in our nightly prayers for those we've met only online; and that can be no bad thing. Thousands of people view our material online daily; many respond and request literature. But so few of those contacts are converted into baptisms- because as a community we fail miserably in the person-to-person stuff. The internet can and does shape people's beliefs and worldviews; and we can use that positively in our witness. But unless we ourselves are founded on the rock of personal, daily Bible reading, we shall be led astray by the billion confused voices shouting at us from the search results on Google. Perhaps Paul's use of letter writing was perhaps analogous to our use of the net. He says time and again that he's writing a letter, but he sees it as a poor substitute for the face-to-face contact he would prefer (Rom. 15:14-33; 1 Cor. 4:14-21; Gal. 4:12-20; 1 Thess. 2:17-3:13). John hints the same (2 Jn. 12; 3 Jn. 14).

There is a spirit of adventure within us, yet we tend to want to live it out vicariously, through identifying with some character in a movie or on a blog; rather than ourselves going outside our comfort zones and being the person God intended us to be in His service. The most timid

office clerk will disclose under psychoanalysis that he has dreams which reflect a passion for adventure. But the internet kids us we can virtually go outside our comfort zones by just sitting before a screen. Yet we can, we really can, get up from the computer and live a life which is ourselves, fearless of what others think, living the gripping life of true spiritual adventure, taking ourselves where we have never been before, even if it takes us to the cross-which is the ultimate end of the truly Christ-following life. For freedom did Christ set us free (Gal. 5:1 RV). The new person, the essential you and me, is characterized by sudden, creative welling up to the Father's glory. I am & the life (Jn. 11:25). This welling up of new life is a characteristic of true conversion. This is why the elderly, the infirm, the chronically shy, experience the flowering of the person, the sense of new life even in the face of the outward man perishing daily; because their inward man, their real self, is being so strongly infused with power (2 Cor. 4:16). This explains why the graph of spiritual growth in any person is not a smooth upward curve; it is a very jagged line. Our true person asserts itself in those moments of totally free choice to serve our Lord. But we so easily allow our lives to slip back into the automatisms which define our internet personas.

We aren't professionals, committee members, in this drive for spirituality. We are amateurs at heart, children, wide eyed with wonder at what we are being shown, ever moving on to some fresh endeavour. Our spiritual life need never become a mere routine, a burden, a duty to be performed, a habit. For [in the heart] where the spirit of the Lord [Jesus] is, there the heart is free (2 Cor. 3:17); we were brought out from the pointless, repetitive bondage of Egypt [of which the internet life has so much of] by the blood of Christ. What this means is not that red liquid somehow did something for us; His example of death, how He was there, inspires us to break out from the vain way of life we received by tradition from our fathers (1 Pet. 1:18). We, as true believers in the representative nature of His sacrifice, are thereby empowered to break out of the routine of our lives. Life becomes valuable; we number our days with wisdom (Ps. 90:12), rather than wasting our hours online.

Playing On The Discontent

The internet is creating a new kind of person. And he's not a happy chappy. But he's a searching guy, a roving, wandering woman. Our modern civilization with its addiction to money and power has left so much unaddressed; and we know it, now as never before. Our need for beauty, for poetry, for art, for mystery and dreams, to find love, the meaning of life, for personal contact with God. The rush of internet existence has left each of us with the niggling conscience that this is the sort of life we want to have, indeed, that we ought to follow. But not only do we not follow our conscience; we don't know where to find something, some philosophy, some religion, which somehow synthesizes all these needs together. People today- young people especially- are so often asking the ultimate questions, looking for the right things, but in the wrong places. The metanarrative of modern art, in all its forms from movies to songs to novels, records the distraughtness of humanity, our malaise, the hidden longing for deliverance and redemption which there is not far beneath the surface of us all. As Brother Tim Dickinson put it recently at a Latvian Bible School: Even art is turning in upon itself. But with all due respect to the forms in which this is expressed- the fineness of the art, power of the wordsmithing, the screenplay... modern men and women are groping like the blind in search of a wall of support, desperate for some familiar guide towards the true path. The self-introspection of internet blogs, humanity's increasing preoccupation with itself, is the result of a failure to find that path. They rage in vain against the machine, a society which has lost its spiritual roots. And I believe, indeed I know from experience of enough conversions, that *we do really have what people are seeking*.

More Real, More Credible

People are unhappy with the internet age. In Europe, they'll pay any money to buy and restore a 19th century Post Office, the classic remnant of the snail-mail era; and the less wealthy often decorate their homes with the timber beams of a previous age. Metal and plastic aren't, in the end, what people are comfortable with. People are seeking reality- concrete, objective, touchable, reality. Real relationships, and not virtual ones. In Christ, and in His body on earth, they can find this. I wonder if this is why the abiding sacraments of baptism and the breaking of bread have been given to us- here, at long last in our all too abstract lives, is something real and actual. We get physically wet to symbolize our connection with the Lord's death and resurrection. And the bread and wine make it come real once again, week by week. The realness about the Truth of Christ is actually exactly what the internet generation needs.

We are to be real. The more real, the more credible. We're not to act, to hide behind words we tap. We now in our personalities reflect and manifest the one glory of the Father, and our blessed Hope is glory in the future, to be glorified, to be persons (note that- *to be persons!*) who reflect and are that glory in a more intimate and complete sense than we are now, marred as we are by our human dysfunction, sin, and weakness of will against temptation. We now reflect that glory as in a dirty bronze mirror. The outline of God's glory in the face of Jesus is only dimly reflected in us. But we are being changed, from glory to glory, the focus getting clearer all the time, until that great day when we meet Him and see Him face to face, with all that shall imply and result in. The essence of who we are now in our spiritual man, how we reflect it, in our own unique way, is how we shall always be.

Endpiece:

Enduring To The End

The Lord's obvious, basic point in the parable of the sower was that very many who start the race will fall away- for various reasons. Israel after the flesh, the New Testament record, Christian history, our own ecclesial experience: they all shout the truth of this. And as we analyze our own private spirituality the more, we see that in principle, we too have an unpleasant capacity to fall away from the spiritual heights we occasionally reach. We witness a baptism, attend a powerful Bible School, break bread and catch, for once, a real picture of the height of the Lord's devotion for us; enter, all too briefly, into some surpassing excellence of God's word...but then, all too quickly, we come down from the mountain, as it were, back to the normality and humdrum of that much lower level of spiritual life to which we are sadly accustomed. Indeed, we can come to so recognize the regularity of this experience, that we no longer rise so enthusiastically to those heights of feeling, because at the back of our mind we know that it will only be a temporary 'high'. In extreme cases, a believer will cease to even try to (e.g.) attend Bible School, break bread etc.; they see no point in trying to lift themselves up, because they know they will fall down again. This problem, in one form or another, affects every one of us. We fail to know how to acquire the tenacity of the long distance runner, the patience of the farmer (James 5:7), the faithfulness of the soldier on a long, difficult campaign (2 Tim. 2:3-5). There is a *something* which is the essence of the ability to

keep on keeping on, in the face of all discouragement. It's this issue which I want to analyze.

Lost Intensity

Firstly, remember that God knows our nature; He remembers that we are dust. He knows that we have this terrible capacity to lose spiritual intensity. His most faithful servants have been afflicted with this problem:

- The disciples in Gethsemane slumbered and slept when the Lord had specifically asked them to struggle on in prayer. A stone's throw from them, the Son of God was involved in a height of spiritual struggle utterly unequalled. And they dozed off in the midst of their half-serious prayers. This incident is alluded to by Paul in a powerful appeal to us: " Consider him that endured [as the kneeling disciples should have watched the distant Lord Jesus as an inspiration to themselves]...lest ye be wearied, and faint in *your* minds [as they did]. *Ye* have not yet resisted unto blood [cp. the Lord's sweat as drops of blood] , [in your] striving against sin" (Heb. 12:3,4). Time and again Paul alludes, sometimes perhaps even subconsciously, to the record of Gethsemane. He evidently saw in those garden prayers and the disciples' sleepiness a powerful cameo of our every battle and failure; and a strong, urgent plea for us to rise up and catch the fire of real spiritual struggle ⁽²⁾.
- Moses fled from Egypt, not fearing the wrath of Pharaoh; he went in faith (Heb. 11:27). But the Exodus record explains that actually he couldn't keep this level of faith, and fled in fear (Ex. 2:14,15).
- The house of Baal was broken down in 2 Kings 10:27. But soon afterwards, it was rebuilt and had to be destroyed yet again (2 Kings 11:18). There are examples galore of purges and re-purges in the record of the Kings.
- Hezekiah's faithful reign was followed by a slip: in his desperation, he cut off the gold (cp. faith) from the doors of Yahweh's temple, and gave them to the invading Assyrians to placate them (2 Kings 18:24). But soon he bounced back to his normal spirituality, with the demonstration of a faith and humility few have matched.
- Jonah, in the intensity of fresh repentance, was willing to die for the salvation of Gentile sailors from God's judgment. But he lost this intensity as he sat under the gourd, angry that Gentile Nineveh might yet be saved judgment.
- The Jews in Jeremiah's time released the Jewish slaves they had been abusing, in response to the word of God to them. " But afterward they turned, and caused the servants and the handmaids, whom they had let go free, to return, and brought them into subjection" (Jer. 34:11).
- Jeremiah himself taught that Israel should surrender to the Babylonians, in accordance with God's word. He himself tried to do this, in obedience; but he was caught by the Jews. He promptly denied that he was doing this, overcome by the patriotism of the moment (Jer. 37:14; 38:2).
- Job seems to oscillate between solid belief in a resurrection and future reward, and a cynical attitude to these things, as if to say 'If only this were true...' (e.g. Job 14:14,15 modern versions).

- Baruch, the faithful scribe of Jeremiah 36, had to be reminded later to stop seeking great things for himself (Jer. 45:5).

- The exiles who returned from Babylon obeyed the prophetic call to flee from Babylon and rebuild the land. But once they arrived, they lost their enthusiasm. And then Haggai came, seeking to stir them up again. It's easy to date Haggai's prophecies. According to Hag. 1:12-15, the people responded enthusiastically to his initial message, given [in European dating] on September 21st. But by October 17th, according to the prophecies of Hag. 1:15-2:9, the people again needed to be exhorted to keep on keeping on in their response to the prophetic word. The fickleness and lack of staying power of the exiles must serve as a warning to us- for throughout the New Testament, the believer who has come out of the world of figurative Babylon is portrayed in terms of those Jews who returned to Judah. They were types of us.

- Dear, heroic Peter started out on the water, eyes set on the Lord. But his gaze wandered, he saw something blowing in the wind- and he lost that intensity.

- Paul withstood the pressures of the 'circumcision party' within the early church, and rebuked Peter for caving in to them (Gal. 2:12,13). But then he himself caved in under pressure from the same group, and obeyed their suggestion that he show himself to be not opposed to the keeping of the Mosaic Law by paying the expenses for the sacrifices of four brethren.

- If Timothy was the elder of the church at Ephesus, it would appear that the Lord's rebuke of the 'angel' or elder of that church in Rev. 2:1 may well have been directed at Timothy (assuming an AD66 date for the book of Revelation). This would imply that Timothy failed to follow Paul's charge to him of 2 Tim. 4, and that his initial devotion waned in some ways.

- David graciously overlooked Shimei's cursing, promising him that he would not die because of it (2 Sam. 16:10,11; 19:23). But he didn't keep up that level of grace to the end: he later asked Solomon to ensure that Shimei was killed for that incident (1 Kings 2:8,9). And one wonders whether it was Shimei's words which so broke David's heart that he later wrote: "Because that he remembered not to shew mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man...as he loved cursing, so let it come unto him; as he delighted not in blessing, so may it be far from him. He clothed himself also with cursing as with a garment..." (Ps. 109:16-18). In Zedekiah's time, the people stopped abusing their Hebrew servants and "let them go"- "But afterward they [re]turned, and caused the servants and the handmaids, whom they had let go free, to return, and brought them into subjection for servants" (Jer. 34:11). Note the play on the word "return". By making their servants 'return' to bondage, they were 'returning' to the bondage of sin and selfishness. And this example is so true to our lives- we can forgive a person at one point in time, or in some way 'release' them; but find it impossible to maintain that intensity, just as David failed with Shimei.

- Israel at Sinai eagerly accepted the challenge of being God's covenant people and therefore living in harmony with His laws. Their sincerity was unquestionable. And yet they simply failed to keep up that intensity.

- The disciples kept changing the subject whenever the Lord started speaking about His death. As He hung in ultimate triumph and suffering on the cross, men came and looked, and turned away again (Is. 53:3; Lk. 23:48). The spiritual intensity of it couldn't be sustained in their minds, as it cannot easily be in ours. The more we break bread, the more we try to

reconstruct Golgotha's awful scene, the more we realize this.

And so we could multiply Biblical examples, as we could from our own lives. But the Father knows we are like this. His word urges us *not* to weary in well-doing, to *continue* instant in prayer, to pray and faint not, to pray *always*. And the Lord who bought us knew we were like this. His parable of the ten virgins shows how He recognized that *all* His people, wise and foolish, would all start off with oil in their lamps at baptism, but would inevitably lose it over time. This reflects the pattern of Israel after the flesh, who began their wilderness journey with none of them weak or ill- which in a group of three million was a miracle (Ps. 105:37). The parable teaches that the Lord's true people would realize their capacity for losing oil, and make some effort to refill themselves. The nature of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit in the first century reflected the principle that flesh cannot retain the Spirit of God for long. It seems that the apostles were filled with the Spirit in order to do certain acts, and after doing them they were as it were 'drained' of the Spirit, and had to be filled up again [\(1\)](#). Thus the Lord Jesus felt that something had gone out of Him after performing miracles (Lk. 6:19; 8:46). The non-miraculous work of God through His Spirit would seem to follow a similar pattern. We are "strengthened with might by his spirit in the inner man", "strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering" (Eph. 3:16; Col. 1:11). God strengthens us deep inside to have that *hupomonè*, that patient endurance, that energy to keep on keeping on. But this strengthening is according to our effort in the appropriate spiritual exercises, and the strength given is not ultimately permanent unless we continue responding to it. and it isn't only a N.T. phenomena; even in earlier times, they that waited on the Lord had their strength renewed, they mounted up on eagle wings, they were made to walk and not faint in God's ways (Is. 40:31). As God doesn't faint or weary, so somehow those who identify their lives with His will also keep on keeping on- even now (Is. 40:31 cp. 29). David felt that his youth was renewed like the eagle's in his repeated experience of God's grace (Ps. 103:5), that his soul was restored (Ps. 23:5), and that a right spirit could be renewed by God within him (Ps. 51:10).

Ongoing Baptism

At our baptism, we died and rose with the Lord, so that in our subsequent lives we should "live in *new-ness* of life" (Rom. 6:4),.. serving Him in "newness of spirit (mind)" (Rom. 7:6). The spiritual life, the mind-life that we now share with Him is a life that is ever being made new. This *new-ness* of mind and living is the very antithesis of the life of spiritual boredom which some complain of. The Lord Jesus is seeking to merge our lives with His eternal, ever-new life; this was the process which began at baptism. There is therefore a sense in which baptism is an ongoing experience. As we die to various aspects of the flesh, so we come alive to spiritual life in those areas; we thereby live in a new-ness of life. As we received Christ Jesus as Lord at baptism, so we *live* daily in Him; our baptism experience is lived out throughout daily life (Col. 2:6). Thus Paul spoke of how he died daily so that he might share in the Lord's resurrection life (1 Cor. 15:31). We always bear about in our body the spirit of the Lord Jesus in His time of dying, so that His life might be made manifest in our mortal flesh even now (the use of "mortal flesh" indicates that this is not a reference to the future resurrection). In this way the process of dying to the flesh works life in us (2 Cor. 4:10-12). Peter clearly held this conception of baptism as an ongoing process; he speaks of how we have already been born again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Christ (a clear reference to baptism), and yet goes on to say that having obeyed the truth, we must go on in being (continuous tense) born again by the work of God's word (1 Pet. 1:3,23).

Baptism is a putting on of the Lord Jesus, a union with Him; which is something essentially ongoing (Gal. 3:27). The Lord Himself spoke of sharing His baptism as being the same as drinking His cup, sharing His cross (Mk. 10:39); which, again, is a process. Likewise Peter saw baptism as not only the one off act, but more importantly a pledge to live a life in good conscience with God (1 Pet. 3:21). 'Obeying the truth' is not only at baptism, but a lifelong pursuit (Gal. 5:7). The whole body of believers in Christ are being baptized into the body of the Lord Jesus in an ongoing sense (1 Cor. 12:13 Gk.), in that collectively and individually we are growing up into Him who is the Head (Eph. 4:15).

Fire And Water

The ongoing nature of the act of baptism was outlined in baptism's greatest prototype: the passage of Israel through the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:2). They were baptized into that pillar of cloud (cp. the water of baptism), but in fact the cloud and fire which overshadowed them at their Red Sea baptism continued throughout their wilderness journey to the Kingdom. They went " *through* fire and *through* water" (Ps. 66:12) throughout their wilderness years, until they entered the promised rest (cp. the Kingdom). Likewise, the great works of Yahweh which He showed at the time of their exodus from Egypt (cp. the world) and baptism at the Red Sea were in essence *repeated* throughout their wilderness journey (Dt. 7:19). Therefore whenever they faced discouragement and an apparent blockage to their way, they were to remember how God had redeemed them at their baptism, and to realize that in fact His work was still ongoing with them (Dt. 20:1). He told them in the desert that He was " Yahweh that *bringeth you up* out of the land of Egypt" (Lev. 11:45). Therefore the overcoming of Edom, Moab and the Canaanite tribes is described in language lifted from the Red Sea record (e.g. Ex. 15:15-17). Throughout their history, Israel were reminded that what God had done for them in their Red Sea deliverance He was continuing to do, and therefore all their enemies would likewise perish if they remained God's people (e.g. Is. 43:16).

The only two sacraments which we have- baptism and the breaking of bread- are related, in that both show in physical symbolism our association with and blessing from the Lord's sacrifice. The breaking of bread is in a sense an ongoing reminder of the same principles which we showed at our baptism. Likewise the Jewish Passover (cp. our breaking of bread) was in order to bring to mind the deliverance achieved at their national baptism. They were even to wear a sign on their hand and between their eyes that reminded them of the exodus (Ex. 13:9); all their thinking and doing was to be overshadowed by the awareness of the fact that they had been redeemed that day. If we do feel that we have fallen so deeply into the rut of semi-spirituality that we can't crawl out, then think back to your baptism, or to the days when you first read Christian literature, bought a Bible, started praying... Try to grasp the enormous importance of that act of baptism: that you were redeemed from the world of sin and death, and that power that worked in your life to bring about that exodus can continue to work. This is why the weak ones among the New Testament believers were bidden look back to their baptisms and spiritual beginnings (2 Cor. 4:6; Gal. 3:3; Heb. 10:32; 2 Jn. 8; Rev. 2:5; 3:3).

The New Life

We have shown that the Lord Jesus is working in our lives, to bring His ever-new, eternal life into ours. We live after baptism in union with Him, we have drunk of the water of *His* life, and we should therefore be experiencing deep within us that life which is described as an ever-bubbling spring (Jn. 4:10; 7:38 Gk.). And yet, like those faithful men we considered to

begin with, this is all too often not how spiritual life feels at all. The Scriptures fully recognize this, and abound with ways in which to realize that life. The following is an incomplete list:

- **Recognition of the seriousness of our sins.** Sin has a kind of anesthesia accompanying it; the very act of sinning makes us less sensitive to sin. If we can really pray, on our knees, for forgiveness of what may appear to others (and sometimes ourselves) to be surface sins, just the inevitable outworkings of being human... then we will have a 'new life' experience. We will die to that sin, and in that death find life. We must wash ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit even after baptism (2 Cor. 7:1); by doing so, we as it were go through the death-and-resurrection process of baptism again; we live it all once again. We must even after baptism "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Rom. 13:14; Eph. 4:14; Col. 3:12,14; 1 Thess. 5:8), even though *at baptism* we put on the Lord Jesus (Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:10) and in prospect the flesh was co-crucified with Christ's flesh (Rom. 6:6,18). By putting off the things of the flesh and putting on the things of the Lord in our lives, we live out the baptism principle again; and thereby we are "renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph. 4:22-24). This newness of thinking, therefore, is a result of serious self-analysis and confession. No matter what your disillusion with Christians and even yourself, whatever your sense of boredom in spiritual life: to rise up from your knees having confessed even your 'smallest' failure, really believing you are forgiven, all revved up with determination to do better... this will impart a verve and newness to life which little else can. But we can only have this if we truly realize *our desperation*. That we are prisoners condemned to death waiting in the last cell, beggars starving to death, craving a piece of bread, neglected captives left to die of thirst (Ps. 69:33; 102:20; 146:7; Is. 42:7; 51:14; Zech. 9:11). These are all oft-repeated pictures of our desperation in spiritual terms. If we can truly grasp it, and realize that we have been freed, we have been lifted up from our desperate poverty- we won't be passive.

- **Serious prayer** is of itself an experience which can really wake us up, whether or not we receive a concrete answer immediately. The peace of God fills the mind simply as a result of making our requests known (Phil. 4:6,7). Praying alone in the room, kneeling, maybe at the bedside, pressing your little nose into that mattress as you concentrate your thoughts and requests; the very experience of this close communion will *of itself* enable you to unbend your legs and rise up a new man.

- **True pastoral concern for others** that they might reach the Kingdom. Paul could say that he lived, if his brethren held fast; his life was bound up with theirs (1 Thess. 3:8; 2 Cor. 7:3). He was willing to be offered as a drink offering upon the sacrifice of the Philippians (Phil. 2:17). Time and again he rejoices in the joy and hope of others (e.g. 2 Cor. 7:13; Col. 1:4); they were his joy and hope and future crown of reward in the Kingdom (Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19,20). For them to be accepted at the day of judgment would be his crown, i.e. his reward and expectation which he looked forward to. It was for their salvation, not his own, that he would rejoice at the Lord's return (2 Cor. 1:14). His spiritual life was bound up in that of others; others who were many times his spiritual inferior. Paul "endured", he held on himself, for the sake of the elect (2 Tim. 2:10). And likewise the Lord Himself died above all *for us*, His desire for *our* salvation led Him to endure for Himself. And on a mundane level; the husband who does his readings a second time for the sake of his wife or children or because a brother has paid an unexpected visit... this kind of spiritual effort for others keeps us going ourselves.

- **The concept of judgment**, that every, every action has its ultimate result and response at the day of judgment; this, Paul reasons in Gal. 6:9, ought to mean that we don't faint, we don't fade away in our enthusiasm to do what is right. There will come a moment when we will be shaken, until only those things which cannot be shaken will remain. In view of this, "let us hold fast, that we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28 mg.). "Let us hold fast...(for) the Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:23, 31). If we appreciate the suddenness of the Lord's coming, that one day will be our last, one day we will put our clothes on, eat breakfast...for the *last* time, and then the judgment; this of itself, the Lord Himself reasons, ought to result in us holding on (Rev. 3:3,11). Likewise Paul argues that the opposite of falling away is living by faith in the fact that one day, He who is prophesied to return will really return (Heb. 10:37,38 cp. Hab. 2:3,4).

- **Concentration on the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus** is something which the Hebrew writer so often encourages, in his efforts to encourage the Hebrew believers. After perhaps 25 years of believing (they were probably converted at Pentecost), they were starting to get bored with God's Truth; the will to keep on keeping on was no longer what it was. But because of the cross, because *He paid dearly for you*, because He is now thereby our matchless mediator, Paul argues: hold on, hold fast, *therefore* (a watchword of Hebrews) endure to the end (Heb. 3:1,6; 4:14; 10:21,23). For that great salvation will surely be realized one day. So, concentrate *personally* on the fact that He hung there for you, honour your solemn duty to at least try to reconstruct the agony of His body and soul.

- **Seriously breaking bread** is related to all this. We can so easily be like Israel, who (presumably, under Moses) kept the Passover throughout their forty years in the wilderness; but never in all that time remembered the day that the Lord brought them forth from Egypt (Ps. 78:42). Yet this was what the Passover was intended for, to remind them of that day of their redemption! They kept the Passover, but never really grasped what it was all about; they never really remembered that day of salvation, they forgot the wonder of their redemption and the future direction which it should have imparted to their lives. And so we can so easily break bread without due attention to the *real* import of the cross. It is, in my own disappointing experience (and you must know yourself what I mean), one of the easiest things in the world for us to do. The love of Christ will *constrain* us- if we let ourselves behold it (2 Cor. 5:14); we can be changed into His image, if we simply behold His glory, as in a mirror (2 Cor. 3:18). The breaking of bread brings us up against a wall; we see the two ways clearly before us. Taking the cup of wine is a double symbol: of blessing (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:25), and of condemnation (Ps. 60:3; 75:8; Is. 51:17; Jer. 25:15; Rev. 14:10; 16:19). Why this use of a double symbol? Surely the Lord designed this sacrament in order to highlight the two ways which are placed before us by taking that cup: it is either to our blessing, or to our condemnation. Each breaking of bread is a further stage along one of those two roads. Paul realized this in pleading with the Corinthians to examine themselves before taking the emblems. He saw the ceremony and our self-examination there as a kind of foretaste of the judgment (1 Cor. 11:29-32). And there is no escape by simply not breaking bread. The peace offering was one of the many antecedents of the memorial meeting. Once the offerer had dedicated himself to making it, he was condemned if he didn't then do it, and yet also condemned if he ate it unclean (Lev. 7:18,20). So a man *had* to either cleanse himself, or be condemned. There was no get out, no third road. The man who ate the holy things in a state of uncleanness had to die; his eating would load him with the condemnation of his sins (Lev. 22:3,16 A.V.mg.). This is surely the source for our possibility of "eating...condemnation" to ourselves by partaking of the breaking of bread in an unworthy manner. And so it is with us

as we face the emblems. We must do it, or we deny our covenant relationship. And yet if we do it in our uncleanness, we also deny that relationship. And thus the breaking of bread brings us up before the cross and throne of the Lord Jesus- even now. It brings us to a realistic self-examination. If we cannot examine ourselves and know that Christ is really in us, then we are reprobate; we "have failed" (2 Cor. 13:5 G.N.B.). Self-examination is therefore one of those barriers across our path in life which makes us turn to the Kingdom or to the flesh. If we can't examine ourselves and see that Christ is in us and that we have therefore that great salvation in Him; we've failed. I wouldn't be so bold as to throw down this challenge to any of us, not even myself, in exhortation. But Paul does. It's a powerful, even terrible, logic. Whilst this is listed by me as just one of several ways of getting to real grips with spiritual life, this *alone* ought to be enough.

- **Appreciate the grace of God.** "This is the true grace of God. Stand ye fast in it" (1 Pet. 5:12 RV mg.). Appreciating that we personally have experienced that grace, so great, so free, will of itself make us hold fast and not fall from it. Because we have received grace, Paul reminisces, therefore we don't faint in our faith (2 Cor. 4:1 Gk.).

- **Personally meditate** on the tragic brevity of the human experience. And this doesn't take a lot of time; just some effort. Think back to you as a child, the questions you asked your mum, your innocent eyes in the photos, think how your dad has aged, realize what a large proportion of his life, of your life, of your brother's life, has now irretrievably passed, in the fleeting tragedy of human experience. And, especially, don't quell the tears or the lump in the throat. I don't think Moses did, as he thought out and wrote Psalm 90. Be taught to number our days, that we might apply our hearts unto wisdom and to that which is ultimately meaningful, to those things which will bind us all together beyond the grave (Ps. 90:12).

- **Personally reflect on Scripture.** See the *wonder* of it all. Let me share with you something that dwells in my mind at the moment. Despite all the likely previous creations, and the fact that God has existed from eternity, the Lord Jesus was His *Only* and His *begotten* Son, made exactly like *us* so as to save *us*, humans who began with the first man Adam 6,000 years ago, sent at this time in the spectre of eternity, to save so few. You can only have a firstborn son once. The Lord didn't personally pre-exist, and God went through that climactic event for *us*. And I have been called to know the saving Truth that relates a man to His Son. This is a thought surpassing in its excellence. But next week, the wonder of it will have dimmed. But if I keep reading, some other facet of the wonder of it all will come to mind. And by these things we live.

And even if despite all these spiritual exercises, we still fail to find that newness of life; the Lord *wishes and wills* to share His new life with us. He has called us for this purpose. If we don't very deeply experience His newness of life, He may therefore block our road in life with a wall, where we have only two paths possible: to abandon Him completely, or dedicate ourselves to Him anew. He may do this in quite complex ways, but His will is that we should give Him our heart, soul and mind. And He will work in our lives to bring that about.

Notes

(1) This is well explained in R. Carr & E. Whittaker, *Spirit In The N.T.* Chapter 3 (Norwich: The Testimony, 1985).

(2)

Paul's allusion	Gethsemane
1 Thess. 5:6,7	Mt. 26:40,41
Eph. 6:18	26:41
Acts 22:7	26:39
2 Cor. 6:10	26:37
2 Cor. 12:8	26:44
Rom. 5:6	26:41
Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6	Mk. 14:36

The Meaning Of *Hupomone*

As we hinted earlier, there is a word used in the Greek N.T. which summarizes this essential ability to keep on keeping on. *Hupomone* is generally translated "patience" or "endurance" ; the idea is of the staying power that keeps a man going to the end. The meaning of *Hupomone* grows as we experience more trials (Rom. 5:3; James 1:3). We find that the longer we endure in the Truth, the more we can echo the words of Peter, when the Lord asked him (surely with a lump in His throat) if he was going to turn back: " Lord, to whom shall we go?" (Jn. 6:68). There is no third road in the daily decisions we face. Over the months and years, *hupomone* becomes part of our essential character; keeping on keeping on is what life comes to be all about, no matter what short term blows and long term frustrations we face. The longer we endure, the stronger that force is, although we may not feel it. Moses is described as having it at the time he fled from Egypt (Heb. 11:27), even though in the short term his faith failed him at the time and he fled in fear (Ex. 2:14,15). Yet God counted him as having that basic ability to endure, even to endure through his own failure and weakness. *This* is what God looks at, rather than our day-to-day acts of sin and righteousness. Likewise Job is commended for having *hupomone* at a time when he was desperate, shaking his fist at God, doubting whether there would ever be a resurrection (James 5:11). Yet God saw all this as surface frustration, and saw that basic desire to endure underneath all those angry words. Likewise Abraham is described as never wavering in faith (Rom. 4:20 RV), even though his relationship with Hagar and his deceit about Sarah would suggest that his faith *did* waver at moments. But he had that understanding of the meaning of *hupomone*, that grit to keep going deep underneath, and God saw through his surface failures and recognized that this lay firmly beneath; and *this* was imputed to him for righteousness. It is our holding fast that is our acceptable service (Heb. 12:28 mg.); not the occasional heroics of outstanding acts of obedience. And Samson, in God's eyes, was a Nazarite from the womb to the day of his miserable death; even though in the flesh, Samson at times broke the Nazarite vow (Jud. 13:7 cp. 16:17, which implies that Samson himself felt he had broken his Nazariteship). Zacharias was " blameless" in God's sight, even though in this very period of his life he was in some ways lacking faith that his prayers would be answered (Lk. 1:6). It is our holding fast that is our acceptable service (Heb. 12:28 mg.); not the occasional heroics of outstanding acts of obedience.

It is only by having this *hupomone* that we can be saved (Mt. 24:13 cp. Lk. 21:19). And yet Mt. 10:22 would suggest that it will be difficult to have *hupomone* in our last days; many will fall away. Our present world is ever changing; stability in work, residence, relationships etc. seems impossible. *People give up so easily*. The generation brought up on telly and Snickers bars and deregulated Capitalism seeks only immediate resolution and satisfaction; and their short-termism fuels yet further their endless quest for the new and novel. And yet *we* must endure to the end in our work for the Lord and our relationship with Him, believing

the same One Faith, living the same spiritual life which those doctrines demand. He amongst us who has *hupomone* to the end of the last generation, right up to the day when the Lord comes, the same will be saved (Mt. 24:13). The Lord Jesus had *hupomone*, it lead Him to the cross and beyond; and we must share His spirit of *hupomone* if we would ultimately share in His salvation (2 Thess. 3:5; Rev. 1:9; 3:10).

There is no greater joy for me than to see brothers and sisters baptized and then holding on, enduring, over the years, through all their personal traumas, through all the rock and roll of ecclesial and secular life. These become pillars in the ecclesia, shoulders one can heavily lean on, real brothers-in-arms, men and women you could give your life for, and who would lay down theirs for yours. The common experience of the meaning of *hupomone*, of enduring together to the end over the years, creates a bond of fellowship which cannot be broken. So, my beloved brethren, cling to the stability of the Truth, to the Lord God and His Son who have been and will be "the rock of ages". And "be ye *steadfast, unmoveable*, always abounding in the work of the Lord... (and may) our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and *stablish* you".

Spiritual Growth: A Personal Perspective

Someone said, I believe, something to the effect that "the unexamined life isn't worth living". And so it is. Self-examination has got to be an ongoing part of our lives, not merely a few moments each week as we notice the bread and wine creeping towards us. As I come up to 40 years old, I can just about start to look back, as well as look forward. In departure from my usual expositional style, I decided to share with you what I understand by spiritual growth. For each life lived in Christ, it will be somewhat different; but the essential processes are the same. The body of believers will ultimately manifest the fullness of Christ, the glory of God. I suggest this happens by each believer coming to reflect some particular part of that glory. One may develop wonderful patience with others' weaknesses; another may develop faith in prayer for others' illnesses. Between us, over history, we finally reflect the full body and character of Jesus. And when we're done, He will come, as He finally sees His reflection here on earth. The temple was laid out, like the tabernacle, as a man's body (when seen from a bird's eye view); as if God's intention was to look down upon His people and see Himself reflected in them. The Lord Jesus looks down upon His people, for all of them live unto Him in some sense, and wishes to see Himself reflected in us.

I once did a Bible School, comparing the lives of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Samson, Job, Paul and Peter. I discerned some common elements in their drive to spiritual maturity. Over their lives, they all display an increasing appreciation of the Name of God; a growing sense of the certainty of their salvation, as well as an ever finer conviction of their own sinfulness; a deeper appreciation of God's promises and the basic doctrines of the Gospel; a marvel at grace; and an ever deeper Christ / Messiah centredness.

The Way Of The Cross

It was the late, great Jim Broughton who gave me good advice in my teens. One of the few bits of advice I took note of was his recommendation to me to try to imagine the crucifixion of Jesus each time I broke bread, and each time to try to realize some new insight into His sufferings and achievement. I've indeed tried to do this, and I commend it. It's been a factor in my growth. The margins of my Bibles are full of scribbled notes around the chapters

relating the crucifixion. It's midnight in Minsk as I write this. I'm still thinking of the little insight I had last Sunday. It was a reflection on the observations of many that what a man needs most as he dies... is not to face death alone. To have someone with him. The way the Lord sent Mary and John away from Him at the very end is profound in its reflection of His total selflessness, His deep thought for others rather than Himself. It also reflects how He more than any other man faced the ultimate human realities and issues which death exposes. He met them totally *alone*, the supreme example of human bravery in the face of death. And He faced them *fully*, with no human cushion or literal or psychological anaesthesia to dilute the awful, crushing reality of it. Remember how He refused the painkiller. And through baptism and life in Him, we are asked to die with Him, to share something of His death, the type and nature of death which He had... in our daily lives. Little wonder we each seem to sense some essential, existential, quintessential... loneliness in our souls. Thus it must be for those who share in His death. I'm grateful to Cindy for a quote from a wise doctor: "What you can really do for a person who is dying, is to die with him". How inadvertently profound that thought becomes when applied to the death of our Lord, and to us as we imagine ourselves standing by and watching Him there. "What you can really do for a person who is dying, is to die with him".

The Way Of Personal Failure

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

Or consider the curse upon Levi- that the members of this tribe were to be scattered in Israel (Gen. 49:7). However, this resulted in the cities of the Levites being scattered throughout the land, thus providing accessible cities of refuge to all who wished to escape the consequences of sin. Those cities were evidently symbolic of the refuge we have in Christ (Heb. 6:18). Again and again, the curses and consequences of human sin are used by the Father to mediate blessing. God was the ultimate avenger of blood (Gen. 9:5); in setting up a way of escape from the avenger of blood, He surely indicates how He recognizes the rightness of His own principles, and yet sought a way for humanity to not perish because of them. In this we see an exquisite prophecy of His provision in Christ, and of the tension between the justice and grace within God's character, the tension Hoses spoke of as God's internal struggle about whether to destroy or redeem Israel when they repeatedly sinned against Him. By all means compare the account of such a case in 2 Sam. 14:7, where it was recognized that God 'devises means' to preserve people from the avenger of blood- a reference to the cities of

refuge. In all this we see the tension within God's person, as He so earnestly seeks to work through our failure to bring about His glory.

David was aware that God didn't really want sacrifice, or else he would so eagerly have offered it (Ps. 51:16,17). Instead, David perceived that what God wanted in essence was a broken and contrite spirit. The Bathsheba incident was programmatic for David's understanding of God, and his prayers and psalms subsequently can be expected to have constant allusion back to it. We meet the same idea of God not ultimately wanting sacrifice in Ps. 40:6-9: "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire [but instead] mine ears hast thou opened [Heb. 'digged'- a reference to a servant being permanently committed as a slave to his master]: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. Then said I, Lo, I come... to do thy will... thy law is within my heart". In Ps. 51:17, David had reasoned that instead of sacrifice, God wanted a heart that was broken and contrite. Here he reflects that instead of sacrifice, God wants a heart that has the law of God within it. This ultimately is the effect of God's law being in our heart- it creates a broken and contrite heart. But how? In the experience of most of us, the law does this through convicting us of our inability to keep the it. And so we see how guilt and grace work so seamlessly together. David's broken heart was a heart which knew he had sinned, sinned irreversibly, and condemned himself. But this, he perceived, was the result of God's law being within his heart. But the words of Ps. 40:6-9 are applied in the New Testament to the Lord's death upon the cross. What's the connection, and what's the lesson? In essence, through David's experience of sin, and the work of God's law upon his heart, he came through that sin to have the very mind of the Lord Jesus as He hung upon the cross, matchless and spotless in His perfection, as the Lamb for sinners slain. Again and again we see the lesson taught- that God works through human sin, in this case, in order to bring us to know the very mind of Christ in His finest hour of glory and spiritual conquest. We must not only let God's word work its way in us; but we need to recognize when dealing with other sinners that God likewise is working with them. He doesn't shrug and walk away from sin; He earnestly seeks to use our experience of it to bring us closer unto Himself.

God's intention that the king of Israel should personally copy out all the commandments of the Law was so that "his heart be not lifted up above his brethren" (Dt. 17:20)- i.e. reflecting upon the many requirements of the Law would've convicted the King of his own failure to have been fully obedient, and therefore his heart would be humbled. And soon after this statement, we are hearing Moses reminding Israel that Messiah, the prophet like unto Moses, was to be raised up (Dt. 18:18). Human failure, and recognition of it, prepares us to accept Christ. To this end, God worked through Israel's weakness, time and again. He even used it as a path towards His provision of Messiah. God wanted to speak to them directly, but in their weakness they asked that He not do this. Instead of giving up with them, as a Father whose children say they don't want to hear His voice... instead God goes on to tell Moses: "They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren [a prophecy applied to Christ in the New Testament]... and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him" (Dt. 18:17,18).

I've often asked myself *how* exactly the Mosaic Law led people to Christ. Was it not that they were convicted by it of guilt, and cried out for a Saviour? "The law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: that... grace might reign... unto eternal life by Jesus" (Rom. 5:20,21). This was the purpose of the Law. And thus Paul quotes David's rejoicing in the righteousness imputed to him when he had sinned and had no works left to do- and changes the pronoun from "he" to "they" (Rom. 4:6-8). David's personal experience became typical of that of each of us. It was *through* the

experience of that wretched and hopeless position that David and all believers come to know the true 'blessedness' of imputed righteousness and sin forgiven by grace. The suffering and groaning of which Paul speaks in Rom. 8:17, 22-26 is in my view a reference to the 'groaning' he has just been making about his inability to keep the Mosaic Law. Our helplessness to be obedient, our frustration with ourselves, is a groaning against sin which is actually a groaning in harmony with that of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, who makes intercession for us with the same groanings right now (Rom. 8:26). Indeed, those groanings are those spoken of in Heb. 5:7 as the groanings of strong crying and tears which the Lord made in His final passion. In this sense, the Spirit, the Lord the Spirit, bears witness with our spirit / mind, that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16). This clinches all I am trying to say. Our inability to keep the Law of God leads to a groaning against sin and because of sin, which puts us into a unity with the Lord Jesus as our Heavenly intercessor in the court of Heaven. But that wondrous realization of grace which is expressed so finely in Romans 8 would just be impossible were it not for the conviction of sin which there is through our experience of our inability to keep the Law of God. Our failure and groaning because of it becomes in the end the very witness that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16). God thereby makes sin His servant, in that the experience of it glorifies Him.

And then there's intellectual failure. The way we misunderstood Scripture, had wrong ideas, which over the years of prayerful Bible study are being corrected. But my observation is that what I'm calling intellectual failure- e.g. a Bible reader believing in the immortality of the soul- usually has a moral reason behind it, subconsciously. We so often wilfully read Scripture the way we secretly want to understand it, willing ourselves to the same conclusions as our fathers. Prayer before daily Bible reading is essential; but it must be genuine prayer, an utterly sincere desire to be taught the way of God whatever this requires us to jettison.

The Way Of Preaching

The experience of preaching leads to our growth. Paul Tournier in *The Meaning Of Persons* perceptively comments: "We become fully conscious only of what we are able to express to someone else. We may already have had a certain intuition about it, but it must remain vague so long as it is unformulated". This is why anyone involved in preaching, public speaking, writing or personal explanation of the Gospel to someone else will know that they have gained so much from having to state in so many words what they already 'know'. And in the course of making the expression, our own understanding is deepened, our personal consciousness of what we believe is strengthened, and thereby our potential for a real faith is enhanced. Tournier's observation is validated by considering the record of the healed blind man in Jn. 9. Initially he says that he doesn't know whether or not Jesus is a sinner, all he knows is that Jesus healed him. But the Jews force him to testify further, and in the course of his witness, the man explains to them that God doesn't hear sinners, and so for Jesus to have asked God for his healing and been heard...surely proved that Jesus wasn't a sinner. He was sinless. The man was as it were thinking out loud, coming to conclusions himself, as he made his bold witness (Jn. 9:31,33).

The parable of the sower leaves us begging the question: 'So how can we be good ground?'. Mark's record goes straight on to record that the Lord right then said that a candle is lit so as to publicly give light and not to be hidden. He is speaking of how our conversion is in order to witness to others. But He says this in the context of being good ground. To respond to the

word ourselves, our light must be spreading to all. The only way for the candle of our faith to burn is for it to be out in the open air. Hidden under the bucket of embarrassment or shyness or an inconsistent life, it will go out. We will lose our faith if we don't in some sense witness to it. Witnessing is in that sense for our benefit. When the disciples ask how ever they can accomplish the standards which the Lord set them, He replied by saying that a city set on a hill cannot be hid (Mt. 5:14). He meant that the open exhibition of the Truth by us will help us in the life of personal obedience to Him.

Discussing Scripture with others has been invaluable in my own experience of Bible study. Particularly is it valuable to discuss with Christians and even non-believers who come from a totally different culture from your own. Thus discussion of the parables of the lost in Lk. 15 with Middle Eastern peasants raises a number of issues which few Western expositors have hit on- e.g. the ways in which the elder son's refusal to attend the banquet was such an insult to the father, the way an older man never runs in public and humiliates himself by doing so. The problem is, we come to Scripture through the lenses of our own culture and background. Leslie Newbigin, a lifetime missionary in India, commented: "We do not see the lenses of our spectacles; we see through them, and it is another who has to say to us, "Friend, you need a new pair of spectacles""(1). The Lord spoke in one Gospel record of taking heed what we hear; but in another, of taking care how we hear. *How* we hear, our worldviews, our approach to knowledge, is in effect *what* we end up hearing.

Newbigin had something of my own experience of the value of discussing Scripture with people from other backgrounds; he speaks of the need of "the witness of those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures"(2). This is not only true in a world-culture sense; but it is helpful to discuss with all manner of folk. Even though we may not agree with them, an hour spent in discussing Revelation with a JW, or Paul with a radical Christian feminist who thinks Jesus is a woman... all this sows stimulation in our subsequent reflections.

More than anything, preaching has taught me the immense value of the human person as an individual. The Lord's parable of the strange shepherd who leaves the 99 and gives his all for the one- the foolish one, the lost one, the antisocial one- is programmatic for me. The need is the call. If one person needs fellowship, forgiveness, love, the teaching of the Gospel, baptism, encouragement, re-fellowship, support, money, whatever... the value of them as an individual must be paramount. No matter what it costs us, how far we have to travel [in whatever sense], how much 'trouble' we get into, how foolish we look, how out on a limb we put ourselves. The value and meaning of the individual person was paramount in the Lord's teaching and example, and it must be in our worldviews too.

John Thomas wrote at the end of his life about his regret for the „theological gladiatorship” of his earlier years. Likewise looking back, I see that initially, I understood 'preaching' as merely debating and combating theological ideas opposed to my own- with no significance placed upon the value of the person with whom I was in discussion. It's not that I now think the doctrines of our faith are any less important now than I did then. Actually, the opposite. It's just that that person on the other side of the fence to you has, just like you, their inner traumas and struggles, their secret conflicts and dramas... and yet all this becomes hidden behind the facade of doctrinal debate and argument. I've learnt that it is to the person we must appeal if we are to win them for Christ, or win them closer to Him as we seek. If we are to convert and help others to Jesus, rather than to ourselves, we need to find "another mode of relationship" than mere intellectual argument. Such argument alone will not convert or persuade towards

the cause of Christ. And yet sadly so much of our collective preaching effort has been taken up with exactly this kind of fruitless debate. Doctrinal argument tends to divide; whereas it is the common areas of experience which tend to unite. And so a woman reaching out to other women, perhaps other young mothers, will be a far more likely cause of conversion than knocking on the doors and engaging all and sundry in doctrinal debate. But that woman, if she is to bring about an authentic conversion, must all the same convert her fellow-woman to something. And she likely will have to talk around all the host of misunderstandings and wrong ideas which her friend has been exposed to in this sadly confused and lost world.

The Way Of Biblical Study

Daily Bible reading from the *Bible Companion* has been a blessing to me. And pray, fervently and intensely, to really understand and respond; that the word may become flesh in us, as it was in the Lord. I can't recommend these habits strongly enough. Through all the ups and downs, failure and success, sin and righteousness, the light and the black, and all the shades of grey, this is a habit I have rigidly kept up. And of course, serious prayer. I am grateful, and maybe in a literal sense it will be 'eternally grateful', that my dear mother taught me to pray on my knees as a little boy. Little could she have imagined what she was doing for me by setting me up in that way from which I would not depart. How in sin, in danger of my life, under arrest by Moslem fanatics, in rejection, in adulation, alone in so many lonely hotel rooms in the service of the Gospel... serious prayer on my knees was my salvation. Who am I to really give advice... but, all I can say is: pray to God, and hear His voice in His word, daily, seriously, intently. And develop habits that enable this. Set your alarm clock just 10 minutes earlier, or whatever that's required.

There's a certain mutuality between our Bible reading, and our prayer life. As we speak with God in prayer, so He speaks with us through His word. Feeling that synthesis between Bible reading and prayer is, to my mind, a significant indicator of spiritual growth. 'Praying' through running off a list of requests, or mouthing the same old phrases... this won't achieve the synthesis, the praxis, of which I speak. As we hear God's word, His voice, so our words of prayer will respond to that appropriately.

The Way Of Grace

That salvation is indeed a pure gift from God, unattainable by our own efforts, becomes more and more clear and awesome to me. But His grace works out in other ways, apart from in our salvation. So many times I have been saved from death or serious injury by grace. It is grace that we have what health we have, life itself. Grace that we were born into a situation whereby in the end we heard the Gospel. It was God's grace that gave me wonderful parents and the finest wife, that preserved me in ways great and small time and again. And you must surely know the same sense of grace.

Realizing that we are in the grace of God, justified by Him through our being in Christ, leads us to a far greater and happier acceptance of ourselves as persons. So many people are unhappy with themselves. It's why we look in mirrors in a certain way when nobody else is watching; why we're so concerned to see how we turned out in a photograph. Increasingly, this graceless world can't accept itself. People aren't happy or acceptant of their age [they want to look and be younger or older], their body, their family situation, even their gender and their own basic personality. I found that when I truly accepted my salvation by grace,

when the wonder of who I am in God's sight, as a man in Christ, really dawned on me... I became far happier with myself, far more acceptant. Now of course in another sense, we are called to radical transformation, to change, to rise above the narrow limits of our own backgrounds. This is indeed the call of Christ. But I refer to our acceptance of who we are, and the situations we are in, as basic human beings.

And so our character changes, our personality is transformed, where and as and when these various 'ways' have their meeting in us- the way of grace, the way of the cross, the way of personal failure, the way of Bible study, the way of preaching. As we progress along the path, it seems to me that our awareness of our responsibility to God in all these matters increases. Emil Brunner's thesis throughout his classic study *Man In Revolt* is that "responsibility is the key to personality". Grasping that we are responsible to God will radically affect our personality. Self discipline, self examination, actions governed by higher principles and the knowledge of judgment... all these things arise from grasping that we are responsible to God. The doctrine of responsibility to God and His judgment affects personality in practice- radically so.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH: Part 2. Indicators Of Spiritual Growth

Spiritual growth is perhaps something we can only get to grips with by observing it in practice. I want to discuss a few indicators of spiritual growth which in my judgment are the most significant in practice.

Self Talk

We all talk to ourselves. There's a steady stream of self-talk going on within us, whether or not we quietly mouth the words to ourselves at times. Some people have a stream of self-talk going on that denigrates their self-worth day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Others have thoughts of anger and bad imaginations against the evil which they imagine others are doing. Yet others have thoughts of utter vanity, of grandeur, of lust, of various fantasies...and these all influence our words, actions and ambitions in the very end. From the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. So "guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Prov. 4:23). This is why we are told to speak the truth *in our hearts*. David definitely has in mind here our self-talk. Our self-talk has a high likelihood of being untrue, fantasy, imagination. Be aware, keenly aware, of the private conversations you're having with yourself. Ensure that all you are saying to yourself, even if it's not about spiritual things, is at least truthful. This is where this great theme of truth starts and ends. Ideally, our self-talk should be of Jesus, of the Father, of the things of His Kingdom. Of anything that is just, true, of good report... Yet our self-talk is closely linked to what Scripture would call the devil- the constant fountain of wrong suggestions and unspiritual perspectives that seem to bubble up so constantly within us. The devil- the Biblical one- is "the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44). And untruthfulness seems to begin within our own self-talk. I would even go so far as to almost define the devil as our own self-talk. And it's likened to a roaring, dangerous lion; a cunning snake. And it's there within each of us. The control of self-talk is vital. And the Biblical guidance is to make sure it is truthful; for lack of truthfulness is the root of all sin. Sin is normally committed by believers not as an act of conscious rebellion, but rather through a complex process of self-justification; which on repentance we recognize was the mere sophistry of our own self-talk. This is why truthfulness is the epitome of the spiritual life. To deny ever being untruthful is to deny ever sinning. We all have this problem. It's why the assertion of Jesus that He was "the truth" was tantamount, in the context, to saying that

He was sinless. Only thus is He thereby the way to eternal life.

No Fear Of Others' Judgment

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

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

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

To feel otherwise involves overlooking a fundamental of our faith- that there truly is one judge. Hence Paul could say to his critics within the brotherhood that it mattered *so* little to him how he was judged by them, for he had *only* One who would judge him (1 Cor. 4:3). Indeed, Paul's thought here is building on what he had earlier reasoned in 1 Cor. 2:15, that the spiritual man "himself is judged of no man". There was only One judge, and the believer

is now not condemned if he is in Christ (Rom. 8:1). He that truly believes in Christ is not condemned, but has passed from death to life (Jn. 3:18; 5:24). So however men may claim to judge and condemn us, the ultimate truth is that no man *can* judge / condemn us, and we who are spiritual should live life like that, not fearing the pathetic judgments of men, knowing that effectively we are *not* being judged by them. How radically different is Paul's attitude to so many of us. The fear of criticism and human judgment leads us to respond as animals do to fear- the instinct of self-defence and self-preservation is aroused. We defend ourselves as we would against hunger or impending death. Yet here the radical implications of grace burst through. We are not our best defence. We have an advocate who is also the judge, the almighty Lord Jesus; we have a preserver and saviour, the same omnipotent Lord, so that we need not and must not trust in ourselves. By not trusting in this grace of salvation, we end up desperately trusting ourselves for justification and preservation and salvation, becoming ever more guilty at our abysmal and pathetic failures to save and defend ourselves.

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

Freedom From Fear

The Bible has so much to say about death, depicting us as having a "body of death" (Rom. 7:24). And yet humanity generally doesn't want to seriously consider death. Yet death is the moment of final truth, which makes all men and women ultimately equal, destroying all the categories into which we place people during our or their lives. If we regularly read and accept the Bible's message, death, with all its intensity and revelation of truth and the ultimate nature of human issues, is something which is constantly before us, something we realistically face and know, not only in sickness or at funerals. And the realness, the intensity, the truth... which comes from this will be apparent in our lives.

And yet the fear of death grips our society more than we like to admit. A psychologist described the huge "number of people who dream that they are locked in, that everywhere they come up against iron-bound and padlocked doors, that they absolutely must escape, and yet there is no way out". This is the state of the nation, this is how we naturally are, this is the audience to which we preach. And we preach a freedom from that fear. Because the Lord Jesus was of our human nature- and here perhaps more than anywhere else we see the crucial practical importance of true doctrine- we are freed from the ranks of all those who through fear of death live their lives in bondage (Heb. 2:15). For He died for us, as our representative. How true are those inspired words. "To release them who through fear / phobos of death were all their living-time subject to slavery" (Gk.). Nearly all the great psychologists concluded that the mystery of death obsesses humanity; and in the last analysis, all anxiety is reduced to

anxiety about death. You can see it for yourself, in how death, or real, deep discussion of it, is a taboo subject; how people will make jokes about it in reflection of their fear of seriously discussing it. People, even doctors and psychologists, don't quite know what to *really* say to the dying. There can be floods of stories and chit-chat... all carefully avoiding any possible allusion to death. This fear of death, in which the unredeemed billions of humanity have been in bondage, explains the fear of old age, the unwillingness to accept our age for what it is, our bodies for how and what they are, or are becoming. I'm not saying of course that the emotion of fear or anxiety is totally removed from our lives by faith. The Lord Jesus in Gethsemane is proof enough that these emotions are an integral part of being human, and it's no sin to have them. I'm talking of fear in it's destructive sense, the fear of death which is rooted in a lack of hope. The person who is freed from this has grown spiritually.

Certainty Of Salvation By Grace

Lk. 12:32 teaches that we should not fear or worry about our lack of material things, because God is eager to give us His Kingdom. The certainty of salvation which we may have ought to mean that worry about all human things of this life becomes irrelevant. The wonderful certainty of salvation and freedom from condemnation is brought out by the wonderful figure of Rom. 8:33,34. The person bringing the complaint of sin against us is God alone- for there is no personal devil to do so. And the judge who can alone condemn us is the Lord Jesus alone. And yet we find the one 'brings the charge' instead being the very one who justifies us, or as the Greek means, renders us guiltless. The one who brings the charge becomes this strange judge who is so eager to declare us guiltless. And the judge who can alone condemn, or render guilty, is the very one who makes intercession to the judge for us- and moreover, the One who died for us, so passionate is His love. The logic is breathtaking, literally so. The figures are taken from an earthly courtroom, but the roles are mixed. Truly "if God be for us [another courtroom analogy], who can be against us" (8:31). This advocate / intercessor is matchless. With Him on our side, 'for us', we cannot possibly be condemned. Whatever is 'against us'- our sins- cannot now be against us, in the face of this mighty advocate. Let's face it, the thing we fear more than death is our sin which is 'against us'. But the assurance is clear, for those who will believe it. With an attorney for the defence such as we have, who is also our passionate judge so desperate to justify us- even they cannot stand 'against us'. Rom. 8:38,39 says that neither death nor life can separate us from the love of God. In what sense could life separate us from God's love? Surely only in the sense of sins committed in human life. Yet even these cannot separate us from the love of God which is so ready and eager to forgive us. This is the extent of grace; that not even sin, which on one hand separates from God, can actually separate us from the love of God in Christ. We are often plagued by a desire to separate out the things for which we are justly suffering, and things in which we are innocent victims. We struggle over whether our cancer or her depression is our fault, or whether we only got into unhealthy behaviours as a result of others' stressing us... etc. This struggle to understand the balance between personal guilt and being a victim of circumstance or other people makes it hard for some people to free themselves from guilt. Seeking to understand is especially acute when we face death, suffering, tragedy, or experience broken relationships. How much was I to blame? In how much was I merely a victim? My determined conclusion is that it is impossible, at least by any intellectual process, to separate out that suffering for which we are personally guilty, and that suffering which we are merely victims of. The cross of Jesus was not only to remove personal guilt through forgiveness; all our human sufferings and sicknesses were laid upon Him there. Our burdens, both of our own guilt and those which are laid upon us by life or other people, are and were carried by Him who is our total saviour.

Acceptance

The final indicator of spiritual growth is what I would call 'acceptance'. Acceptance of our salvation, of who we are as persons, acceptance that we are sinners, acceptance of everything around us that cannot be changed until the Kingdom comes. Acceptance, in the end, of grace; an acceptance that merges into faith, faith in its full and final sense as we soberly contemplate our death, judgment to come, and the awesome prospect of utter infinity shared with the Father and Son.

Notes

(1) Leslie Newbigin, *A Word In Season* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) p. 192

(2) Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel In A Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) pp. 196,197.