

The Open Christ:

An Argument for Openness

Experimental Theology

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1 The Essential Importance of Unity

1-1 Introduction

I lay down a challenge in this book: Of a totally open table and a willingness to baptize whosoever will into Christ. I know it will be too much for some, and will be instantly and instinctively rejected as being the greatest betrayal of all we as Bible believing Christians have ever stood for. But I believe my case is Biblically solid, and that the case the other way is not really a case, but rather a mixture of tradition, gut reaction and an intuition based upon culture. I may come over at times as critical of the situation existing in the kind of closed table fellowships in which I spent much of my life. But my criticism of our culture is in fact a calling of us to our highest values- of fearless Bible study, willingness to follow wherever our Lord leads us, being like Him whatever the cost, prepared to stand with our backs to the world if need be, and also to see the backs of family and old friends turned upon us for the sake of our Biblical convictions. If this challenge to a totally open table is a bridge too far for some, then at the very least I would hope that the case I also make for total openness in fellowship to all others “in Christ” would be accepted- whatever view of

fellowship they may hold, however they may read Bible teaching about fellowship.

I am of course fully aware that I am asking a lot in suggesting to those in closed-table communities to believe and act otherwise. But I submit that the Biblical evidence for an open communion table and an open attitude of the Lord Jesus towards those wishing to be baptized into Him is very clear in the Bible. And I will let Lev Tolstoy say what therefore needs to be said at this juncture: "I know that most men, including those at ease with problems of the greatest complexity, can seldom accept even the simplest and most obvious truth, if it be such that would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have delighted in explaining to colleagues, which they have proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabric of their lives".

God has designed both natural and spiritual life to be lived in community. Cut off from community, people wither and die, just as animals do when taken out of the flock or herd. To cut off any single individual from the body of Christ is serious indeed. Many are the spiritual shipwrecks and broken lives which have been created by an individual being rejected. Truly, "The awareness of human separation, without reunion by love- is the source of shame. It is at the same time the source of guilt and anxiety" (1). Whilst none of us are

answerable for how others act, we can vow ourselves never to support or uphold policies of exclusion, whatever the cost to us. If we exclude another because of moral weakness- what of ours? If we exclude because of doctrinal misunderstanding of the Bible- what of ours? For we know ourselves only a fraction of the ultimate truth of God, and for sure we ourselves are misinterpreting some parts of His word.

The bread which we break is the communion [*koinonia*] of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16), the sign of participation. To exclude anyone from it is to say at the very least that they are not part of that body nor do we wish them to come near to it. To recognize some as “brothers” but excluded from that table is simply impossible; it is tantamount to condemning them as not part of the body of Christ nor able to access it. This is serious indeed. And to separate ourselves from the body of Christ (which we do by separating from those in His body) is to separate ourselves from Him personally. The matter could not be more serious.

The Need for Unity Between Believers

Let me begin by discussing the need for fellowship between fellow believers. It is my observation that our walk in Christ is prone to deflection by two extremes: on the one hand, a liberal view of the meaning of the Lord Jesus Christ which results in 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. We may consider him a mistaken brother, or an erring brother- but still a brother. Even when a brother has to be disciplined, "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 (James 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". Just as the Lord Jesus at the last supper fellowshiped Judas who had "no truth in him", Peter who wasn't yet "converted", and

the disciples who believed in demons and ghosts and who misunderstood the Lord's clear teaching about His resurrection.

Whether someone is a brother in Christ or not depends on whether they have been baptized into Christ, and we will address what makes baptism valid somewhat later. In the same way as your natural brother is always your brother, whatever he might do, so a brother is always a brother. 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 Lord's acceptance of that person who seeks to come to Him, not on the person performing the baptism. 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.

Not only do we have no right or ability to gather up the weeds from among the wheat (we must leave this to the day of judgment); but it is the clear teaching of the Lord that if we judge / condemn our brother, we too will be condemned. So, if someone is baptized into the Lord Jesus Christ, *don't* treat him as if 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 others.

And encourage others to reject this idea that anyone outside your community cannot be a brother in Christ. For the end result of this reasoning is a cult mentality; everyone outside us is dark, 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, discipline 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 the God whom he has not seen (1 Jn. 4:20)? "*Why do you 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 acceptance, 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 men. 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.

1-2 The Creation of Unity Through the Cross

A major result of the existence of the Lord Jesus was to be unity amongst God’s people. Thus the Angels sang: “...on

earth peace among the 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 unto Himself through the work of Jesus (Col. 1:20 RVmg.); reconciliation with God is 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. We are to live at peace with all within the ecclesia “as much as depends on you” (Rom. 12:18). 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 cleanses 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... you all are partakers with me of grace" (Phil. 1:5-7 RV). All those in the Lord Jesus by 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, grows unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom you also are built up *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; it is a denial that we are stones within the same temple. 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, characterized by 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 in 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 to the word shows that it's inappropriate to claim we are 'out of fellowship' with 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 Christian 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. His death for us and our fellowship with others who partake in it 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 (Jn. 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). To operate a system or mentality of different 'folds' [cp. 'fellowships'] is to work against the work of the cross.

- Clearly enough, the bronze serpent lifted up on the "standard" or pole 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. His death should create fellowship and not division.

The Lord Jesus died with arms outstretched or uplifted, in open welcome of men and women to come to Him. To deny others this, or to treat them as if they are not saved by His work there, is to sin deeply against Him at His greatest and most desperate hour. To be exclusive rather than inclusive is, quite simply, to live in denial of the most quintessential spirit of Christ.

The Yoke of Christ

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. And to refuse others fellowship in Christ is to deny them His yoke. It is a profound working against Him and all that He lived, died and lives again to achieve. To be in Him, under His yoke, is to put our arms around our brethren and labour together- not to reject them because they fellowship some whom we may consider questionable. 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. Nor can we seriously come to Jesus if we are rejecting our fellow brethren.

Paul's Perspective

Paul had all 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 Your chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of Your nation, that I may glory with Your 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. If someone is in Christ, 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 within their community who are *not* validly baptized, this doesn't take away from our unity with those who *are* in Christ. Unity and avoiding division is therefore 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.

Metaphors of Unity

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). There are of course

many who to some extent hear His voice, but when gathered together before Him (supremely at the memorial meeting) they are divided amongst themselves. They have not allowed His word to affect all parts of their lives; and the majority of those divided from each other are only so because they are following the traditions and expectations of others. Hence the most serious problem in the Corinth ecclesia, Paul said, was that they were divided (1 Cor. 1:18 Gk.). 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 do you persecute *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. For the context of 1 Cor. 11:27 speaks of the Lord's body as being the ecclesia, the community of believers. 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 brothers and sisters are baptized into His body, then we simply *must* fellowship with them. Otherwise we are missing the point of our calling. 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.

1-3 Condemnation for Division

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. I have a recurrent nightmare, quite literally, of divisive brethren I well know being cast into the darkness of condemnation, replete with their wide margin, well marked Bibles and dark suits. May God’s grace spare them from it, but it seems to be a Biblically correct picture.

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). Many closed table communities- and the Christadelphians would be a classic example- are bitterly divided. They built on sand in that their view of fellowship and exclusion failed to reflect an obedient hearing of His most basic words. 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, necessarily 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 (1 Cor. 11:19). But woe to him or her by whom the offence comes (Mt. 18:7); and there is nothing like division for causing little ones to stumble. Time and again I saw that, in a lifetime of missionary work dealing with new converts. Any whiff of division causes many to stumble. And it is our attitude to "the little ones" which is of such especial interest to the Lord who died for them (Mt. 18:6).

The One Body

If there are divisions, then it is evident that they only exist in the minds of people here on earth- not in that of God, for whom there is only *one* body. If we admit that our brother is *in* Christ, 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 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 invisible 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 has 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 who say they have broken away from us; 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. It was a "body" which was saved when Christ rose from the dead; salvation is therefore in a community. And there is only one such community, 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 believers in Christ, but between believers 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 (Acts 15:14); 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 various ways, and one of them is through 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 baptism into Him ought to break bread together. This is not to say that the breaking of bread should only be shared with those in the one body; but as a very minimum our thinking on this subject should surely be led by Scripture to breaking bread with all others in the body of

Christ. Because some passages in Corinthians associate the breaking of bread with our fellowship with others in Christ, it is a logical fallacy to reason that therefore we can *only* break bread with those in Christ. 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 and no right to the altar. And if we fence the table against unbelievers we are likewise denying them access to the Lord- although the idea of an open table is discussed elsewhere in this book. In this section, we're looking at the need to at the very least share fellowship with all who are in Christ. 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". Ultimately, of course, it is not; but that is what the closed table communities have done to

their Lord's cross.

The One Body

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. David's Psalms therefore frequent exult that what God had done for the body in past history is in a sense done for us today. 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 separates himself seeks 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.

The Sin of Diotrophes

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 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 Diotrophes is condemned for doing: "Diotrophes, who loves to have the pre-eminence... receives us not...and not content therewith, neither does he himself receive the brethren, *and forbids them that would, casting them out of*

the church" (3 Jn. 10,11). Now this is exactly the position of the closed table 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 but is suspected of breaking bread with those who might- 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. This is not to say that there is to be no church discipline- but I discuss this later.

1-4 An Impure Fellowship

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 in Christ. Our response is to not be defiled ourselves in practice. 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 and those of the Lycus Valley in Rev. 2 and 3. Even in Corinth, in an ecclesia riddled with immorality, false doctrine, abuse of the breaking of bread etc., Paul makes a point of calling them his "brethren" (statistically, 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 a seriously 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. Note too that Paul lamented that all in Asia had turned away from him (2 Tim. 1:15). But the ecclesias to whom the Lord Jesus wrote in Rev. 2 and 3 were "in Asia". For whatever reason, brethren turned away from the apostle Paul, and yet were still graciously counted as in fellowship with the Lord Jesus. That observation has some major

implications which we can each meditate upon personally.

The Proverbs often taught the need to separate from and contend with those within Israel who were astray (e.g. Prov. 14:7; 28:4). They were not to fellowship, not walk in common, with thieves (Prov. 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.

But...?

The most common response to the above reasoning presented above is to quietly agree. But to say that pragmatically, to fellowship all whom we consider our brethren in Christ will lead to more division within our current community. Our parents... children... family our kids married into... will divide from us. And so... best to stay quiet. Go to your “elders” in closed table communities with these concerns and they will likely comfort you that “unity” is best served by not dividing further. But “unity” has been a mantra disguising all kinds of evils- totalitarian regimes, from the far left to the far right, have had “national unity” as the battle cry justifying all manner of abuses and denial of liberty of conscience to the individual. The evidence presented above must be given

its due weight. And we must personally feel our personal responsibility to act. Typically, most members of closed table communities- and again, the Christadelphians would currently be a prime example- will under the bedclothes, within the assurance of total confidentiality, admit in whispers that they see an open table and open attitude to baptism into Christ as the right way to go. But fear of consequence holds them back from acting upon it. The younger generations grow up and reluctantly uphold the positions of their fathers, as age makes the preservation of their beloved community more attractive to them.

The responsibility is shifted onto “the elders” and decision makers. But we are all decision makers. We shall each answer for how we have treated our brethren. We expect those convicted of Christ to leave all they once held dear in their Moslem or Buddhist communities; but the conviction of Christ goes far beyond acceptance of the Gospel and baptism. It is an ongoing call, to each and every one of us in Him. The tail wags the dog in so many closed table communities. If the masses were to rise up and say what they really thought, the leadership would by and large cave in and agree with them, just as happens in classic revolutions. A few will hold out to the bitter end and depart into splendid isolation. The doctrines of the Gospel which we hold dear are attractive to people worldwide; a divided, exclusive, small minded community or church is not. We so easily could

be the salt of the entire world, preparing and hastening the coming of the Lord; we could be at the very cutting edge of human society on a global level. God has set up those potentials. It is for us as individuals to do the right thing, banding together as far as possible under the yoke of Christ to make the burden and cost more manageable.

Notes

(1) Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989) p. 9.

2 Fallacies and Problems with a Closed Table

2-1 Logical Contradictions

I grew up within a closed table community, known as the Dawn Fellowship. In my late twenties, I moved to the Central fellowship of Christadelphians, who for the most part also operate a closed table. My church experience wasn't happy, the more so from observing at close quarters the endless damage caused by the practice of disfellowship. Over the years, I became aware that this generally bad and unhappy fellowship experience was actually quite common in Christadelphia; and then I became involved with people

from other denominations, especially the Jehovah's Witnesses, whose lives likewise had been torn apart by division between those who were their "brethren". I realized that it wasn't simply that I had had a bad ride. Thousands of sincere Christian folk worldwide had experienced the shattering of their families and relationships because of the insistence that X be disfellowshipped, and any who fellowshipped X must likewise be. Just a brief search on the internet for terms such as "damage", "disfellowship", "excommunication", "psychological", "Christadelphian", "Jehovah's Witnesses" will confirm this. There can be no doubt that huge psychological and spiritual damage is caused to many people by "disfellowship". We should of course be willing to stand with our backs to the world, completely alone, if need be, if Biblical principle requires this of us. But. Only "if need be". To be responsible for this damage, to passively participate in it, to uphold it, to continue it- can only be done if firstly we are thoroughly and utterly Biblically convinced that this is the right way, the clearly stated will of God. In this book I more than question whether such behaviour is indeed the Biblical way and the will of the Father and Son; and I conclude that actually, the very opposite is the case. Such behaviour is wrong and in fact the very opposite is required of us if we are to be faithful to the Father's word all that we see and know of the Lord Jesus.

The "closed table" system of fellowship operates by having

a statement of faith, and sometimes a stand on moral or practical issues [e.g. divorce and remarriage, evolution, the role of women in the church], and offering fellowship and the bread and wine to only those who believe and uphold the same statements. At first blush, this seems all nice and cosy—everyone believes the same thing, the community has backbone and a basis. But... is it Biblical? Does it match the radically open spirit and example of the Lord Jesus? And what about those who are excluded? Here are just some of the problems encountered with the closed table model:

Members are inducted into the closed community either by baptism or admission into fellowship some other way. But people don't remain static. They may be aware of the beliefs in the statement of faith initially, but over time they forget them or may depart from them due to isolation from the mainstream of the community. And some were never really aware of the detailed positions of the community they joined. They may have contact with family members or folk with other doctrinal perspectives, and these factors may have more impact upon them than their on paper association with the closed community. Or their Bible reading may lead them to think differently on some aspects of the faith enshrined in the statements of faith. Such cases are not so few and far between, in my observation. For whatever reason, the idea that "We in our [closed community] all believe what is written in this statement of faith" is simply untrue in reality.

The only way to ensure it is true would be to have a system of regular re-interviewing of all members to ensure their fidelity to the statements; and to have a network of watchful informers who report any slight apostasy they notice to some eldership system who would then ultimately eject the straying member. Practically, such systems would have to be necessary to ensure that people still believe that they believed at their point of entry into the community. Because practically this is impossible in any large worldwide community, one has to accept that there will be people who do not accept the statements of faith in their entirety. And a surprising number never really understood or agreed with the statements which comprise their 'Statement of Faith'.

Faith and understanding are ultimately very personal. They are affairs of the heart. There is no way of telling what people really believe in their hearts, and what beliefs they may share in confidence with others under-the-bedclothes in secure environments. There's no way anyone can actually state with confidence what say 50,000 people in a community really believe, when most of them are personally unknown to that person who makes such a statement. The closed table mentality presupposes that faith and belief in certain propositions are black and white realities- a person believes X or they do not believe X. But that is not the nature of faith. Some openly admit that their faith in a given doctrinal proposition- e.g. that death is unconsciousness- is stronger at

some times than at others, they have doubts about the proposition, their position on that matter varies from total agreement one day to total disagreement the next. That is the practical nature of human faith and understanding. Yet the closed table mentality simplistically presupposes that all members of the closed community believe proposition X, because it is enshrined in their 'Statement of Faith'. But the reality on the ground is that faith, understanding and belief are not definable in such simplistic binary terms. And there is no doubt that one of God's children can believe the wrong things about God and yet still remain in fellowship with Him. Samuel dogmatically asserted that God "will not repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent". And yet the inspired record goes on to show that God did indeed repent, and it comments just a few verses after Samuel's claim: "The Lord repented that He had made Saul king" (1 Sam. 15:29,35). Yet Samuel remained a member of the community of believers. Neh. 8:17,18 makes the amazing revelation that from the time of Joshua to Nehemiah, the feast of Tabernacles was never properly observed. Yet good kings like David, who loved God's word, lived during that period. Although clearly their understanding and practice was faulty in this matter, this did not end their fellowship with God.

It is psychologically normal and usual that over a period of time, people move on in their thinking from positions, or are influenced towards other positions. To maintain "purity of

fellowship” on the basis of any one stated position or statement of faith would require a disciplinary process, a mechanism for ejecting the apostate. If each congregation is autonomous, as e.g. the majority of Christadelphians claim, and if there is no head office deciding cases of apostasy, then there is no such mechanism in place. And so it is that e.g. within Christadelphia there are some who will state views contrary to some aspect of the “Statement of Faith”, but if they are in a “liberal” ecclesia, they will not be ejected from the community. There are, e.g., many ecclesias who do not believe that disfellowship is an appropriate way to deal with problem members. And so those members remain. One only has to review various internet forums to see some Christadelphians advocating views which are contrary to the letter of the Statement of Faith of their community. Therefore without a strong, universally accepted body within the community who ensure no departure from the statement of faith, there is no way that the community can claim to universally all believe the same things.

2-2 The Need for Power Brokers

A closed table becomes meaningless if those who are more open aren't disciplined. And this requires a “third party” clause to be added to the original statement of faith. Thus the Dawn fellowship have their notorious “4th clause” which

states that they will not fellowship those who believe the same as they do about divorce and remarriage but who are prepared to fellowship with those who are prepared to fellowship ecclesias who have cases of divorce and remarriage. Some in the Central Christadelphian community, notably the Christadelphian Office, uphold a similar position, in refusing to fellowship those who believe their statement of faith [the BASF] but will fellowship those who fellowship those who differ on one small point, holding to the BUSF. These “third party” clauses are logically required if one is to seriously claim that all within the closed community literally believe all the things in the statement of faith. But there appears no statement of this kind of thing in the Bible. Seeing these clauses and positions are vital to upholding a closed table, one would expect to see an attempt at Biblical justification for them. But there never seems to be any. And this approach sounds very much like “guilt by association” or “contamination by communion”, phrases quite openly used by some Christadelphians. Guilt by association isn’t a Bible teaching. Rather do we see the opposite- the spotless Lord Jesus eagerly fellowshiping with sinners and not being contaminated thereby. We see the faithful within the apostate churches of Revelation 2 and 3 not being condemned for their presence in those churches. We see faithful individuals within Israel’s history living in “fellowship” with theologically and morally apostate believers- and

commended for being a light in that darkness. Never did the faithful quit. We see above all the Father and Son coming into the world of sinners in order to save sinners by the very humanity and personal connection of Christ with sinners. If there is really no such thing as personal “guilt by association”, then there’s no need for the third party clauses.

The third party clauses are without direct Biblical support. By upholding them, the situation develops whereby baptized believers, having identical theology, are separated from each other because of a disagreement over these third party clauses. The following scenarios are common and real in their pain and damage:

A sister from the Unammended Christadelphians who believes the BASF marries a brother from an Ammended ecclesia. She must uphold the third party clauses, or else she can’t break bread with her husband and his family. By doing so, she must cease fellowshiping with her beloved family and baptized siblings. Relationship stress becomes major. She is forced to choose- because of the third party clauses. And the end result is that baptized believers in Christ sharing the same beliefs are divided from each other and families are divided. And worst of all, typically everyone involved in the division will admit that it is wrong and without Biblical basis. But the closed table, third party clause forces it upon them. This kind of thing breeds deep resentment against the

“establishment” which is enforcing this unGodly position upon people.

The upset sister shares her feelings on a social networking forum which she wrongly assumed was private. She admits she broke bread with her father, who she loves dearly and is dying of cancer. She is accused by someone who saw her post of not upholding the basis of fellowship. She refuses to retract what she wrote as it was true and is how she really feels. She is disfellowshipped because she says she can't agree to only break bread with members of her husband's Ammended community. That is of course a cruel thing to do- but it's required by the view that “we only break bread with those who share our statement of faith *and* who will not break bread with others who fellowship with those who fellowship with those who may hold a wrong understanding of who God will resurrect at the last day”. Of course, as soon as the “third party” clause is dropped, then the gate is open- if members can break bread with those who don't agree with everything in the statement of faith, then that statement ceases to be a binding force in the community.

To ensure that the community ejects anyone who fellowships with those who think otherwise, something has to be chosen as a shibboleth, a symbolic act or word which is the definition of being “in” or “out” of the community. Typically, closed table Christian communities have chosen the breaking

of bread service as this shibboleth. This is a physical act which is public and clearly definable- if you break bread with anyone outside of the community, then you must be ejected. But this invests the breaking of bread with a sacramental value which is foreign to Scripture and more at home in Roman Catholic theology. It forces the breaking of bread to be perceived as the apex and defining point of Christian fellowship. But Biblically and from observed experience, it isn't. One can sit in a church and break bread with people whom you don't know and may differ from in many ways. Or you can experience close fellowship with other believers through experience and shared worship, but the lack of any communion service doesn't one bit affect the validity of fellowship. Biblically, of course, fellowship is far richer, complex and wider than taking a sip of wine and pinch of bread together in the same church hall.

The proof of any fellowship theory or position is in the eating, in the actual experience. The point is, only a few have a positive experience all their lives in a closed table community, sooner or later something comes up which spoils the story. The Christadelphian faith is fully shared by the CRC and by some churches affiliated with the Church of God General Conference, both of whom are open table. Their church experience is generally far happier. People leave, fall away, apostatize, but the overall position of the church or denomination is unaffected, and without the bitterness caused

by the third party clauses being operated, thereby breaking up families and relationships.

There is an observable anger over the fellowship issue. When someone loses their faith, adopts major wrong doctrine such as the Trinity, or morally falls away- there is typically sadness, sincere and tearful entreaty, and presentation of a solid Bible case appealing for the person to re-think. But when someone suggests adopting an open table, there's huge anger, ad hominem attacks, mud campaigns and all manner of nasty behaviour. This is clearly not spiritually motivated. The appeals are to human statements of faith, precedent, legalism, church tradition, human logic- but no Bible case is made. The problem is explicable in terms of basic sociology and psychology- it's what happens to people accused of boundary breaching, and the anger is typical of those devoted to maintaining boundaries. The discussions, such as they are, often reveal irrational fears- that an open table will lead to losing theological truths. The experience of the COGGC churches and CRC mentioned above shows this is indeed irrational fear. There's a distinct awkwardness when a Bible case is pushed for an open table.

Shared theology doesn't create fellowship, rather does a common experience of sharing in Christ's work, both past and present. There is no clear, concrete example in either Old or New Testaments of fellowship amongst believers

being based upon a shared set of theological interpretations. Rather is the basis their actual and practical identification with the people of God and the work of His Son. Significantly, therefore, there is no actual statement of faith presented in the Bible.

A brother or sister may be disfellowshipped by a few individuals in a tiny ecclesia. But that person may then go on to teach an identical statement of faith to many others and baptize them. Yet according to the closed table model, all those converts would be “out of fellowship” if they continue to break bread with the person who taught and baptize them. This very issue has led to serious worldwide division in the Christadelphian community. On a family level, the same is true. An individual may be disfellowshipped for reasons held by their family to be irrelevant or based on false information. Still believing the same doctrine as the community who disfellowshipped them, the disfellowshipped person teaches their children the same doctrines and baptizes them- but the moment they are baptized, they become unwelcome to break bread with the rest of the community unless they refuse to fellowship their own father or mother. In summary, the closed table model of fellowship runs into huge problems as soon as someone is disfellowshipped for reasons which are false or which are unconnected to the basic doctrines comprising the statement of fellowship. And because communities and churches are

comprised of fallible people, these kinds of mistakes and misjudgements happen. But because they happen, serious division and bitter family breakup occurs.

The closed table model demands that we understand fellowship in simple binary terms- one is either “in” fellowship or “out”. But experience and Bible teaching suggests that this is far too simplistic. There have been many cases where one Sunday, a person breaks bread at church as “in” fellowship; at a mid-week meeting of the church, they are disfellowshipped. Next Sunday, they are “out” of fellowship and can’t break bread. As we shall see, the Greek word *koinonia* translated “fellowship” is much fuller, wider and complex in meaning than to conclude that fellowship is a simple “in” or “out” state. One can sit in a church hall every Sunday for years and yet have no real personal knowledge of another believer who sits in another part of the hall. One can experience fellowship in moments, in situations, in differing contexts, with those who may not belong to your church and whom they may consider to be “out of fellowship”, but they belong to Christ- and He as a person is the basis for our fellowship. For fellowship is repeatedly spoken of as being “in Christ”.

Fellowship is typically withdrawn from a believer on the majority vote of the church or a group of elders. But can such a decision which has such far reaching and potentially

damaging consequences for an individual be performed on a mere majority vote? And how much majority is required? 51%? 66%? Democracy isn't a Biblically preferred method of dealing with such matters- and see the excursus upon "The fallacy of democracy". One of the points made in that excursus is that the electorate are often ignorant of the actual facts and are likely to be swayed by biased presentations of them made by interest groups. This is very true when it comes to disfellowship decisions. The facts are often not fully known or understood, and some lobby for "disfellowship" or "retain in fellowship" based on personal connections, dislikes, biases, fears of precedents etc.

And then there is the stubborn problem of what to do with those who vote against? The closed table system logically requires that they be withdrawn from, unless they agree to submit to the majority decision. But the Bible clearly teaches that if we don't love our brother, we abide in darkness; if we separate from those who are in the body of Christ, we separate from Him; our attitude to our brother is our attitude to Him. It is understandable, therefore, that some feel they cannot just do what they think is wrong, commit that which may affect their eternal salvation, just because a majority think they should. Given the eternal gravity of the issues, one cannot follow a majority. We must do what we believe to be right. It was majority decisions which led to false doctrines such as the Trinity being accepted; as Richard Rubenstein

wryly commented, Jesus became God because of a majority committee decision. Yet if the minority continue to break bread with the disfellowshipped person, they too must be disfellowshipped within the closed table mentality.

A closed table requires policing. And who is to do that, and how is it to be done? The closed table immediately plunges the local ecclesia into a sea of very human politics over these issues, because Scripture is silent about this. In practice, a closed table involves a body of elders deciding who can and who cannot take the emblems- because by definition, each individual member can't decide this question as each will judge differently, and so closed communion would become self-defeating. And yet on the other hand, who we break bread with is of individual significance and importance, and nowhere does the Bible say we can resign this decision to a body of elders. The closed table communities are basically a lo-fi version of Luther's pompous claim that "the pulpit can and must alone preserve Baptism, Sacrament, doctrine, articles of faith, and all estates in their purity" (1).

The closed table communities all without exception have a tragic history of division and subdivision. Heresy hunting becomes necessary, otherwise the members can no longer comfortably assume that all within their community believe the same things. And one cannot fail to notice the parallels

between autocratic, abusive political systems and closed table Christian denominations. That is not to say that the one is as bad as the other; rather am I observing feint outline similarities. A process of “informing” upon others arises quite naturally, members of those systems fear to think outside the frames imposed upon them, and creativity and a following of God’s leading becomes pushed underground. And the mantra of closed table Christian groups and political situations as varied as Communism and Fascism is identical: unity. That’s the cry- unity, a unity which is understood as uniformity of thought, belief and attitude. Biblical unity is not uniformity, and the variations within the first century church, as Biblically recorded for us, indicate that what bound the early believers together was their common share in Christ, rather than a unity of position on all theological and practical matters.

A closed table effectively implies that those considered fit to partake of the table are the one and only true church on earth. And yet most reasonable members of closed-table fellowships will admit that there are likely other believers in other fellowships who are also part of the one true church. The anger over the fellowship issue is a reflection of the discomfort which many feel on this issue. There is a disease because of the conflict between trying to not be judgmental, and yet wanting to have an assurance that all within the community think exactly as we do.

Closed table ecclesias disfellowship believers who believe as they do, or whose baptisms they accept as valid, simply because those other believers have a different view of Bible teaching about fellowship. Typically there is no “operation lost sheep” mounted to bring them back- because there is really so little to say. If you disfellowship your brethren for such reasons, what word do you have for them? You continue preaching the Gospel to the world, searching out those who have fallen away from faith or plunged into lives of immorality. But what word do you have for your good living, right believing brethren who have a different view of fellowship to you? In practice, nothing. Because there is nothing to be said, because the decision to exclude them was wrong. Those individuals are not “in the world”, you would probably still address them as “brethren”; but neither are they in your church. Such a situation is nowhere envisaged in Bible teaching about fellowship and the nature of the true church. Understandably, when this issue is raised with closed table ecclesias there’s a lot of anger expressed, just as there is in all of us when we are called on anything wrong which we do but can’t justify.

A closed table is without doubt psychologically and sociologically attractive. We all prefer to be in “safe” company- those whom we are assured think as we do. It is the easy, humanly attractive way. Yet Christian fellowship according to the pattern of the Christ who broke His bread

with those excluded from the church of His day, with those who didn't make the grade either morally or theologically, is what we are called to- if we are to be true followers of Him. The price to be paid for following Him in this way, of having the spirit of Christ without which we are "none of His", is often immense. And as we shall see later, it was the radical openness of the Lord Jesus, especially in His table fellowship, which lead Him to social and literal death. It is the way of the cross; and all within us rebels against that call. There are times when things go wrong in believers' lives. Affairs, divorce, alcohol and addiction problems... and the response to those issues will vary between believers. Some will consider disfellowship to be the answer, others will not. In many congregations the elders have no other authority apart from the fact they are elected by the congregation- and that raises the question of whether the non-Biblical principle of democracy actually confers authority to make disfellowship decisions.

Closed table approaches allow for no exceptions to the rules. A standard of prescribed doctrinal knowledge must be attained before baptism, and must be remembered and retained for fellowship. The whole system of closedness is rendered meaningless and hollow if we keep making exceptions- baptizing this one who doesn't quite know it all, and breaking bread with that one who no longer remembers, understands or agrees with it all. But God's whole dealing

with mankind, as witnessed and recorded in His word, is based upon exceptions to rules. Adam didn't die in the day he sinned; Israel weren't wiped out as a nation as the God whose word is ultimately true once solemnly proclaimed to Moses. Nineveh didn't perish 40 days after the pronouncement made by Jonah. The closed table mentality requires a legalistic praxis which is quite foreign to how God operates with us. The Law of Moses is full of concessions, principles in conflict and exceptions to rules. And of course we for whom the wages of sin is death shall not in fact eternally die. By grace, the law of sin and death shall be somehow broken. And spiritual life is full of gracious exceptions being made to Divine laws and rules. That is not to say that they are not to be taken seriously, of course. But the reality is that without those exceptions, none of us would have any hope of eternal salvation. The retarded, senile, disturbed, morally adrift, misunderstanding... were the ones brought to salvation by Jesus, through His eating with them. And Christadelphians baptize them, along with the illiterate of Africa and Asia... Exceptions are quite rightly made. Yet those exceptions disprove the rule- that the community is bound together by a detailed statement of faith, and only those who believe every part of it are admitted to the community by baptism and retained within it by closed table fellowship at the breaking of bread.

Summary

Closed table communities who claim to fellowship upon some doctrinal basis make unrealistic assumptions:

- That everyone still believes the same doctrinal positions which they did at point of entry to the community
- That the level and nature of doctrinal knowledge required for entry to the community is the same worldwide
- That anyone who departs from the basis is excluded from the community- discipline of erring members is universally upheld in every congregation
- Anyone unable to fully grasp the doctrinal basis of the community [through mental limitation, illiteracy or lack of teachers] cannot be baptized nor enter the community.
- Deviation from the doctrinal basis must lead to exclusion from the community, whether the deviation is cosmetic and minimal [e.g. 'ammending' the position on who exactly may be resurrected by Christ, as in the BASF], or major [e.g. belief in the Trinity].

The fact that these are impossible assumptions explains the tendency for closed table communities to endlessly divide; and it also explains their experience of dissatisfaction and unhappiness because of the known presence of those who do not on some point share the same faith as the others.

But there is another way; a better way. Accept that fellowship with each other is a natural experience which arises out of our having a common share in Christ; don't try to force it to depend upon sharing the same theology. Accept that the Lord Jesus practiced an open table; don't get hung up about who breaks bread with you and don't seek to exclude people from His table. See yourself as an honoured guest at that table. Teach and enthuse about Bible truths to all you meet, including those at church. If possible, join a church where there is strong, Godly leadership who teach Bible truths up front. You will rarely be bothered by the long term presence of those who think otherwise. Be *open* rather than *closed*- and enjoy life in the body of Christ, rather than being caught up by the need to *exclude*. Rejoice in showing the *inclusive* spirit of Christ.

Notes

(1) *Luther's Works*, edited by J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Publishing House, 1955-1986), Vol. 28 p.62.

2-3 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 failure 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'? Where would we stand if the Father and Son took that approach to us personally?

The command to "come out" from Babylon was in the first instance a call to follow God's leading and return to the land of Judah; they were to do this before Babylon fell (Jer. 25:12; 29:10). But not all the Jews in Babylon who didn't obey this call in physical terms, for whatever reason, were therefore unacceptable to God. Daniel is the great example. The night Babylon fell, he was present with the King of Babylon; but under the new regime of Darius the Mede, Daniel was also present. But he was a man "greatly beloved" by God, even though for whatever reason he didn't physically separate from "Babylon" and return to Judah. It's rather like the way that Naaman was granted the concession

of still visiting the temple of Rimmon for worship- because in his heart he was separate from all that and firmly committed to the one true God of Israel (2 Kings 5:18,19). It is mental rather than physical separation from evil which God requires.

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). The implication is that Jesus was illegitimate, without known origins. 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. We have the same tendency- and the Bible consistently challenges us to follow the example of the Lord Jesus, the word *made flesh*, and

reach out to this fallen world through association with it.

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).

Excursus 1: The Fallacy of Democracy

It is the assumption of many Western Christians that democracy is somehow of God, and is part of the 'Christian' heritage of the West which must be upheld and accepted at all costs. But this assumption is culturally determined; the West has never operated on true Christian principles, and can hardly be described today as 'Christian' in any Biblical, real sense. Most human societies over the millennia haven't found democracy a useful way to govern or run their affairs. It's only really emerged in the last 200 years as a popular philosophy. And even within those years, there is no real evidence that it has worked well. And the West is now in free fall; only the wilfully blind would fail to see that it is soon to be subsumed beneath the non-democratic power blocs. The following are some fallacies in the system:

The electorate rarely if ever know what they are voting for, because they lack complete information. As Winston Churchill quipped, "The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter". The ruling party often gets themselves more media coverage in the lead up to elections, and the average voter may read a few pages on the internet and half listen to a few party

political broadcasts. That is no way enough information upon which to make a decision; the various alternatives aren't all available to the voter, neither do most people have the time or ability to research them. People often vote not because of principle but because of perception, because of how they voted last time, their perception that they are from a family with a certain political position; or because their parents, partners, children, friends, neighbours, work colleagues are voting in a certain way. Biblically, there is evidence that it is not within man to direct his steps (Jer. 10:23). It is beyond us.

The idea that the chosen party or position or decision is the view of the majority is a very problematic position. What "majority" is required for a decision to be carried? 51%? 66%? Who says so? An increasing problem with democracy is that there is a disinterest in the political or decision making process. Let's say that 60% of the electorate actually vote. And in a multi-party / multi-option system, there may be say three serious contenders. One gets say 60% of the vote, and the other options get say 30% and 10%. Defenders of democracy will say that there was a landslide victory for one party or option, and therefore the society is getting what the majority clearly want. But they got 60% of the vote- which if only 60% of the electorate voted, means that the view of only 36% of the actual society is imposed upon the other 64%, and all in the name of a landslide victory. This isn't the same

as the majority having their way. They are not in fact a majority. This problem is especially acute when ecclesias claim to have disfellowshipped someone, or to have adopted a fellowship policy, on the basis of democracy. Many church members have no interest in what they perceive to be church politics, and don't attend business meetings. So the decisions are taken by a minority, although they claim to act in the name of entire churches. So often it has happened that a numerical minority of an ecclesia have disfellowshipped an individual who the majority of the ecclesia have no undue issue with. And so stress and tension and conflict inevitably arise.

People are short termist. They vote for what seems to offer them a good deal right now, immediately. Remember that Adolf Hitler came to power not by revolution but by free, democratic elections. People don't know what's best for them. If God had allowed democracy to Israel in the wilderness, they would've returned to Egypt, and Moses would've had to go with them. Ten out of the twelve spies argued that Israel could not possess Canaan. And the punishment for taking a democratic decision was death and wasting in the wilderness. It cost them the Kingdom. When Israel chose their own leader at the time of Rehoboam, they chose a man who led them right away from God (1 Kings 12:16-20). The majority chose Barabbas and rejected Jesus, thereby condemning the Son of God to death. Clearly Divine principle should be followed- and not democracy. Even if

we stand with our backs to the world.

Because the key movers want their decisions implemented, they tend to make short term promises to the electorate which they don't come through with. The result is disillusion with the political process. Long term planning is therefore impossible- because short term results must be produced. Joseph's plan to store the food of Egypt during the seven prosperous years would likely have been impossible if he had lived within a democratic system. The leaders become servants not of the people but of what they perceive the people will want to see. Posturing, image and quick results become the order of the day. Ruling or decision making by Divine principle goes out of the window.

Democracy and Fellowship Decisions

Democracy requires those participating in it to accept positions and to adopt behaviours which they may believe are seriously wrong; living by personal principle isn't possible. It will surely be a hollow excuse to come to the Lord Jesus at judgment day and excuse ourselves for having excluded others, with all the damage that caused them, because we were doing what the majority demanded of us. We're not going to start a debate with the Lord about why we were democrats and why He ought to accept that our view of democracy justified us in hurting and abusing others. We will just have to hang our heads- that we did what Ex. 23:2

condemns, which is to follow a multitude [a majority] to do evil by upholding injustice. So often it is said: "I do not agree with not fellowshipping you, but I will not because the majority in my church say I should not". The double negatives are of themselves a reflection of the logical problem here. In this case we are no better than all kinds of people who have done awful things to others whilst muttering something to the effect that they don't personally agree with it. We hold people accountable for their actions, and their mutterings that they were led into it by others, that the situational ethic excused them, doesn't cut it. We need to hold ourselves accountable to the same standard. When it comes to something as deeply significant as Christian fellowship, where the withholding of it can cause the excluded one to stumble from the way to eternity, we need to hold ourselves especially accountable. The fact that others have sold their souls to democracy does not excuse us from not following God's word and showing the love of Christ to His brethren. We shall have to answer for our personal division from and refusal of fellowship to those in Christ. It will not be appropriate to start making some case for democracy before the judgment throne of Jesus, with an acute awareness of His grace and our desperate need for it so strongly in our minds.

Another problem with democracy is the levels and sub-levels upon which it operates. Thus local areas may democratically elect an individual who then sits upon a

national committee, and that committee then also takes decisions democratically. The will of the local populace isn't therefore done, even if 100% vote for it, if on a higher level there is opposition to it. Consider the following possibilities, assuming ten areas vote in a multi-option / party way, even assuming 100% turnout:

Area 1: 50% for candidate X [with 10% for candidate Z and 40% for candidate Y]

Area 2: 90% for candidate Y [with 5% for candidate Z and 5% for candidate X]

Area 3: 85% for candidate Y [with 10% for candidate Z and 5% for candidate X]

Area 4: 40% for candidate X [with 35% for candidate Y and 25% for candidate Z]

Area 5: 40% for candidate X [with 35% for candidate Y and 25% for candidate Z]

Assuming one hundred voters in each area- 285 voted for candidate Y and only 140 for candidate X. But X wins the day, and has the majority on the national level, and therefore controls policy. These figures become even worse if it is factored in that voter turnout is usually far from 100%. And then there is the assumption that each area is equal in population size- and this is never the case. If Areas 2 and 3,

where Y won 90% and 85% of the vote, contain three times the voter population of the other areas, then the unfairness of X being the controlling force is even more absurd. This opens up the question of proportional representation... and many other questions. But put simply- democracy does not mean that the majority get their way. This is a fallacy.

Applying the levels of democracy problem to the Christian church, we find that if the issues under vote include separation from other believers, then the contradictory nature of democracy means that very often the majority view is in fact not followed- on a matter of deep significance. A local ecclesia may decide one thing about fellowshiping Christ's brethren, but some higher umbrella body then precludes them from doing it. Power is being brokered in such a system- human power, not Divine- and brokered by men rather than God. Another difficulty with church democracy is that often it is overridden by a desire not to lose members. If democracy can be overridden, it is no longer what it claims to be; and therefore nobody should be claiming that they have no option but to refuse fellowship to a brother or sister in Christ simply because they belong [or like to think they belong] in a democratic system. Typically the majority of an ecclesia may decide that they are happy to fellowship an individual or group of individuals. But one or two loudly object, threatening to leave if that person is fellowshiped [with shades of the elder son walking out of the Father's house at

the prodigal's acceptance]. Because 'we all must be agreed on this matter in case we have a division', fellowship is refused to the person[s]. All because a tiny minority disagreed. So the vast majority did not in fact get their way. The tail wagged the dog. This is a very frequent occurrence in church life- so common that it's clear that democracy isn't really being followed, and neither is living by principle, doing what is right even with our backs to the world. Instead one ends up with a tepid, spineless status quo where nobody is happy, and everyone in their conscience knows that the situation isn't Biblical nor pleasing to their Lord. The only alternative is to do what is right, and to accept that by doing what is right one will at times lose friends and family members- if our relationships with them were likewise not solidly built on God's word. Shoddy building comes to its judgment in the end, and if our relationship building within the ecclesia was of a purely social level over the years, then this too will come to the day of break up.

The Bible is in one sense a very long history book, recording human behaviour over time from God's perspective. One thing at least is clear from that history- the majority are usually wrong. People go astray "like sheep", in that they follow each other into sin (Is. 53:6). Time and again we see that the minority position was the right and Godly one, and the majority position was wrong. Joshua and Caleb against the majority of the spies, leading to "the majority" of Israel

being overthrown in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:5); the decision to sail onwards against Paul's advice ("the more part advised" in Acts 27:12 AV reflects Greek words which would better be translated 'the majority decreed')... the examples can easily be multiplied, climaxing in the decision to crucify God's Son. The lynch mob in Ephesus "was confused, for the majority did not know why they had come together" (Acts 19:32). People end up doing awful things which they don't fully understand- because they are driven on by the crowd mentality. "If you listen to fools, the mob rules"- and so it is with democracy. "The mob rules". Democracy is but a pandering to our basic gut instinct to follow the crowd rather than to walk alone with God. Democracy merely makes this intellectually and philosophically acceptable in the eyes of Western man. In the context of the fellowship issue, the whole problem is resolved by having an open table, and allowing individuals to decide according to their personal, Bible based conscience when to separate from someone. Separation on a personal basis was taught in many of the Proverbs- the wise man uses his wisdom to judge when to cease walking together with the foolish. These Proverbs were given within the context of Israel as a theocracy, a whole nation who comprised the body of the Old Testament faithful. Yet even within that, there was to be personal, individual assessment of whom to 'walk with'.

There are options to democracy. One of them is quite simply strong, Godly leadership according to His principles. Another is that “every man does what is right in his own eyes”- that phrase is used in Jud. 17:6; 21:25 as the antithesis to Israel having a King. God didn’t want them to have a King. He wanted each individual to treat Him as their King and to serve Him within a personal relationship with Him. The term isn’t therefore necessarily a criticism of Israel, but rather a statement of how things ought to have been. But of course, that is the hardest way to go. Electing a leadership and then doing what they say is the easiest way to go. The harder way, but the Biblical way, is to do what is right before God, and to remain connected with others within the people of God on the basis that we all share in the same salvation in Christ. The boundaries and defining structure of our relationships with each other are on this basis, and not because of a common subjection to human leaders or the philosophy of democracy. In reality, many closed table communities are effectively saying: If you don’t agree with democracy and will not abide by fellowship decisions and policies which we believe we adopted democratically, then, you have no place in our church and we will not fellowship you if you fellowship certain ones whom we ‘democratically’ decided are not in fellowship. Yet the basis of our fellowship should be “in Christ” and not because of our acceptance or rejection of a philosophy like democracy, which in any case is not

found in Scripture neither in principle nor practice.

Approaches to church leadership are related to the issue of whether to demand a high level of knowledge from those who are baptized. If there is strong, Biblical leadership in the hands of a pastor and a pastoral team, they will direct the policy and doctrinal positions of the church. If people are baptized having much less knowledge or different interpretations to that leadership team, then they will have no real influence on the teaching position of the church- because the faithful leadership will not allow them onto the platform. But if as in many Christadelphian congregations, democracy reigns and quite soon the baptized male converts are teaching from the platform- then it is understandable that there will be a greater and higher demand upon those converts at the point of baptism or acceptance into fellowship. I have argued that such democracy isn't Biblical; strong, Godly leadership is. If democracy is indeed the way to go, then we would expect to see it taught by principle and practice in the Bible; but it isn't. Strong, Godly leadership is taught. And demanding a highly detailed Bible knowledge at baptism and making fellowship dependent upon attaining it surely flies in the face of the New Testament's example.

3 Defining Fellowship

3-1 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 [such as signing up to a set of theological positions in a "Statement of Faith"] which means nothing in practice.

It is commonly assumed by many closed table communities that "fellowship" is a binary, "in" or "out" state. But this isn't how the word is used in the New Testament. *Koinonia* is only one of the words used to describe Christian

fellowship, and it is very wide in meaning. It carries the ideas of *having* a share in something, and also *giving* a share in something or someone. Christians share or have *koinonia* with unbelieving Jews in that we have Abrahamic roots to our faith (Rom. 11:17). The Philippians had *koinonia* with Paul in the work of the Gospel in that they materially supported his work (Phil. 1:5).

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*. *Koinonia* is to create a bond between comrades wherein 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 or *towards* 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*" (1). 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 centred around the person of Jesus.

In summary, *koinonia* means to share *in* and not simply *with*. At your leisure consider the usage of the word in this connection in Lk. 5:1; Heb. 2:14; 2 Pet. 1:4; Rom. 11:17; 2 Cor. 6:14; Rev. 18:4; Mt. 23:30. We are “in fellowship” with each other in the sense that we share in the same reality. So all who wish to share in that reality [Christ, in the Christian context] are “in fellowship” with each other. Paul often speaks of *koinonia* in giving- the sense being of giving to or participating in a project or entity outside of yourself. 1 Cor. 10:16-20 speaks of how sharing in a feast implies your sharing in the Lord you are celebrating- the emphasis is vertical rather than horizontal. The concern is whose feast you are attending or engaging in- which entity you are fellowshiping, Christ or an idol. With whom you do this, laterally, isn't in view here.

Phil. 2 exhorts believers to be of “one mind”, but that one mind is later defined in the chapter as being the mind of Christ on the cross. Again, the basis of unity between believers is their common share in Christ, especially in His death- there is never any implication that a theological statement of position is to be the basis of their unity. If this were the case, then we would expect to see this specifically stated. Instead, as in 1 Cor. 10, the unity between believers

is on account of their individual participation in the mind and work of Christ.

3-2 The Case of Acts 2:42

Acts 2:42 in the AV has strongly influenced the thinking of many who uphold a closed table, due to reading back into a Bible verse the impression given by the AV and assuming it therefore supports a traditional approach to fellowship: “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers”. The impression is given by the AV that the duty of baptized believers is to continue believing the “doctrine” as in the theological positions of the apostles, and to only fellowship and break bread with those who believe the same. But on that basis it ought to be impossible to also pray together with those of different doctrinal persuasions- and that is not usually insisted upon by closed table theorists. However, the Greek text of Acts 2:42 is poorly translated by the AV. The *didache*, or “doctrine”, refers not to theological propositions but to the act of teaching by the apostles. The mass of 3000 newly baptized converts were taught further by the apostles, in line with how the great commission of Mt. 28:19,20 had

commanded the apostles to go and teach the good news of Christ's resurrection, baptize people into it, and then teach them further. We have in this section of Acts 2 the classic obedience to that commission. Indeed, the mention of people present from "all nations" encourages us to understand Acts 2 as Luke's account of how the great commission was initially obeyed; and his version of it in Lk. 24:47 says that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name, beginning at Jerusalem". There are pointed references in Acts 2 and 3 to repentance, remission of sins, baptism into the name, and all this beginning at Jerusalem with the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower the preachers (cp. Mk. 16:17). Clearly Luke is presenting the fulfilment of the great commission. The reference to the new converts hearing the teaching [AV "doctrine"] of the apostles after baptism is the direct fulfilment of the command of Mt. 28:20 for the apostles to further teach converts after baptism. Hence the CEV translates Acts 2:42: "They spent their time learning from the apostles, and they were like family to each other. They also broke bread and prayed together".

Acts 2:44-3:1 goes on to explain the summary of Acts 2:42. The new converts continued listening to the teaching [AV "doctrine"] of the apostles and continued in fellowshiping with them- not in the technical sense of being "in fellowship" as opposed to being "out of fellowship"; for this would require us to read into the text our understanding of those

terms. They continued “hanging out” with the apostles, continued in their presence and company, as eager students with their teachers. The Greek for “fellowship” is *koinonia*, and the root word *koine* occurs in Acts 2:44- they had all things “in common”. This is how they fellowshiped or common-ed together; they pooled their possessions and had them in common, or, as the AV will have it, in “fellowship”. In fact the idea of *koinonia* or “fellowship” in the New Testament is most commonly used about the sharing of material resources rather than theological agreement (Rom. 12:13 “contribute”, Gal. 6:6 “share all good things”, Phil. 4:15 and throughout 2 Corinthians in the context of appealing for assistance or fellowship for the poor saints at Jerusalem). Acts 2:46 then speaks of how they attended the temple together, and broke bread in homes. This is the further explanation of how the new converts are described in Acts 2:42 as continuing in the apostles’ teaching [they went to the temple to hear it, as this was likely the only venue large enough to hold the crowd], and they continued in breaking of bread- by doing it in homes. For there was no church building available to do this as a group of 3000. And the nature of the “breaking of bread” is further defined in Acts 2:46- it involved a joyful eating together. The breaking of bread was therefore in the form of a collective meal, continuing the connection established by Jesus between His open table collective meals, and the “breaking of bread” in

memory of Him. Acts 2:42 speaks of the new converts continuing together in “*the prayers*” (ESV and Gk.). Acts 3:1 goes on to define what this meant in practice- Peter and John went into the temple at the time of prayer. What they had in common was praying together in the Jewish temple prayers. But those prayers were attended by many Jews who didn’t believe in Jesus. What that goes to show is that you can perform a religious act of fellowship with unbelievers, but enjoy true Christian fellowship with God’s true people who are amongst them. From the very start, Christianity started with an “open” attitude to fellowship with the unbelieving Jews. If there really is some guilt by association principle to be operated in Christianity, surely we’d expect to see it outlined right at the start.

The way Jesus forewarned the disciples that the time would come when they would be cast out of the synagogues (Jn. 16:2) surely implies He assumed they would maintain synagogue attendance until they were cast out, rather than removing themselves in obedience to Christ. By remaining as far as they could, they were the salt of their world; and we see in Paul’s ministry how his synagogue attendance gave him many opportunities to witness to the Gospel. The Lord warned His disciples that they would be scourged in the synagogues (Mt. 10:17). But synagogues could only scourge those who were members. The Lord foresaw that His preachers would remain within the synagogue system rather

than leave it totally. The fact Paul was scourged in synagogues (2 Cor. 11:25) shows that in being a Jew to the Jews, he opted to remain within the synagogue system. This fact shows that the Lord Jesus didn't intend His people to formally break with the synagogue system, even though it was apostate in doctrine and practice. This indicates that there was absolutely no sense within Him of 'guilt by association' nor a demand for His people to leave apostate systems- they were to remain there until they were cast out of the synagogues (2).

Even from within the New Testament we can soon perceive that first century Judaism was full of both theological and practical errors- the immortal soul, heaven going, ascending to "Abraham's bosom" after death, hell fire, a personal Satan, literal demons, a Kingdom of God based around the violent resistance of evil and military conquest of the Romans in the first century; and above all a serious misunderstanding of Jesus and the whole concept and nature of Israel's Messiah.

We can now summarize the above in tabular form:

Acts 2:42	How it worked out in practice
And they continued	Having heard the basic

<p>stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine [teaching]</p>	<p>Gospel and having been baptized, they continued hearing the apostles' teaching, as the apostles obeyed the great commission- to preach the basic Gospel, baptize, and then teach further (Mt. 28:19,20). Acts 2:46 therefore speaks of how they attended the temple together in order to learn more from the apostles' teaching</p>
<p>And fellowship (<i>koinonia</i>)</p>	<p>Acts 2:44- they had all things "in common", Gk. <i>koine</i>.</p>
<p>The breaking of bread</p>	<p>Acts 2:46- this involved a joyful eating together in house groups</p>
<p>"The prayers" (ESV and Gk.).</p>	<p>Acts 3:1 defines what this meant in practice- Peter and John went into the temple at the time of prayer.</p>

3-3 “The fellowship of the Spirit”

When the Bible speaks about the experience of fellowship, there is no suggestion that it occurs only if there is exact theological agreement over the interpretation of the Bible on every point. Rather, the basis of fellowship is related to common experience: “If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have communion [fellowship] with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:10). This is a more practical way of describing “the fellowship of the Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1). “The Spirit” doesn’t refer simply to the naked power of God. The Spirit of God is essentially His thinking, His characteristics, the things of His Name and personality. Whenever we are with others who have the mind of Christ, we experience fellowship. We may meet with another believer from whom we are on paper divided by a closed table policy, denominational or fellowship boundaries, even some points of theology; but clearly the mind of Christ is in them as it is in us. And we experience the fellowship of the Spirit. Paul’s whole reasoning in Phil. 2:1-5 seems to be that having the mind or spirit of Christ is to experience fellowship in the Spirit; the mind of Christ, rather than any bullet point set of theological insights, is the basis of real fellowship. To argue otherwise is to argue against clearly observable fact, in that two people may share an identical theology and yet not

experience fellowship together. There is no meeting of minds, often a mutual refusal to fellowship each other, and the fellowship of the Spirit doesn't exist between them. Having the mind of Christ doesn't remain on a purely mental level. It calls for action in practice. Paul spoke of how the Philippians fellowshiped with him in the work of spreading the Gospel (Phil. 1:4 RV); he urges the Corinthians to accept Timothy because "he works the work of the Lord, as I also do" (1 Cor. 16:10). To not participate with others in the Lord's work, to not get involved with their initiatives or exclude them from our own, is to deny the fellowship of the Spirit; it is a denial of the mind of Christ.

The idea of fellowship being "in the spirit" is not what we naturally want to hear. As human beings, we prefer hard, clear cut boundaries. You are in, but they are out. Hence the attraction of a closed table based around clearly defined parameters and detailed theological positions. We also have a natural tendency towards being judgmental; I am one of the people of God, but you are not. And from this there arises an endless fascination regarding the question of which is the true church. Other writers have usefully spoken of the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church is what we see from our viewpoint on earth- a wider Christian community split into denominations and subdivisions thereof. Some of the members of some of those groups are surely counted by God as members of the one ultimately true church.

But that is the invisible church- invisible to us, and visible only to God. We need to just let that be, leaving those questions of ultimate judgment to God. By saying this, I am not in any sense diminishing the value nor importance of Bible doctrines, nor the need for us as individuals to be faithful to the Bible in formulating our belief system. We should still evangelize unbelievers and misbelievers alike with the truths of God's word; but we can do this without raising the issue of ultimate judgment, and without adding on to the end of each of our specific doctrinal positions: "This is saving truth. If you do not accept it, you cannot be saved". I do not refer to the most basic truths of Christ; for He is of and in Himself our Saviour. I refer to many of the other host of theological positions which are enshrined in many statements of faith.

The ultimate reality is that Christ died for our sins, rose again and shall return. The rest is interpretation. That is not to say that interpretation is not important; for how can the matter of interpreting God's word to us be in any sense *unimportant*. But we don't have to demonstrate our recognition of this importance by ultimately condemning or rejecting those who sincerely differ from us. And in time, truth is perceived for what it is by all sincere followers of the Lord.

3-4 Fencing the Table?

If we decide to operate a closed table, then it follows in practice that there must be a body of elders who decide who can and who cannot partake of the Lord's table. Yet the Bible appears silent as to who exactly these individuals are, nor how they should be appointed, nor on what basis they can limit access to His table to those in their congregations who seek it. Typically, many ecclesias are between 10 and 50 members, and the "elders" effectively get to that position by default- anyone who attends regularly and maintains a stable lifestyle ends up a church elder. But does that mean they have the power to exclude from the Lord's table? How mechanically and practically to implement a closed table policy is one of that policy's weakest links. And the weakness of the link is what has caused so much trouble in practice in so many congregations. So often, the difficulty in policing who breaks bread and who doesn't has led to the average believer resigning the whole question to a group of "elders" to decide who can and who cannot partake- and their criteria are often not Biblically based and relatively arbitrary.

We must take with the utmost seriousness a theme which is developed in the Gospels- that the followers of Jesus wrongly sought to limit access to Him to those they considered not suitable. Martha didn't want Mary to be sitting at Jesus' feet; the disciples didn't want a sinful woman to anoint Jesus' feet, nor to talk to the Samaritan woman, nor

did they want children to come near Him; the crowds didn't want the blind man nor the woman with an issue of blood to get too close to Him, and they didn't want Jesus to go and share table fellowship with Zacchaeus ... Seeing that the bread and wine are supreme symbols of the Lord Jesus, are we wise to 'fence the table' against those we consider to be inappropriate? The incidents recorded in the Gospels are carefully chosen, because they are programmatic for the pattern of discipleship and relation to Jesus in later centuries. Surely by denying people access to the supreme physical symbolism of the Lord Jesus we are failing to learn the lesson of these Gospel incidents, where people were always wrong to deny others access to Jesus; by doing so we are continuing the trend of those in the Gospels who were so sadly mistaken.

Right and Wrong Fellowship

The New Testament often appeals to us not to fellowship the wrongdoing of this world. Those teachings, however, do not mean that *we* should not be open to *them* in the Lord's house. We should not go to them, but we should be open to them coming to us, into an environment where we are controlling the basis and principles. It's rather like telling your children that they cannot go and sleep over with their friends in a home where bad things are going on; but their friends are welcome to come to *our* home and sleep over. The clear

requirement not to fellowship "the unfruitful works of darkness" means that we are not to do those things nor are we to identify ourselves with those organizations or situations where those things are practiced and accepted. We are not to go to them; but we are to urge them to come to us, and to receive them with open arms and open table. This is not the same as fellowshiping evil. This is reaching out to save the lost, in the spirit of Christ and following His open table policy in breaking His bread with sinners.

Notes

- (1) G.V. Jourdan, "Koinonia in 1 Cor. 10:16", JBL 57 (1948) pp.111,112.
- (2) The references to the appropriate Jewish laws are to be found in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew* (London: Continuum, 2005) p. 183.

3-5 The Problem of Drawing Boundaries

Christian communities have divided bitterly over where to draw the line when it comes to excluding some from fellowship and when to baptize people. Which doctrines and positions are tolerable, and which aren't? Who exactly is in the body of Christ? If we don't know for sure, then how can we draw boundaries based on the assumption that we can in

fact define the body? The problem with drawing a line somewhere, no matter how sincerely it is drawn, is that we are fallible. We run the very real risk of excluding some whom the Lord accepts; and our rejection of them is a serious sin. On this basis, it would seem better to draw no line in terms of excluding others or denying them access to the Lord through baptism and the breaking of bread. Further, sustained meditation upon the person, character and abiding spirit of the Lord Jesus surely suggests that He was and is not a line drawer. He accepted all who wished to come to Him, and indeed urged all men to come to Him. The ultimate line is between those in the light who believe in Him, and those who do not and abide in darkness. But this line is drawn by them and not by us. The question boils down to this: Is it better to err on the side of acceptance of others, or on the side of rejection of them? Surely the whole tenor of Christ's teaching is that we should eagerly err [if it is indeed that] on the side of acceptance. And even if we cannot bring ourselves to do so in every case, we should at least have the grace to accept that others within our community may see things that way.

Peter's Problem

In Acts 10,11 Peter is challenged to reject the Jewish food laws, whereby it was considered "unlawful" for a Jew to eat with or socialize with a Gentile. Peter learnt that he was not

to call *any* man common or unclean (Acts 10:15), including unbaptized Gentiles. Because Christ died for “all men” we are to invite all of them through open fellowship with them. Hence he reflected that the Spirit had bidden him go with the servants of Cornelius “nothing doubting” (Acts 10:20 AV), but the Greek really means ‘making no distinction’ (s.w. 1 Cor. 4:7; Jude 22). The distinction was not in that he was to call nobody unclean- because the same Greek word is used in the NT about some such sinful people who are indeed “unclean” (2 Cor. 6:17; Eph. 5:5). We aren’t called to forget what is black and white. But in the context of table fellowship, Peter- and us- are taught not to make any distinction *there* between saint and sinner. Peter was shown a similarity between eating unclean animals, and eating in table fellowship with Gentiles. He went and shared table fellowship with unbaptized Gentiles because he had been taught that he was not to call any person “common or unclean” since they had all been potentially cleansed in Christ; and he was to use table fellowship as a means of reaching them.

This has profound implications for *our* table fellowship; we are to use the breaking of bread as a means to invite all people to realize in practice the potential made possible for them. For each person on this earth has been potentially cleansed and made holy rather than “common”; and we are to use table fellowship in order to invite them to appropriate

this to themselves. This is exactly how Peter used table fellowship. He speaks of how it had been “unlawful” for him to “keep company” with Gentiles (Acts 10:28), but now he had learnt that he could and should do so. This Greek term for “keep company” doesn’t simply refer to social contact, it is specifically used about spiritual association: ‘joining oneself’ to the disciples in faith (Acts 9:26), ‘cleaving to’ Paul after having accepted his message (Acts 17:34), ‘joining’ ourselves to Christ (1 Cor. 6:17). Likewise Peter learnt that he must “come unto” those whom previously had thought were beyond table fellowship. And this Greek term means far more than to physically visit or enter a property; it is used about ‘coming’ to the throne of grace, ‘coming’ unto God through Christ (Heb. 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6); ‘coming unto’ either Mount Sinai or Mount Zion, in religious association (Heb. 12:18,22). And again we note-Peter said he had been taught that he must ‘come unto’ and ‘keep company with’ literally *all* men, in that Christ died for all men, and we are to religiously fellowship with them in order to bring them to a decision for Christ (1).

The difficulty others had in accepting it is similar to the struggles many of us have had with the opposition received from closed table theorists. Peter was told to go with Cornelius “Making no distinction” (Acts 10:20- *diakrino*). The same word is used about the Jewish brethren who then “contended” with Peter over his table fellowship behaviour

(Acts 11:2- *diakrino* again). The repetition of the word like this in the record seems to rebuke those who contend with others about their table fellowship policy; for Peter had been told *not* to contend / judge in this matter, and yet those legalistic brethren did that very thing. “You can’t break bread with us because you break bread with those we don’t approve of, even though you are our brother in Christ...” seems to smack of just the same disobedience. But as always, the proof of the pudding is in the eating; open table fellowship brings people to Christ, as it did Cornelius, whereas closed table fellowship drives people away. At least initially, this was recognized by the brethren in Acts 11 and they too changed their closed table policy. Those who wonder about changing from a closed to an open table have the records of Acts 10 and 11 as constant and powerful encouragement. An examination of the Greek behind Acts 10:15 is an even bigger challenge to us- Peter was told not to call or make common that which God had [potentially] cleansed; but the Greek is always elsewhere translated to defile or to make unclean. ‘Don’t make unclean what God’s made clean’ is the idea. By refusing table fellowship to people, we are proactively making them unclean- we are treating them as if the cleansing work of Christ has no possible connection to them. And so often, people end up acting and believing according to how others act toward them in such matters of spirituality. They simply walk away

from the table from which they were excluded, and from all that is represented upon it... That is the observed reality in thousands of cases. David felt that being cast out of the community of Israel was effectively saying to him "Go, serve other gods" (1 Sam. 26:19). Nobody probably ever said those actual words to him, but this verse captures well how people so often read rejection from the people of God- they do indeed tend to go off and serve other gods. It is those who cast them out who will have to answer for having caused their stumbling.

An analysis of the use of the term "brother" and "brethren" in the NT is an indication that the early brethren did not see the terms as only applicable to those in full Christian fellowship. They clearly weren't hung up on the use of such terminology in the in fellowship / out of fellowship way in which some today reason. The table manners taught by the Lord Jesus involved inviting those other than our "brethren" to the table (Lk. 14:12). And the term "brethren" is used about those "not in fellowship" in the sense of being active Christians. The believers are addressed as "men and brethren" in Acts 1:16 (as in Acts 15:13) and yet the same phrase is then used about an unbaptized crowd of people who were listening to the Gospel being preached (Acts 2:29; 3:17; 13:26,38). It is also used in addressing those who in no way believed the Gospel (Acts 7:2; 22:1; 23:1,5). We note that Paul was called "brother" by Ananias even before he was baptized (Acts

9:17; 22:13); and Paul's reasoning in 1 Cor. 8:7-13 seems to suggest that he saw "every man" as his "brother", and sought not to put a stumbling block in the way of any and every member of the general public, whom he also calls "brother". This was surely because the early brethren had learnt the lesson taught to Peter; that they were to see all men as potentially cleansed in Christ, seeing that Christ died for all, and individuals are to be invited by us to accept that cleansing - in Peter's case, through extending table fellowship to them.

Notes

(1) It should be noted that these two Greek terms- to “come unto” and “keep company with” were earlier used about Philip being told to “Go near [s.w. “come unto” in Peter’s experience] and join yourself unto [s.w. “keep company with” for Peter and Cornelius] this chariot” (Acts 8:29).

4 The One Body

4-1 Defining the One Body

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. Some are simply more 'into' Bible study and correct Biblical interpretation than others; typically males are more wired that way than women. Even within closed table communities with very detailed statements of faith, there are those for whom doctrine / theology is of very little importance, but they are far stronger in the more important areas of practical Christian kindness, forgiveness 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). I grew up thinking that the body of Christ was basically the few hundred believers who belonged to the exclusive fellowship I was raised in. The wider I perceived the body of Christ, the richer became my experience of Christ personally.

The account 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 tabernacle 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- just as much as those churches who refuse to meaningfully accept others as being in the body of Christ despite acknowledging that they have been baptized into the body.

The body of Christ is visible only to Christ. The concept of one denomination or group of ecclesias / churches effectively being that 'body' is false. The concept of being in a worldwide fellowship of the same denominational beliefs is only possible thanks to international travel and communication- which has only existed in the modern world. Before that, the notion of being part of a worldwide denominational brotherhood would've been hard to conceive of. Believers would've known other believers, and at most a few local churches within walking distance from them. And yet denominations, fellowships etc. speak of their

communities, their group of ecclesias, as "the brotherhood", as if the confines of the body of Christ are set by their own perceptions rather than by the Biblical definitions of that body. Any individual baptized into Christ is in the body. Many closed table apologists will claim that they are not judging whether or not someone is in Christ or not. And yet the very parameters of fellowship are predicated upon just that- being in the body of Christ. To refuse fellowship to a brother or sister in Christ is indeed judgmental. The idea that there is a group of ecclesias / churches who comprise the body of Christ immediately raises the need for defining who is in and who is out, making a list of them, and someone, somehow, ensuring that they all continue to tow the line. Leaders of closed table communities these days spend a lot of their time on the phone, communicating by email, investigating the meaning and implication of words and actions spoken and performed by members of their group in other parts of the world. All this is not the spirit of Christ, nor is it His service. The need to identify others worldwide as in or out is very stressful, time consuming and impossible to finally achieve. The New Testament speaks of the ecclesia in the singular- there is ultimately only one ecclesia, which is the body of Christ. An open table, with Biblical leadership teaching God's word faithfully, obviates the need for this identification of others. They will identify themselves by their response to the word faithfully taught.

The Background of “The one body”

The language of the New Testament is full of radical challenges to the cult of the Roman Emperor and Empire. Instead of “Caesar is Lord!”, Christians were to recognize Jesus as their *only* Lord, and to make this confession at their baptism into Him. Instead of the empire of Caesar, their loyalty was to the Kingdom of God. The idea of the *one* body has reference to this too. Seneca addressed Nero as “the soul of the republic, which is your body” (Seneca, *De Clem.* 1.5.1). But for the Christian, their Kingdom was not of that Roman world, they had been baptized into the body of Christ, the things of His Kingdom, which they were to understand as existing already in embryo in the form of the wider ecclesia, both over space and time. Seneca also speaks of Nero as “the head of the body” (*De Clem.* 2.2.1) and Roman citizens as “limbs of a great body” (*Ep. Mor.* 95.52). Clearly Paul’s language of the body of Christ, with Him as the only head, and us as members of *His* body, is an intended, conscious deconstruction of these ideas. Baptism was into that one and only body- of Christ. The New Testament, therefore, would’ve been seen as a radical, dangerous and subversive document. It was so hard to accept the teaching of the one body of Christ, with one Lord over all the component parts. It was a rejection of Caesar, of the cult of the emperor, and it cost many all that they had in order to accept it.

I mention all this because often we tend to feel that things are so much easier for many of us in the body of Christ today than they were for those in the first century. But it wouldn't be 'fair' that the path for some to God's Kingdom is to be harder than for others. In the divided state of the body of Christ today, it is just as much social suicide, social death for some, to accept and act upon the doctrine of the one body; to accept that we are baptized, into connection with the community of all others who are in Christ. Baptism in that sense is not into a local church, a denomination nor a theological position. It is into a community, the collective body of the redeemed. Ultimately, only the Father and Son know the precise limits of that body. We here on earth see what appears to be the body of Christ, but only the Lord alone "knows them that are His". And, difficult as it is, we are to accept that.

Let me repeat yet again: Baptism is into the body of Christ. It's not therefore true that baptism is into only one group of Christian believers, and therefore the baptized person must be forbidden from fellowshiping with any other group, even if they believe the very same theological positions as they do. Yet this is the demand of the closed table mentality. It comes dangerously close to making baptism an entry rite into a human community rather than into Christ personally. By baptism into the body of Christ, the baptized person is therefore in fellowship with, connected intimately with, all

others who are in that body- whoever they may be. Despite all the insistence of the elders of closed table groups, the persons they baptize are in God's eyes in a far larger body than that of that closed table group. The body of Christ is not equal to that particular ecclesia or fellowship. Some who belong to the ecclesia may not ultimately be in the Kingdom, maybe they were never considered by Christ as part of His body. The Lord knows them that are His, and in this sense His body is invisible and not discernible by us. But we know it exists, and every sincerely baptized person knows they are part of it. There need be no fear nor angst about deciding how to define the Lord's body- *He* knows them that are His. Yet closed table groups and those obsessed with allowing baptism only to those schooled in the theology of their group do indeed have colossal angst over this question of defining the Lord's body for Him. An open approach to baptism and the "breaking of bread" frees up a huge amount of mind and energy for far more profitable things in His service.

4-2 The Relationship Between the Breaking of Bread and the One Body

The breaking of bread service means different things to different people. For unbelievers, it may be a meal

celebrating Christ's life and death to which they have been invited to partake. For others who have been baptized, this is the equivalent of the Passover- a reminder that they too were redeemed from Egypt through the blood of the Lamb and passing through the Red Sea waters of baptism (1 Cor. 10:1,2). Indeed, for all of us who regularly break bread, it would be true to say that the act speaks different things to us at different times; at times more comforting, at others more challenging. At times it is a particularly meaningful symbol of our horizontal bonding with each other as the body of Christ; at others it is more of a personal reconnection vertically with the Lord who loved us to the end. And likewise it would be too simplistic to insist that because there is a connection between the breaking of bread and the body of Christ, therefore this is the *only* function of the breaking of bread. The one body partake in the one loaf; we are one body insofar as we partake of the one loaf, which is Christ, the bread from Heaven (1 Cor. 10:17). But this is not to say that we cannot share that bread with others, as we have Biblically demonstrated elsewhere [see chapters 7 and 9]. We are asked to act out the parable of the body of Christ each time we meet as a community to "break bread". But the breaking of bread service has many meanings, and closed table enthusiasts are forced to focus exclusively upon the service as a sign of participation in the one body- when in fact it has many other meanings too. For those who are

baptized, the breaking of bread has a different meaning than for those who are not; but the fact it has a meaning for the baptized doesn't mean it's necessarily wrong to share the emblems with the unbaptized.

The issue of the unbaptized's participation is surely something which should not stop believers from fellowshiping between themselves at the Lord's supper. Coming from a background totally different to my own, Robert Jenson powerfully expresses the situation if we refuse to fellowship with baptized believers:

"Many rationalizations have been attempted, all of them sophistical. The simple case is this: If I and my group celebrate the Supper, and do not admit you, this is excommunication; and if we indeed belong to the body of Christ, as we claim merely by our celebration, it is excommunication from the body of Christ. If you then otherwise celebrate the Supper with a group of your like, we are bound to maintain that this celebration is a mere attempt, in which Christ is not present. If we fail to maintain this, either we are merely being inconsequential, or we revoke our right to exclude you in the first place. There is no middle ground. If you acknowledge that I belong to the church, you must admit me to your Supper. If you will not admit me to your Supper, you should not then talk about my nevertheless being your 'fellow in Christ' (1).

This is Paul's whole argument about "the body" in 1 Corinthians 10-14. If we say we will not fellowship those who are in the body, then we are separating ourselves from the body of Christ. It's that serious. And the pain we cause by such dividing of the body is a direct wound inflicted upon none other than the Lord Jesus personally, whose body we are. To do so is to dice with your eternal salvation. That is not to say that those who uphold a closed table and refuse fellowship to their brethren will be condemned; for it's not for us to pre-judge the Lord's judgment. But all we can say is that by doing so, we are doing those things which Biblically warrant our separation from His body. Of course, we all do this every time we sin; but hopefully we repent and recognize our sin and seek to desist. The problem with adopting a closed table policy and excluding those whom we surely know are members of the Lord's body through faith and baptism is, however, somewhat different from momentary lapses bitterly regretted and repented of. This is a way of life and thinking, living in a position of sin- and we do so at our eternal peril.

Selling Out?

There is always the fear in the minds of those who previously held closed table positions that we are somehow selling out our doctrinal positions if we break bread with those who believe otherwise. This may be a valid fear if one

is going to allow those who hold incorrect views to teach from the platform. But secure the platform, and this will not happen. Strong, Godly leadership and teaching will mean that those who really strongly disagree will themselves depart and find a church more suited to their view. If there is no such thing as ‘guilt by association’ or ‘contamination by communion’- both mythical concepts, no matter how dogmatically they are pushed, explicitly and implicitly- then we have nothing to fear.

There are communities who have held very specific, non-trinitarian positions for generations now- the Church of God (General Conference) in North America, the Christian Restoration Centre in New Zealand, and more recently, Carelinks Christadelphian Ministries. Yet their open table policies didn’t mean that their specific doctrinal positions were lost. Indeed, their preaching material is more up front and doctrine-centred, and their success in preaching those positions more successful, than larger closed table communities such as the various Christadelphian fellowships. That fact is significant and must be given its due weight in our reflections upon this issue. The simple reality is, that a community can teach and maintain doctrinal truths whilst still having an open table. Putting this in more erudite terms, Gordon Lathrop wrote often of a Christian community “as a place with strong symbols at the centre and open doors” (2).

There is, however, the strongly ingrained mindset that “fellowship” is “upon” some kind of doctrinal basis. But fellowship is an experience rather than an on-paper agreement which somehow mystically binds people together. Even those who believe identical doctrines as defined in a detailed, complex statement of faith such as the Christadelphian BASF will still often not fellowship together; and one can sit in a church hall adhering to an identical statement of faith whilst being poles apart over practical issues. Fellowship is not “upon” theological positions; it is rather “in” a person, “in Christ”. This is the Biblical emphasis; and there is a significant New Testament silence about fellowship being achieved through adherence to a statement of faith in doctrinal terms. Indeed, no such statement is presented anywhere in the Bible.

The question often asked is: How and where, then, to draw boundaries? But I am not sure this is the appropriate question to be asking. Because the example of Jesus, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere [see chapters 7 and 9], was of being fundamentally open, without boundaries in seeking men and women to come to Him. It was this which made Him so unpopular to the boundary-obsessed Jews in the ecclesia of His day. The division between light and darkness, the eternal and gaping chasm between belief and unbelief, life and death, is of course emphasized in the Bible. But in seeking to help Joe Public or Katya Kosmosova to make the jump, we

are to do as Jesus did- welcome them to the Lord's table, if they seek to come. Of course, we love boundaries. They help create a safe space from the world of darkness. But life in Christ, following the radically inclusive and open Christ, is not a safe life, nor is where it leads a safe place. It is only cults who create such supposedly safe places where all think and act to the same standard- and then they turn in upon themselves in self-destruction. Those who wish to come to the Lord's table are surely seeking a place with Him- otherwise, quite simply, they would not be there in the first place. They'd stay home on Sundays watching telly or chatting on the internet, or go out with their unbelieving friends.

And if my words here haven't persuaded you. Firstly, that's fine by me. Go ahead and limit the Lord's table if your conscience tells you so. But surely, you cannot Biblically justify excluding those who believe as you do from 'your' version of His table? Do you not have the grace to differ on that point with your brother or sister, without casting them out of the church? Since when does having a genuinely held alternative view of fellowship, sincerely justified Biblically in the conscience of your brother or sister, become a reason for excluding them? And since when would you then exclude members of your community because they, whilst agreeing with you, would still fellowship that person who has an alternative view of fellowship to yourself? For generations

now, Biblical evidence has been requested for those positions. Despite reading and experiencing so much of closed table thinking, I for one have never seen even an attempt at giving chapter and verse. The challenge remains open, but even if it were to be met, those passages would have to be interpreted in the context of the mass of Biblical evidence that division between validly baptized, good living brethren in Christ is sinful and wrong.

Notes

(1) Robert Jenson, *Visible Words: The interpretation and practice of Christian sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) p. 113.

(2) Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1998) pp. 132,133; *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1999) pp. 93,94.

Excursus 2: Statements of Faith

Statements of Faith have been used as the classic way of fencing the Lord's table. The reasoning goes: "Here are our positions. If you agree, you can break bread and fellowship

with us. If you don't, you can't". And for such fencing of the Lord's table to work in practice, there must be some kind of position statement which effectively states: "And further, even if you agree with what we believe, if you fellowship or break bread with those who believe otherwise or have a slightly different statement of faith, you also can't break bread". In the Christadelphian experience, this has been seen not only in the positions of the "minority fellowships" such as the Dawn, Berean, Old Paths etc., but also in the view of the mainstream "Central" or "Ammended" fellowship who officially refuse to fellowship those who hold the "Unammended" statement of faith, which differs on one small point regarding who exactly will be resurrected to judgment.

Some Fallacies

I have argued throughout this book that the Lord's table is His, and doesn't need fencing. Indeed, it is not for us to do so. If the core symbols and beliefs of a community are taught up front by a strong, Godly leadership, then there is no danger of false teachers getting onto the platform. And banning them from a pinch of bread and a sip of wine is in any case no very certain method for preserving a church from apostasy. Further, there is no Biblical example of a statement of faith being used to decide who may or may not sit at the Lord's table. His own example of open table would've shocked the Pharisees exactly because He made no attempt to

quiz the attendees about their doctrinal or moral status. The “Statement of Faith” mentality is foreign to Scripture. Significantly, neither the Lord nor His apostles left us any code of belief upon which we are to decide with whom to share His table. In fact, they left us no guidance at all upon this matter- because their example was of an open table. In cases of extreme practical misbehaviour and abuse of other church members- and I mean “extreme”- there is guidance about separation. But this is to be decided by the elders of each local congregation, and every New Testament example of such discipline (and there are very few) is in the context of extreme *practical* abusive behaviour rather than any theological error. The silence of the New Testament in this area is surely significant, and at the very least, closed table theorists should accept that their position is not specifically defined in Scripture and they ought to have the grace to accept that others will see things differently.

If there are strong symbols and principles at the centre of a group’s identity, they can be “open” to others with no fear of compromising those symbols and principles. Imagine a political party. Let’s say Neo-Nazis. They have the Swastika as their symbol and very clearly anti-Jewish, anti-black, anti-Gypsy principles stated and publicized. But their meetings may be “open to all”. No Jew, black guy or gypsy is likely to attend. And the Neo-Nazi party risk nothing by pronouncing their meetings as open to one and all. Many well intentioned

Christian believers fear that an open table will lead to their doctrinal beliefs and principles being somehow “sold out” or minimized. The “fear” element is of itself unhealthy and doesn’t feature in the spirit of Christ. There is no need to fear that our openness will compromise our symbols and principles- if they are firmly stated, advocated and preached by us. If e.g. as non-trinitarians we openly state our position, it’s unlikely that Trinitarians would wish to attend our table. And if they did and, horror of horrors, take a pinch of bread and sip of wine, that act in no way compromises our core beliefs.

Those small Protestant groups who rely heavily upon a Statement of Faith to define themselves and thus fence the Lord’s table against others have another, related, characteristic: They tend to have not given due weight to the very clear Biblical teachings about eldership and church leadership, preferring instead to allow a democratic process to elect people to leadership positions. This has all the drawbacks outlined in Excursus 1. The average non-trinitarian group is small- rarely 100 members. What is needed is strong, Godly leadership-even just two or three good leaders. If the pastoral team or figures are teaching Godly, Biblical doctrine up front, then people will attend and join the church because of this. No false teaching will be heard, because the platform isn’t open to everyone to teach as they think fit. In this way, correct Bible teaching is given,

whilst leaving attendance at the Lord's table open. If, let's say, a Trinitarian attends and takes a sip of wine and pinch of bread, he or she makes the same level of contribution to the teaching function of the church as if they didn't take the emblems. In the end, it's pretty insignificant and academic as to whether they take the pinch or sip.

The problem faced by many such small churches or groups is that there is a tendency not to focus upon the core doctrines of the Gospel. The church slides into a position (and this is now very common in the Christadelphian community) where the group teaches a message from the platform which is vague and indistinguishable from that which would be heard from any Christian denomination; but with an awkward conscience, they uphold a closed table policy because this is expected of them by other churches in their denomination and it will cause an upset to the Sunday afternoon social club to change it. Over time, the church slumps into the mire of mediocrity, there is no clear perception of what they stand for, no fresh converts are made apart from the occasional boyfriend or girlfriend of a member, and one by one, the members slip away elsewhere- often because of a negative experience with the imposition of the "closed table" mentality. That would be a fair description of what at least the Christadelphian community has slumped into.

A Historical Perspective

Spiritual Israel needs to learn from natural Israel's mistakes. Israel had God's word but added to it the various rabbinic commentaries. Biblical interpretation became an art form whereby those commentaries could not be directly contradicted. They therefore came to be added to, with various explanatory clauses. The same has happened with the 'Statements of faith' in many Christian groups. Over time, they have been added to and explanatory clauses added as divisions are created and patched up, and as new issues arise. That of itself shows that they are not an encapsulation of 'saving truth' as they stand; there is nothing sacrosanct about them, even though they are effectively used in that way. The most widely used Christadelphian statement of faith is the BASF- The Birmingham Ammended Statement of Faith. The fact it is *ammended* and a division is upheld by many against the "Unammended" Christadelphian group is surely a tacit recognition of the fact that no statement can be perfectly accurate. Any attempt to amend statements of faith, or even to put them into contemporary language, leads to inevitable fraction and division amongst believers. Once created, communities tend to become saddled with them; they remain with them because any attempt to change them usually causes division. Over the generations, a group's "statement of the one faith" becomes a quaintly worded document which was clearly written in places to address heresies of previous centuries. But it remains, because to change it would be

divisive. Such communities, and Christadelphia would be a good example, then enter a crisis phase, whereby some discard the document entirely as antiquated and irrelevant, whilst others fight tooth and nail for fellowship to only continue to be offered upon that basis.

A statement of faith can really only be uttered by a person, *expressing* their faith. It is commonplace in Australian Christadelphian churches for the baptismal candidate to write and read out their own personal 'statement of faith' before baptism; and yet, in contradiction to that, the baptized candidate is then expected to uphold an official Statement of Faith written generations ago by others in a different situation the other side of the world. This raises another historical problem: Who gets to write a statement of faith? Who gets to amend it or expand it? The *Birmingham* Ammended Statement of Faith used by many Christadelphians highlights the issue- Birmingham England was the source of the document and continues to insist on adherence to their statement for fellowship to be granted. And the rest of the Christadelphian world are held ransom to that. It is not the Birmingham, Alabama statement of faith from the USA; nor the Sydney, Australia nor London, England nor Moscow, Russia nor Nairobi, Kenya statement of faith; it is the Birmingham, UK statement. Inevitably, issues of power brokering arise. And these issues are not spiritual, but carnal and human. History has proven them to be so, over the

generations. The simple alternative is to have an open table, teach clearly and up front Bible truths, baptize whomsoever will, and fervently proclaim God's Truth to all. Such politics, power struggles and the divisions which come with them are then simply not an issue.

Bible Centred or Christ Centred?

Perhaps the greatest problem with Statements of Faith is that they inevitably are lists of theological positions; yet the basis for Biblical fellowship is always presented in the New Testament as being in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is our common relationship with and in Him, and our need for Him and desire to approach unto Him and partake in Him, which is the basis for our association together in church. Statements of Faith tend to make the Bible the basis of fellowship rather than the person of the Lord Jesus. This in turn creates a tendency towards intellectualism as the basis of fellowship. When the mentally challenged, the illiterate or those not academically inclined are baptized, they join a community whose apparent "Statement of Faith" they do not understand or appreciate. That Statement is never a meaningful central point for their personal faith nor association with others within the community. The Statement of Faith of the community who baptized them typically has meaning for a group of theologically minded males who have control of the community. It has little meaning for those not

inclined that way. In the Christadelphian community, according to internet discussion groups, the average member has hardly read the BASF and is certainly ignorant of its exact contents.

And it has no meaning at all for the significant proportion of that community who are located in Asia and Africa, where illiteracy, lack of fluency in English and lack of education are rife. The Gospel appeals to the poor and always has done, indeed it is intended and designed for them. The majority of “the poor” over the last 2000 years have been illiterate. Statements of Faith mean nothing to illiterate communities; rather is it shared experience which is the unifying factor between them. Statements of Faith are therefore only relevant to some parts of the body of Christ; and their popularity appears to increase with the intellectualism and abstraction of a community. The focus of any Christian community must surely be upon Christ as a person; this is not in any sense to diminish the importance of Bible study or correct understanding of God’s word. But we must take seriously the Lord’s rebuke of the Jews: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life [but] you will not come to *Me*, that you might have life” (Jn. 5:39,40).

The Alternative to Statements of Faith

There is an alternative. Strong, Godly leadership teaching Biblical doctrine, with the table open to the world, inviting people in and urging them towards baptism into Christ through direct teaching and through a warm welcome at the Lord's table. Those who think otherwise about basic theological issues will soon depart of their own accord. We need to come to the judgment seat of Christ knowing that it was never us who rejected anyone; but rather, any who consider us "out of fellowship" have reached that decision from their initiative. That has been a guiding principle in my own life and in my passing through the church politics which all believers have to. It's always me who's been rejected from others' company and fellowship, rather than my rejection of them. Despite many other failures in life's path, that is one principle I have upheld and can now look back and commend to all. We who rejoice in hope of not being rejected before the just judgment seat of Christ must surely not reject any in this our day of opportunity. The fear that not having a Statement of Faith will somehow lead to an "anything goes" situation is unfounded. The Jehovah's Witnesses have very hard boundaries and are totally exclusive- but they have no Statement of Faith. Their strong leadership structure precludes the need for one. I would argue that at least in Christadelphian experience, the opposite is the case; reliance upon a Statement of Faith for fencing the Lord's table has led to endless subdivision, a decreased

interest in Biblical doctrines for fear of controversy, and a lethargy which has led to the church shrinking in size, at least in the UK, and certainly not growing into any significant force in this world.

Neither Old nor New Testament contain any “Statement of Faith” in doctrinal [i.e. theological] terms (1), and that fact must be given its due weight. To construct a “systematic theology” of the type I present in my *Bible Basics* one must search the entire Bible and piece together a picture about the nature of God, Jesus, humanity, Satan, God’s Kingdom, etc. Nowhere is it presented in bullet point form. And the fact God has left it for each of us to piece together the picture from a long and varied book, the Bible, surely suggests that each attempt is going to be different, focusing on some areas more than others in reflection of the personality and historical position of the person attempting the enterprise. And surely God understands that. To insist upon one uniform “Statement of Faith” is to adopt a position which self-evidently God doesn’t; for He has provided us with no such statement nor has He presented theological truths to us in a clearly identified, systematic manner which is easy to see at first reading of His book the Bible. And the majority of His people have been illiterate and without access to the entire Bible, so it was in fact an impossible task for most members of the body of Christ down the centuries.

The large mass of teaching in the Law of Moses was of a mainly practical character- not theological bullet points. It's apparent from Israel's Biblically recorded history that many Israelites held wrong theological understandings of God. But there was no mechanism nor call for them to be excluded from the community of God's people because of that. Rather did the prophets repeatedly rebuke Israel for their wrong *behaviour*. And the New Testament is similar. The bulk of the Lord's teaching about "the Kingdom of God" referred to practical living issues; and the bulk of the later New Testament's critique of the early Christian congregations likewise referred to their moral, practical failures. In almost every case, "false teachers" and their false teachings were of a practical, moral character. A slip in Biblical interpretation here and there wasn't what Paul, Peter, John, James and Jude were mainly concerned about in their writings. And the same could be said of the Lord's rebukes of the ecclesias in the Lycus Valley as recorded in Revelation 2 and 3. And never once is there the teaching that because a person had left one point of a "Statement of Faith" that they should therefore be excommunicated. That apostasy, both theologically and practically, will happen in churches is perhaps inevitable. The Old and New Testament writers simply appeal to individuals in specific places and specific times not to go that way themselves, and to strengthen what remains within their own immediate community. As Harry Whittaker wryly

remarked in this context, every ecclesia or fellowship of ecclesias is effectively born to roll downhill. That is a fact of life and Biblical experience. But both Old and New Testaments are again united in demonstrating that this happens because of weak leadership. The roll downhill will not be stopped by throwing out of fellowship those who've not yet rolled downhill. The democratic model followed by many, especially within Christadelphia, tends to create weak leadership- and everyone [usually, male] who can do so is urged to get on the platform and take their turn, with all the problems of democracy outlined in Excursus 1. By contrast, communities with strong leadership tend to survive better, especially if the leadership is able to recruit and train leaders to take their places after they fall asleep in Christ.

Scripture and Interpretation

Once the "Statement of Faith" model is followed, sooner or later language becomes outdated, issues which were live issues at the time the Statement was written cease to be, and they need to be modified. And this process of modifying a traditionally accepted Statement of Faith is sure to create division and subdivision. It should be noted that there were no "Statements of Faith" in early Christianity; the first ones began to appear around 180 AD. The reasoning was initially that the wording of the creeds was based on the Bible, so, there was no harm in them. But this process developed to the

point that when the Trinity was defined by the Nicene Creed in 325 AD, this creed was treated by Trinitarians as on a par with Scripture. But the path to that position had been set by Irenaeus and Tertullian at the end of the 2nd Century AD, in insisting that their creeds be memorized by baptismal candidates on the basis that their creeds were true interpretations of the Bible and therefore were on the same level as the Bible text.

Athanasius taught that the decisions of the church councils were identical with the Scriptures, so that "you cannot tell one from the other". Theodoret went further: "I follow the laws and rules of the apostles. I test my teaching by applying to it, like a rule and measure, the faith laid down by the holy and blessed Fathers at Nicaea" (Letters, 40). Cyril justified the Nicene Creed about 25 years after it was written, in terms better used for the inspired Scriptures themselves: "For the articles of the Faith were not composed as seemed good to men". He seems to be alluding to the words of 2 Pet. 1:21 about how the Bible itself was inspired. Cyril continued: "But in learning the Faith and in professing it, acquire and keep that only, which is now delivered to thee by the Church, and which has been built up strongly out of all the Scriptures... And just as the mustard seed in one small grain contains many branches, so also this Faith has embraced in few words all the knowledge of godliness in the Old and New Testaments. Take heed then, brethren, and *hold*

fast the traditions which ye now receive, and *write them on the table of your heart*” (Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture* 5, 12-13). Here Cyril alludes to holding fast the traditions of the Bible itself (2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Tim. 1:13) and writing God’s own words upon the table of our heart (Prov. 3:3; 7:3). Hilary makes the same equation of the Nicene Creed and Scripture: “[The Creed is] certified by the full weight of Scripture authority [and is] that exact sense in which Scripture declares” (Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, Book 10, 67). Thus we see how the Bible and the *interpretation* of it have a tendency to become conflated into one and the same- with tragic results. For the Trinity is not in fact Bible teaching. And that same basic tendency is to be seen in communities denominated upon a “Statement of Faith”. One slight defection from one point means “out”. But the Bible and human interpretation of it are two different things.

The Possibility of Error

There must surely, in all intellectual and spiritual humility, be the recognition that our interpretations stand a certain probability of being slightly incorrect. In any case, have we not all wondered with Job “How little a portion is heard of Him!”. We at best know only a fraction of a percentage of the final Truth of God. Our figure may be higher than the Trinitarian next to us, but the essence of connection to God is

not through theological truth alone, but above all through our connection to His Son. No matter how small we consider the possibility of our error on any one point, it surely must be accepted. Any other approach would be bigotry and spiritual arrogance. What if, for example, I as a believer in a non-literal “Satan”, I who teach my view strongly, am confronted at judgment day by Satan himself, replete with pitchfork and many heads and horns? Well, I would’ve been wrong in this life on that point. If I had rejected people who didn’t share my view, then... what of my eternal destiny? If I had not rejected them nor prejudged their acceptability at the Lord’s table, then I think I would catch the Lord’s eye and notice a gentle, forgiving, understanding smile.

Statements of Faith only “work” in fencing the Lord’s table if there is a 100% acceptance of them by all within the group. This of course lays bare the problems when a denomination like the Christadelphians enter into “the mission field”. Illiterate people and those who don’t grasp English well [as well as the mentally challenged “back home”] are baptized without a 100% awareness or subscription to the Statement of Faith. The majority of the Christadelphian Central Fellowship are located in Africa and Asia- and nearly all of them are ignorant of the BASF and don’t even have a copy of it in their own language. There is also the problem that statements of faith were written to address particular situations at the time and reflected concerns and sore points

of writers long since dead and unable to explain themselves. There is therefore in the BASF Christadelphian Statement of Faith the insistence that we must reject the idea that young children and the mentally limited can be saved. Probably well over 75% of Christadelphians do not accept that idea and would leave that open to God's final judgment. But this means that there is not a 100% acceptance of that point of the Statement of Faith. And if community members can disagree on that point- why not on others?

There's also the problem encountered time and again both within the Christadelphian experience and outside of it- that different people mean different things by the same words which they subscribe to. Words and meanings are so easily confused that to try to broker Christian fellowship on the basis of a human document is doomed to failure. I have deep differences with John Shelby Spong, but on this point he has some observations worth sharing, because they are true as far as they go:

“Many people said (the Apostles Creed), but they understood what it was saying and what they meant by that quite differently. No matter how hard they tried, they could not close out this perennial debate. They could not establish a consensus and they could not agree on the [definition] of what had been once "delivered to the saints." It did not occur to these people that the task they were trying to accomplish

was not a human possibility, that the mystery of God, including the God they believed they had met in Jesus, could not be reduced to human words and human concepts or captured inside human creeds. Nor did they understand that the tighter and more specific their words became, the less they would achieve the task of unifying the church. All creeds have ever done is to define those who are outside, who were not true believers; and thus their primary achievement has been to set up eternal conflict between the "ins" and the "outs," a conflict that has repeatedly degenerated into the darkest sort of Christian behaviour, including imperialism, torture, persecution, death and war" (2).

Notes

(1) There are passages where Paul speaks of passing on words which he has received of the Lord. I understand these to be snippets of direct revelation he received, and faithfully passed on. But they are not in any sense a "Statement of Faith". To argue that they were proves too much- because in this case, the "Statement of Faith" ought to be limited to just those three or four statements he passed on in that form.

(2) John S. Spong, *The Sins of Scripture* (London: HarperCollins, 2005) p. 226.

5 Baptism and Fellowship

5-1 Being "In Christ"

So many times does Paul speak of life "in Christ"- over 90 times. 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 church 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".

Modern Difficulties

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 in meaningful fellowship. 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, often through claiming some spiritual superiority and being unable to stomach apostasy, 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, created by a sense of doctrinal or interpretational superiority.

The internet generation especially seems to find fellowship "in Christ" difficult. The wide availability of the Bible text, lexicons claiming to explain the meaning of the original words, commentaries and interpretations galore... have all resulted in great potential for division over interpretation. Likewise the number of Christian denominations multiplied very sharply soon after the invention of the printing press. Further, the internet generation 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.

Defining the Body

Given the unquestionable Biblical evidence that life is to be lived "in Christ", i.e. in His body, with other believers, it becomes crucial to understand who are the body of Christ. We are baptized into His body, we join the church by that act (1 Cor. 12:13)- in the sense of the invisible church, the one seen and known from above by the Lord Jesus who is the head of the body / church. The question of what makes

baptism valid therefore becomes quite important. Many closed table groups hold the view, often unspoken and unformulated but all the same very real, that other churches are somehow not with the Lord and therefore should not be actively fellowshiped with. This is understandable in terms of group psychology; but it is Biblically condemned. Is it really so that millions of other Christians down the centuries and to this day, have been baptized into Christ, love Him, read the Bible daily, try to follow it in their lives, try to bring their thoughts daily into subjection to Christ, make great sacrifices for Him, suffer persecution for their faith, pray frequently every day to Him- and He is looking the other way, ignoring them, as it were? Does He really treat them as He would a Moslem or atheist? When they die and return to the dust, is that really the end for them as it is for unbelievers? That we may be right and they may be wrong on many issues of Biblical interpretation is hardly the issue; for our being in the body of Christ is all about relationship with Him. And you can have a legitimate relationship with a person whom you don't understand fully, or even misunderstand in some ways.

Of course, there is "another Jesus"; it is not simply naming the name of Christ which makes a person acceptable to Him. Doctrine and interpretation of God's word are of course important. For who could say that understanding God correctly is *unimportant*. Yet on the other hand, we have no

direct Biblical guidance concerning what degree of theological error or honest misunderstanding makes a baptism invalid. There's ample evidence within the New Testament that the early believers had all manner of misunderstandings and errors, both practical and theological. But this did not make them no longer members of the body of Christ. Indeed, the New Testament evidence is conclusive that candidates for baptism did not know any detailed theology, they had simply been convicted of their sins and need for Christ, had heard the good news of His perfect life lived for them, His death and resurrection for them, His coming again for them, and simply desired to associate themselves permanently with Him and His cause through baptism.

Wherein we see others in error, we are to appeal to them—just as the faithful prophets appealed to the community of Israel in Old Testament times, submerged as Israel were beneath colossal practical and doctrinal errors. The state of Christendom today is similar to that of Israel in Old Testament times; the body is sick and decaying, riddled with false doctrine and practice. But to isolate ourselves behind the walls of a closed table policy is little more than elitism and spiritual snobbery of the worst sort, and a marked failure to learn the lesson of Elijah, who perceived that he alone was right with God within Israel.

Again I repeat- we simply don't have direct, specific Biblical guidelines about what theology is acceptable and what isn't, in terms of making baptism valid. After years of thought, prayer and practical experience with these issues, my suggested best practice is as follows:

- Teach, practice and model what is true and right, doctrinally and practically, in your own life and in your church; in practice, this means that those who are living and believing otherwise will not stay long in your church nor in association with you if you insist on teaching and living the Truth.

- Perceive all those baptized [by adult immersion] into Christ as fellow Christians and therefore "in Christ". Recognize their errors, practically and theologically, engage with them, with the humility born from constantly bearing in mind that you too have not get everything perfectly right in those areas.

- Do not demand rebaptism unless the individual feels it is necessary for them. Leave it to their conscience.

- Practice a totally open communion table, inviting all present to partake.

- Keep or seek to exert firm influence and control on the teaching structure in your church and in media under your influence. Teaching and modelling the right beliefs and practices is the key to a healthy church and will effectively

keep false teachers away. When those under your pastoral care fall into sin and doctrinal error, seek to engage with them, ever being aware of your own intellectual and moral weakness. Only in very extreme cases may it be necessary to finally ask someone, e.g. a clearly proven predator, to not attend church meetings. We have no right to cast anyone out of the church of Christ, which is His body. This doesn't mean we don't have a range of disciplinary measures open to us, but let's use them rather than simply excommunicate those whose errors we more keenly perceive.

Notes

(1) C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle Of Paul To The Romans* (London: Fontana, 1959) p. 93

5-2 The Validity of Baptism

As we grow in knowledge of God's word and His ways, there is the basic psychological tendency to assume that this is what we have always understood, and to demand that others who are further back on their spiritual journey will have a handle on the knowledge we have acquired. There is also the tendency to consider that if we allow people into our community who know less than we do, then somehow we are selling out, reclassifying all our own knowledge of God's ways as somehow of no value. This perhaps is one reason

why there is clear historical evidence that the church became more demanding upon baptismal candidates as time went on after the first century. That same tendency can be observed in the Christadelphian community, moving from a very open attitude to baptism upon a basic acceptance of God's Truth, towards a demand for ever more detailed knowledge. When we as mature believers come to consider how much knowledge is required to make a baptism valid, then we must be aware of these tendencies- to hold a new convert up to ourselves, as being the standard of knowledge required for valid baptism.

We may be helped in combating these tendencies by appreciating that it is the Lord Jesus who calls and inducts men and women into His body. It is the work of the Lord through His Spirit- for by that Spirit we are baptized into the one body (1 Cor. 12:13). John the Baptist spoke of how the Lord Jesus would baptize people (Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Jn. 1:33), although Jesus Himself didn't perform baptisms Himself literally (Jn. 4:2). When someone is baptized, they are essentially baptized by Him and His work. We are baptized with a baptism (Mt. 20:22,23; Mk. 10:39), which grammatically suggests that we are baptized by someone- and that someone is Jesus. It is His operation and not ours, we are just the tools, the instruments here on earth, for His work- providing the water, the towels, the human side. The Bible never suggests that the person who physically holds the

shoulders of a person going under the waters of baptism is in some way adding to the significance or meaning of the ritual. If someone wishes to be baptized into Christ, then it is evident that they have come to understand enough of the Lord Jesus to wish to identify with His death and resurrection through being immersed into Him. Baptism being for “the remission of sins” it is also evident that the person wishing to be baptized has some sense of sin, their need for forgiveness and a desire to live a new life. For the very nature of baptism is such that it requires some careful consideration and conscious application. It involves at very least undressing, finding water, going into that water and getting wet, arising from it spluttering and probably slightly awkward in the sight of others. Most baptisms are before witnesses; there is an assembled group watching and the act is therefore a consciously performed act. It’s surely designed so that a person doesn’t drift into relationship with their Lord, making some internal psychological commitment to His cause which may then fade from their consciousness. The very nature of water baptism requires far more than that.

Let’s get one thing clear. Baptism is into Christ, into His body. If it were an induction ritual into a human society or social club, then it would only be reasonable for those allowing the induction to ensure that the candidate had a thorough understanding of the positions, norms and expectations of the group. But baptism is into the Lord Jesus

personally, hence the symbolism of death (under the water) and resurrection (out of the water) with Him. In the same way as the Lord's table is intended to be open to all, so baptism into Him is likewise to be open to all who so desire to associate with Him in this way. It is not for us to stand in the way of anyone wishing to come to the Lord. The Gospels record several incidents of where the disciples tried to turn people away from Christ (children, the Gentile woman, some Jewish mothers and others) or act as a barrier between them and Him. Time and again the Lord demonstrates His openness to all people, and a criticism of those who would stand between Him and people wishing to come to Him.

The Speed of First Century Baptism

The examples in Acts of preaching the Gospel and baptizing those who believed it are united in suggesting a very short period of time, and immediate baptism- the same hour of the night, in the case of the Philippian jailer, or the very same day, in the case of thousands on the day of Pentecost. The list is impressive: Acts 2:38-41; 8:12,13,36-38; 9:18; 10:47; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5.

The Crowds in Jerusalem The thousands baptized on the day of Pentecost clearly heard Peter's preaching over a period of at most only a few hours. They asked what they must do- and were told they needed to repent and be baptized. And so they were, in the thousands (Acts 2:38-41).

Repentance is a very complex and personal issue. There is no evidence that each of those people gave a theological statement of their understanding.

The Samaritans When the Samaritans believe the things Philip preached, they were immediately baptized (Acts 8:12). Baptism is seen as part and parcel of belief. The Lord's words that whoever believes-and-is-baptized shall be saved (Mk. 16:16) are surely being alluded to; for He too put baptism as part of initial belief in the news about Him.

Simon Magus Simon appears to have been an onlooker at the baptisms of Acts 8:12, and "himself believed also: and when he was baptized, he continued with Philip" (Acts 8:13). Here we see again how belief and baptism were so closely connected. We see here another fulfilment of the great commission of Mt. 28:19,20- the basic Gospel was to be preached, people baptized, and then they were taught further. This seems the sense of how the convert Simon "continued with Philip", for to 'continue with' someone was an idiom for being a student of them (Mt. 15:32; Jn. 8:31; Acts 2:42; 14:22; 15:35; 18:11; 19:10; Phil. 1:25; Col. 1:23; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 3:14; 1 Jn. 2:19). In Simon's case, one gets the feeling that his motives for baptism were likely almost visibly suspect from the start; he saw the opportunity for financial gain. But that was no reason to not baptize him. We can never know the motives of those who seek baptism. Over

the course of a few thousand baptisms I have arrived at the simple conclusion that it's so often those who appear to be so well motivated, so brimming with knowledge and zeal, who don't stay the course. And it's those whose motivation would appear suspect- getting baptized because the boyfriend is baptized and from an established family of believers, or from the apparent motive of material benefit- who despite many traumas and difficulties in their lives, endure to the end. And it is endurance to the end which is of the essence. Simon's baptism should surely sink for all time the 'forbidding of water' to people because we doubt their motives. We barely know our own motives, so how can we pronounce with confidence upon the motives of other hearts, to the point of denying them baptism?

The Ethiopian Eunuch The impression is given by the record that he really couldn't put the Scriptures together at all; his first comment to Philip was that he couldn't understand the Scriptures because he had no teacher (Acts 8:31). The way Philip opens his mouth "and preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:35) suggests the man had no prior understanding of "Jesus". Philip's message obviously included baptism, because the Ethiopian on his initiative asked to be baptized when he noticed some water on their journey. Philip did not refuse him, but said that he could do so if he believed with all his heart (Acts 8:37). The fact Philip requested the man to ask *himself* that question would

imply that Philip did not know the state of the man's heart. He didn't say "Yes, Mr. Ethiopian, I can read your heart and I see you believe, so, yes, you can". The Ethiopian's confession that "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37) is clearly presented as sufficient for the man to be baptized. One excuse for not following the example of baptisms found in Acts is to argue that no extensive interview or theological teaching was necessary because the apostles knew the hearts of men by the Holy Spirit gifts. But the example of the Ethiopian rather suggests that Philip did not know the man's heart, rather did he leave the man to decide the state of his own heart.

Saul Saul was baptized immediately the scales fell from his eyes (Acts 9:18); "then he rose and was baptized". Immediate baptism was again associated with belief.

Cornelius The case of Cornelius (Acts 10:47) again shows the urgency of baptism; Peter didn't report the case back to the elders, he went ahead immediately with it. Acts 10:36-43 usefully record "the word" of the Gospel which had been sent to Israel and which the Gentiles could now also believe: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him

on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”. This “word” of the Gospel has several allusions to the great commission- “we are witnesses” is Lk. 24:48, and Peter clearly felt he was fulfilling the great commission when he says that he is preaching because after the resurrection, Christ “commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God”. Peter’s comment that “to Him all the prophets bear witness” was doubtless said with his mind on how after His resurrection, the Lord had expounded where He was to be found in the prophetic writings. The Gospel which the great commission required to be taught and baptized into is therefore summarized in “this word” which is summarized here by Peter. It was a brief message about the person of Christ, His death and resurrection, His forthcoming return in judgment, and our need to repent and receive forgiveness by association with His Name.

Lidia The conversion of Lidia is spoken of in a subclause: “And when she was baptized...” (Acts 16:15). There is no statement that she believed what Paul had spoken; merely that

she listened with interest and was baptized. The implication is that belief and baptism are part and parcel of the same thing. There is certainly the impression that the period of Lidia's teaching was quick. To argue that she may have been instructed for several days is an argument from silence. The impression given by all the accounts of baptism is that it was the initial response made by people once they believed a basic outline of the Gospel.

The Philippian Jailer The earthquake occurred at “midnight” (Acts 16:25); Paul and Silas spoke “the word of the Lord” to the jailer, and “that same hour” (Acts 16:33) he washed their stripes and he and his family were baptized. The exact referent of “that same hour” is difficult to determine, but the grammar would seem to imply that within one hour the jailer heard the word of the Lord from Paul and Silas, washed them, and he and his family were baptized. All in the midst of the aftermath of a major earthquake. The record seems to be using “that same hour” to highlight the urgency of baptism [it should be done even in the midst of an earthquake, at night]; and the speed at which it could occur [“that same hour”]. After this, the jailer took Paul and Silas into his home and prepared a celebratory meal; and then day broke, the magistrates sent an urgent message requiring Paul and Silas to be released (Acts 16:34,35).

5-3 An Open Attitude to Baptism

If indeed, as is often claimed, the Gospel is so simple that a child can understand it, it should be no surprise to find that people heard the Gospel and were immediately baptized. Without exception, all the examples of baptisms recorded in Acts are of this nature. That is evidence which demands a verdict if we are going to argue that an adult requires months or years of teaching before being “ready” for baptism. Further, there is no evidence of any background checks of morality being made, nor any in depth discussion with the candidates of their doctrinal beliefs. To argue that these *should* be done is to argue from silence, and against the consistent pattern of New Testament example. Of course, by doing so, one ends up with a church comprised of people with varying ideas, conceptions and moral situations- but all united by a common commitment to Christ and being willing to be taught further. This may be “messy” in denominational, social club terms. But that was the first century church, where the lame, maimed and blind were urged to simply say “yes” and enter the church, in terms of the parables of Luke 14. Of course, it’s very difficult to live socially in such a situation, seeing we prefer to associate with people who have identical understandings to ourselves, and to mix with people whose morality conforms to our own standards. But this difficulty is the very difficulty of Christian fellowship, the cross which we are to carry. The difficulty of being “in Christ”, in the dysfunctional and muddled body of which He

is head, is indeed a cross- although often not perceived as that. And many have flunked it by fencing Christ, and it has been flunked on an institutional level by the arising of denominationalism, whereby each group nails their theological and moral colours to the mast and permits only those who subscribe to be baptized into them and break bread with them.

In the same way as we run the risk of turning the *Lord's* table into our own table, so we likewise run the risk of turning *the Lord's* church and body into our own. The two issues are related. Natural Israel made this mistake- the Passover "feast of the Lord" had to be described repeatedly in John as "the feast of the Jews", and the frequent mention of "the synagogue of the Jews" is purposeful too; the Lord's congregation had become theirs. Paul in 1 Cor. 1:13 is especially aware of the danger of seeing baptism as entry into a human community rather than entry into Christ. Beasley-Murray captures the sense of the Greek well: "Has Christ been apportioned to any single group among you? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1). Christ died for us, therefore baptism is into His death and body- not any human denomination. We may safely infer that the Corinthians were making the same mistake as many do today- assuming that the person who taught or baptizes a person has baptized them into them or their group. And this attitude problem at Corinth came to term in the

divisions into various groups at the “breaking of bread” which Paul has to criticize in 1 Cor. 11. The idea of baptism “in the name of Jesus”, *eis to onoma*, has been understood in the context of other 1st century usage as meaning “to the account of”, “making over to” or “the setting up of the relation of belonging”. There are even examples of those who purchased slaves baptizing them into the name of their master (2). There is therefore much significance in the fact that people are baptized by the baptizer into the Name of Jesus, with the baptized person calling upon themselves the name of the Lord (Acts 2:21,39 Gk.; 15:17; 22:16; Rom. 10:13; James 2:7). They belong to Him alone. The whole symbolism of baptism as explained in Romans 6 is about entry into Christ’s death and resurrection. We were not buried in the water *like* Him, but actually *with* Him (Col. 2:12). We too were as it were laid in His grave. The connection is very intense. Just as baptismal candidates must put off their clothes and then put on clothes after their baptism, so this is alluded to in other baptismal passages which speak of “putting on Christ” (Rom. 6:3-5; Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:9,12). It cannot be emphasized too strongly that baptism must never be made the equivalent of entry into any human organization.

Forbidding Water?

Peter challenged the legalistic brethren of his day with the

question: “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized?” (Acts 10:47). The Greek word translated “forbid” presents a theme worth paying attention to. Peter uses the same word when he says later that if he had not baptized those Gentiles, then he would’ve been “withstanding” [s.w. “forbidding”] God Himself (Acts 11:17). This is serious. By forbidding people baptism we are forbidding God, because it is ultimately God through His Son who is the baptizer of people, thus inducting them into His people. This thought alone should make it very difficult for any of us to ever forbid baptism to someone who wants it. Great judgment is stored up for those who forbid others to preach the Gospel (1 Thess. 2:16). Diotrephes forbid brethren from fellowshiping with other brethren (3 Jn. 10)- and was roundly condemned for doing so. The disciples were rebuked for forbidding children to come to Jesus (Mt. 19:14)- this was ‘much displeasing’ to Jesus (Mk. 10:14, Gk. ‘much much-grieved’); for forbidding the disciples of John the Baptist, with their alternative understandings of some things (Mk. 9:38); no man who works in Christ’s Name should be forbidden, although the disciples evidently thought such a person should be forbidden (Mk. 9:39); the Jews are condemned for forbidding [s.w. “hindered”] men to enter the Kingdom (Lk. 11:52; note that to make the way to entry hard and difficult, creating hoops which must be passed through, is effectively forbidding a man entry); the Eunuch’s question

as to what forbade him to be baptized was answered by Philip eliciting a simple confession of faith from him, that Jesus was the Son of God (Acts 8:36).

All this is sober reading. The Father and Son are “greatly displeased” with those who forbid others to be baptized or to fellowship with their brethren (3). Closed table denominations are simply wrong, seriously wrong, in these areas. For their whole rationale is that nobody can be baptized unless they subscribe to their positions on everything; and if one of their number breaks bread with believers in another group, even if those they break bread with believe an identical theology, then they are disfellowshipped- with all the pain this causes. The brethren are forbidden to fellowship with other brethren- and that is exactly the scenario of 3 Jn. 10. Those who do so are condemned in strong language. Yet the closed table enthusiasts argue that their members are forbidden to break bread with those in another fellowship.

5-4 The Content of the Message

The context of the great commission is that it continues the theme in the preceding sections of Matthew, Mark and Luke- to go and tell everyone the good news of Christ risen and victorious over death. The women were to tell the disciples (Mt. 28:7), the apostles (Lk. 24:10), Peter (Mk. 16:7), “all

the rest” (Lk. 24:9) and “my brethren” (Mt. 28:10), Mary rushed to tell “those that had been with Him” (Mk. 16:10) and “my brethren” (Jn. 20:17), the two from Emmaus rushed to tell the folk in Jerusalem (Mk. 16:13; Lk. 24:33), “the eleven” told the two from Emmaus (Lk. 24:34) and Thomas (Jn. 20:25), Peter was told to “feed my sheep” (Jn. 21:15-17), which he seems to have obeyed by standing up and telling the Jewish world that Christ had risen. In perfect, seamless continuum with these commands to tell others, the Lord then told them to go and tell the world the good news, and to baptize people. The content of the great commission was therefore the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection, and the associated command to baptize people into it strengthens that conclusion. The idea clearly was “Jesus has died and risen- associate yourself with it by baptism into it!”. The command to preach-and-baptize in Mt. 28:19 is grammatically all one; the preaching of the good news and baptizing into it is all part and parcel of the same idea.

Mt. 28:19,20 speaks of teaching (*matheteuo*), baptizing, and then “teaching (*didasko*) them to observe all things that I have commanded”. *Matheteuo* strictly means “to enrol as a scholar”. The basic message of Christ’s death and resurrection and the command to associate with it involved repentance in order to receive the associated remission of sins made possible by it (Lk. 24:47). On this basis, people

were baptized; but they were being enrolled as pupils, disciples, scholars of the Lord Jesus. It was only a beginning of a learning process. Baptism was therefore the start and not the end. Afterwards, those baptized were to be taught (*didasko*) the endless practical implications of life in Christ. The teaching however was essentially moral and practical (“to observe all things that I have commanded”) rather than theological. I have elsewhere demonstrated (in chapter 3) that the two fold pattern of teaching the basic Gospel, baptizing and then teaching further was followed to the letter by the apostles in Acts 2. We noted above how it was also followed in the case of Simon in Acts 8:13. And we see it hinted at in Rom. 6:17, where Paul says that the Roman believers had been baptized and then “entrusted” to a “pattern of teaching”- the teaching them of “all things which I have commanded you” which was to be taught to those who had been baptized (Mt. 28:20).

If the early brethren taught a message of complex theology equivalent to a multi-page, carefully worded “Statement of faith” and then interviewed candidates for baptism to ensure they understood it all before immersing them- then this has to be proven from the pages of the New Testament. In all the New Testament examples of baptism, there is only one specific example of a confession of faith before baptism, and that is the case of the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip didn’t ask him any questions, he simply informed him that acceptable

baptism depended upon a man believing in his own heart. To which the Ethiopian responded that indeed he did. There is also no example of lengthy teaching of candidates for baptism; the recorded examples of baptism imply that the candidates were taught the Gospel in a matter of hours. The closed table approach to fellowship and baptism is up against a hard problem in the matter of baptism. The lack of any single account of a lengthy instruction and interview procedure for baptismal candidates is surely a significant missing link. There is not even one recorded incident which could be pressed into service to support this position. And yet every one of the many recorded examples of baptism can be used to prove that the basic message of the Gospel was very simple, was taught briefly, and people were baptized into Christ immediately upon their acceptance that Christ really had died and risen again.

If we wish to know “What is the Gospel?”, then read a Gospel record. They are transcripts of the Gospel which was originally preached e.g. by Matthew or Mark or Luke. The message they trotted out was written down, under inspiration. It’s why they all tend to begin where we might, with the promises made to fathers, and conclude with an appeal for baptism. The later New Testament was not therefore required to make baptism valid- because thousands were baptized at the time of Acts 2 before any of that had been written. And those thousands statistically make up the majority of the

baptisms we read of in the New Testament. What comprises the basic Gospel is found in the Gospels. If you disagree, then you are saying that a person could read or hear one of them but still not know the Gospel. And the Gospel records are largely concerned with the Lord's moral teaching, rather than theology. There were multiple theological errors amongst His audience- immortal soul, the nature of Messiah and the kingdom of God, the nature of Israel, the devil, demons, hell fire etc. But He doesn't engage much with these issues; rather does He preach the good news of how life should be lived under the dominion of God as King, i.e. within His Kingdom. It is the moral teaching of the Lord which is the essence of the Christian Gospel. One only has to read a Gospel record from start to end to realize that. The Bible is not a riddle which we must crack, and only few do; God is not playing hard to get nor hiding Himself. And remember that the vast majority of those baptized down the centuries have been illiterate. Illiterate people deal in terms of visual pictures rather than the abstractions involved in intellectually wrestling towards the correct understanding of a written text. The Gospel was therefore simple. It required no feat of intellectual study or manipulation of various Bible passages into a correct synthesis. The fact *we* may have done this kind of thing doesn't mean that we can assume all believers down the centuries have, nor needed to. What is required after a hearing or reading of the Gospel records is

simple faith in Jesus. And that faith comes or is elicited by hearing that “word of God” which is the Gospel.

This needs to be underlined. “The gospel of the Kingdom” which the Lord preached is to be found in His parables of the Kingdom, which account for a large proportion of His recorded words in those red letter New Testaments. And those parables are teaching moral issues, concerning how life should be lived right now under the dominion of God as our King; the Kingdom life, lived under the domination of the King, is essentially about life lived in practice, attitudes to the lost etc. And these teachings are enshrined in the ‘Gospel records’. Those records are transcripts of how e.g. Matthew preached the Gospel, and they were written down under inspiration in their present form. If we want to know “What is the Gospel?”, then we read the Gospels. And there is no specific theology, of the kind we find in a statement of faith like the BASF. Rather do we find that “the things of the Kingdom” are issues of ethics and morals. And so the paradox has arisen- that Christadelphians will fellowship those who are not that developed in their personal spirituality or conformity to the Lord’s moral teaching, all because they are OK on their theoretical theology. And they will reject spiritually minded members of the body of Christ who may be mistaken on some theology. There is plenty of Bible teaching about judgment to come, and what shall be the basis of acceptance and rejection. There is no hint that

correct theology will predicate eternal salvation; there will be no 'theory exam'. The issues upon which eternity is predicated are all practical, moral and ethical; summarized in simple faith in Jesus as our Saviour, which faith has to issue in works appropriate to such faith in salvation by grace.

It is this basic content which makes a person responsible to God. The men of Nineveh and the queen of Sheba will rise in the judgment over the Bible studying Pharisees of the first century, and condemn them (Mt. 12:41,42). What knowledge did they have? The queen of Sheba had the knowledge of Yahweh's moral requirements as taught in Solomon's Proverbs. It's unclear how much correct theology she was taught; and if correct theology is so critically important, we would expect to hear of Solomon teaching it to her, before reading that she shall arise at the last day and be saved. We don't read of her going back to her country clutching scrolls of the law of Moses. Maybe she was illiterate. But we read of her awed at the moral appeal of Yahweh worship. Likewise the men of Nineveh heard only a brief message from Jonah- that Yahweh was going to destroy them. We would expect to read of Jonah eagerly expounding true theology to them and giving them scrolls of the writings of Moses and the prophets; but we don't, and we get the

impression he had no interest in sharing Israelite theology with Gentiles anyway. But those men, many of them illiterate and with no access to the written word of Yahweh, shall arise in salvation at the last day. It was the moral appeal of Yahweh and their sense of His claim upon them which made them responsible to His judgment and thereby capable of salvation seeing they accepted that claim.

“That understanding unto which we have arrived”

It's true as in any relationship that relationship with God can operate on different levels. Accurate knowledge of Him, correct interpretation of His word which reveals Him, of course plays a part in that relationship and enhances it. But this is not to say that once we arrive at a certain set of theological truths, e.g. those enshrined in a statement of faith, that thereby we 'know' God and have a relationship with Him; whereas those who haven't got every part of those truths 'right' therefore don't know Him at all nor have any relationship with Him. This attitude implies that the knowledge we have is the total sum of 'knowing God'. And yet all that we know is merely "Parts of His ways: but how little a portion is heard of Him!" (Job 26:14). Therefore any growth in knowledge of His Truth is not really possible. Likewise, we condemn fellow believers who have maybe 0.00001% knowledge of God just because we have say

0.001%. What if at the day of judgment it turns out that we had something slight wrong? If we have condemned others for their lack of accurate Biblical interpretation... how shall we stand before a just God who focuses upon our judgment of attitude to others as the basis of His judgment of us? The attitude that we have absolute truth and other believers who differ have zero is of course attractive to the fleshly mind. Yet intellectual pride is perhaps the most abhorrent form of pride to the God who sees our limitations and inadequacies so clearly. We cannot, surely, reduce God's truth to a simplistic black and white situation where we have "the truth" and others who differ slightly do not. Relationship with God, like any relationship, is on a sliding scale. Some achieve intimacy of relationship in different ways. And some simply achieve it deeper than others. Naturally, there is a cut off line somewhere, perhaps differing for each person, beyond which there is no relationship, merely a vague academic awareness. And baptism does provide an entry into covenant relationship with the Father and Son; the whole concept of God in covenant relationship with people would be meaningless if 'anything goes' in terms of knowledge of God. But from our position, we cannot judge that. Neither are we asked to. We are asked to reflect the open welcome signified in the open arms of the crucified Christ. Those who wish to come to Him we should not reject, not to His table nor from the waters of His baptism.

God is leading us all into closer relationship with Him. Paul speaks profoundly and maturely in Phil. 3:15,16: “Let us therefore, as many as are mature, be thus decided; and if in anything you are otherwise decided, this also shall God reveal to you. For now, according to that understanding unto which we have arrived, by that same rule let us walk”. Paul was acceptant of the fact that believers will reach different judgments on issues because they have ‘arrived’ at different points. God reveals things to people, yet, Paul surely implies, believers respond to those revelations at different speeds. What is required is integrity on our part, walking according to the understanding we have arrived at- and living together in the same church community despite those differing understandings. Paul’s tolerance of the wide doctrinal positions in Corinth is a case study in this.

There is an element to which believers are required to live with integrity within the understandings which they have- even if those understandings may be technically ‘wrong’ in the final analysis. We each serve God within the frames of our current understandings- when we realize they were lines drawn in the wrong places, or true ideals which had become applied in the wrong ways at the wrong times, then we are to have the humility and softness in the hand of our Divine potter to respond. Having our eyes opened to the wrongness of a closed table would be a pertinent example. The Lord taught that those who thought that they ‘saw’ would therefore

have no excuse for their sin (Jn. 9:41). Yet He had just condemned those same Jews as “blind” (Jn. 9:39). They were blind, but because they perceived themselves as ‘seeing’ God, therefore they would be judged accordingly.

In the context of baptism, all these things surely mean that a person doesn’t have to have their theology perfectly right before they are baptized. For none of us have it perfectly right. The act of baptism presupposes an understanding that Christ died and resurrected, and the candidate believes that to the point of wishing to personally identify with Him. All the New Testament examples of baptism therefore imply a very quick response to the basic message of Jesus, and a decision to identify with Him and His cause in baptism. The disciples believed in ghosts and demons [with their associated implications of immortal souls and the existence of a personal Satan- all beliefs which other Scripture shows to be wrong]. But these theological errors didn’t mean that they had no relationship with their Lord. You can love and believe someone even if you misunderstand them. Typically these days, parents have children who move to other parts of the world. They see each other only occasionally. The child changes and becomes very different to the young person once known to their parents. Over the decades, those changes can be quite fundamental, and they are not perceived by the parents- who still relate to a 50 year old as they did to how that person was at 20. But this doesn’t mean that the elderly

parents and middle aged child don't have a valid and meaningful relationship. It is not, therefore, for us to insist that a person must reach the theological understandings which we now have before they can be acceptably baptized. That would be to set ourselves as the benchmark of another man's acceptability with God. The only safe way is to follow the Biblical examples- baptize all those who say "Yes" to the basic message of Jesus, without seeking to be an intellectual nor moral policeman to them.

5-5 Baptism and Statements of Faith

This of course is hard news for the likes of conservative Christadelphia, who claim that acceptable baptism is predicated upon belief of the many propositions listed in their BASF or other such statement of faith. At least five clauses in the BASF speak of a 1000 year Millennial reign of the Lord. But this is only made possibly explicit in Revelation, well after the valid baptisms of thousands by the early church. So it is simply not Biblical to insist that a belief in a Millennial reign is required for baptism to be acceptable. Well known Christadelphians such as Harry Whittaker and Alan Hayward explicitly denied in writing their belief in a literal 1000 year Millennium. And that was OK. Despite clauses 18 and 26,28 and 29 of the BASF

stating that belief in a Millennium is part of the basic Gospel. And this raises the question: If it's OK to not agree on some clauses and yet have valid baptism and fellowship, then which other clauses in the BASF may likewise be disagreed with? And who is the power broker in deciding that, and upon what authority? Likewise some of the clauses relating to the atonement are interpretations of passages in Paul's letters. These were not written at the time that thousands were baptized in Acts. And again we return to the reality that if we want to know "What is the Gospel?", then we are to read the Gospel records. And they are decidedly more moral than theological in their content. The good news of the Kingdom presented there is largely the good news of how life can be lived now under the dominion of God as King, rather than expounding a political future kingdom with a capital, laws, temple etc.

There has always been concern that some statements in the BASF and other such statements are not solidly underpinned in Scripture. Thus the claim that Adam's punishment "defiled and became a physical law of his being, and was transmitted to all his posterity" (Clause 5), with a "condemned nature" shared by the Lord Jesus (Clause 8) is unsupportable from Scripture, and historically many Christadelphians have expressed disagreement or at best ambivalence; likewise the idea that the mentally ill and children will not be saved. It simply is not true, therefore, that valid baptism and

fellowship are based upon a document which is disagreed with by the caucus of the population supposedly governed by it. Another such example would be the insistence of clause 14 that it is necessary to believe that the Lord only intercedes for His own and “does not intercede for the world”. There would be Biblical reason to doubt that, and immediately the question arises as to what the human author of the statement had in view. And we from this distance don't know that. And so as with any human document, its value and intention becomes clouded in semantics.

And then there is the question of literacy. With only a fraction of the population literate, and Christianity spreading largely amongst the illiterate working classes, it's clear enough that a detailed understanding of theology was not expected nor even possible. And the BASF is detailed theology. It's not translated into many languages, and so a large percentage of those bearing the name “Christadelphian” are ignorant of it— for they are either illiterate or lack the fluency in English to understand the document. Who, for example, really understands what “wearing a condemned nature” means. And those baptized by sectors of Christadelphia without a statement of faith or with a different one, are nearly always accepted by other Christadelphians without rebaptism. So a mistake has been made in claiming to predicate acceptable baptism upon the BASF. It's like taking a wrong turning... we can stubbornly continue and get more and more lost, or turn

back and go back in humility to the point where we were first mistaken. That is against our nature, and it is harder for a collective group to do this than for individuals.

Notes

(1) G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

(2) G.R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism”, in G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, D.G. Reid, eds, *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1993) pp. 60,61.

(3) Bear in mind the considerable reasons to believe that re-baptism is not required of anyone baptized into Christ; see section 5-3.

5-6 Rebaptism

Baptism is into Christ, and Christ is His body. We are therefore baptized “by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). In the context, Paul is arguing that the body of Christ is the church, the community of believers. The question of the validity of baptism is therefore related to the issue of fellowship within the body of Christ; if someone is baptized into the body of Christ, then they must be treated as a necessary member of the community and not rejected or treated as unnecessary. For those parts of the body which we

consider out of sight and out of mind are in fact, Paul argues, absolutely necessary for our total growth. Those parts of the body may well refer in our 21st Century context to those baptized believers whom other believers consider non-existent and unnecessary because they belong to communities other than our own. If they refuse to fellowship us, then they are contributing to the overall dysfunction of the body, but the fault is theirs and not ours.

Eph. 4:4-6 stresses that there is “one baptism”. It could well be that Paul was making a sideways swipe at the Jewish idea of rebaptism, for Judaism at that time practiced frequent ‘baptisms’ or ritual washings. And it was the encroachment of Jewish ideas into Christianity which led to all manner of false teachings. In my books *The Real Christ* and *The Real Devil* I trace the development of the false doctrines of a personal cosmic Satan and the Trinity to such encroachment of Judaist thinking [e.g. that Messiah was an Angel] into the thinking of the early church. Whether or not Paul had rebaptism in mind when he wrote of “one baptism”, there is no example of rebaptism in the New Testament apart from the possible case in Acts 19, which we will consider later. When talking about “rebaptism” I refer to baptism as an adult by immersion; infant sprinkling isn’t baptism, and there is no question that those baptized in this way should be baptized again.

Baptism is “for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). If there was no sense of forgiveness at baptism, nor repentance, because the candidate got baptized for other reasons, then once a person truly repents they may well desire to be baptized “for the remission of sins”. It is of course hard to look back and understand or reconstruct what exactly were our motivations and beliefs when we were first immersed. Which is why the matter is so personal that it seems to me quite inappropriate to demand that a person be rebaptized in order to fellowship with us. It’s too intimate and personal a matter for anyone else to delve into. The “other reasons” for baptism apart from repentance and desire for forgiveness could include:

A desire to express assent to theological truths which a church has taught them

The need to join a church who effectively baptized people into them [perhaps because the person wanted to impress a family or marry a member of that church]

Doing what their peer group were doing

Heavy personal pressure from someone in the church

Hope of financial or material benefit if they got baptized.

Many of these reasons revolve around the misconception that baptism is into a church or human organization. Those who

discern the above reasons for their baptisms may wish to be properly baptized; but human motivation is very hard to quantify, let alone when we may be looking back at who we were many years ago and why we did something like getting baptized. It's quite possible that someone may have understood the doctrines associated with the true Gospel when they were immersed, but the above motivations are wrong... Being aware of true theology may not be enough in itself to make baptism valid. It is personal faith and relationship with and in Christ which is what salvation is all about, and a merely tokenistic ritual done for all the wrong reasons is not going to save anyone. However, these are all matters of the heart and deepest personal conscience; it surely can't be right that a church demands rebaptism before giving the bread and wine to someone. For this again turns the breaking of bread into "our" table, rather than accepting it is the Lord's.

5-6-1 Acts 19

The only possible case of rebaptism is in Acts 19:1-7: "And it came to pass, that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper country, came to Ephesus and found some disciples. And he said to them: Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? And they said to him: No. We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. And he said: Into what then were you baptized? And they

said: Into John's baptism. And Paul said: John baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe in him that should come after him, that is, on Jesus. And when they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. And they were in all about twelve men”.

These men had not been baptized with Christian baptism, which is into the death and resurrection of Christ. The command for baptism into His death and resurrection was given after Christ had risen from the dead. It could be argued therefore that this is not an example of adults once baptized [by immersion] into the Lord's death and resurrection being rebaptized. That approach would appear to be the correct line of interpretation once due weight is given to the fact that they had not received the Holy Spirit; surely there is an intended allusion to Jn. 7:39: “He spoke of the Spirit, which they that believed in him were to receive. For the Spirit had not yet been given, as Jesus had not yet been glorified”. The Greek idea behind “not yet been given” is similar to the men's words in the Greek of Acts 19:2, where “We did not hear whether there *be* any Holy Spirit” carries the idea ‘We didn't hear that the Holy Spirit is present / has been given’. The men had surely heard of “Holy Spirit”, but they were unaware it had been given. The connection with Jn. 7:39

could suggest they were actually ignorant of the death, resurrection and glorification of Jesus- hence their need for Christian baptism. Their ignorance of the coming of the Spirit is painted, according to the connection with Jn. 7:39, as ignorance of the fact Christ had been glorified. If these men had been baptized by John but were now in Ephesus, it's quite possible they had left Palestine soon after their baptisms and were ignorant of what had subsequently happened to Jesus until Apollos had now told them. "Into [Gk. *ek*] what were you baptized?" (Acts 19:3) would therefore carry the implication that they had not been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ; their answer comes across rather lamely: "Into John's baptism". The necessary answer was "Into Christ's death and resurrection", but they are forced to reply somewhat ungrammatically- that they had not been baptized *into* anything much at all, apart from into John. There could even be the implication that they had not been baptized by John himself, but "into John's baptism" by some disciple of John. Acts 19:5,6 sounds as if they were unaware that John had taught the people that they must believe [and be baptized] "into Christ"; and when they understood that this had been his message, then they were baptized into Christ. They had had the idea in their minds that they must make a change, but it would seem they were ignorant of what John had actually taught about Jesus.

Again and again it must be remembered here that John's baptism wasn't Christian baptism; it was to prepare the way for Christ and baptism into Him. Paul explains that John's teaching was intended to lead men to believe "in" or "into" Christ [Gk. *ek* again- he stresses this twice in Acts 19:4]. When the men understood that, they were "baptized into [Gk. *ek*] the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:5). Baptism *into* Christ is here presented as part and parcel of belief *in* Him. Baptism is assumed in the New Testament as being part of belief. This incident leaves us with the clear impression from the use of the term *ek* , into, that they had been baptized into John and had been ignorant of Christ's death and glorification. Their immersion "into John's baptism" had not therefore been Christian baptism at all.

The connection between baptism and receipt of the Spirit also cries out to be understood within the context of Acts to the great opening example of baptism in Acts 2:38: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit". I have elsewhere suggested that the "gift" in view there was that of forgiveness and spiritual blessing in Christ. The baptism [or, rebaptism] of Acts 19 did not of itself give the Holy Spirit gifts; these came as a result of Paul laying his hands upon the newly baptized people. This would've been a situation analogous to that in Acts 10, where the Gentiles who were baptized exercised miraculous

Spirit gifts straight afterwards in order to demonstrate that the decision to baptize them had in fact been correct.

5-7 Baptism: God's Work

It should also be noted that baptism is in a sense performed by God. We are 'baptized by one Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:13), the Greek definitely meaning 'by' in the instrumental sense. This is another reason why the physical person on earth doing the baptizing is insignificant; the essence is that we were baptized by the Spirit, by God's path of operation in our lives which we willingly accepted and submitted to. It could be argued that no baptism [and I use the term in its Biblical sense of immersion of an adult who has heard the Gospel] is therefore 'wrong'; for surely it was not chance or irrelevant human issues which brought it about. It was God's work, and therefore to demand rebaptism before giving someone the emblems of God's love in Christ could be seen as working against the work which God has done. God can stop baptisms if He wishes; and He does so. I recall driving out of Riga to a lake to baptize a man. As we drove, he shared with me how years earlier, he had decided for baptism by another church. They drove to another lake, but their vehicle broke down in the forest on the way; and despite much prayer, the man ended up walking a few hours back to town. God stopped that baptism. But I baptized him, and God enabled that. I mention this to demonstrate how it could be argued that any

sincere baptism, our immaturities of faith and appreciation notwithstanding, is of God and not chance.

Tit. 3:5 says the same as 1 Cor. 12:13; baptism is a “a washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”. Who is the washer and renewer? The Spirit. 1 Cor. 6:11 surely alludes to water baptism into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit when we read that we were “washed... into the name of the Lord Jesus... by [*en* in the instrumental-‘through the work of’] the Spirit of our God”. My point is that baptism is referred to as our having been washed. It was something done to us, by the Father and Son, through the agency of the Spirit. Jn. 3:3-5 likewise refers to water baptism as a birth “of the Spirit”. “Born of water and of the Spirit” could be understood there as a parallelism, whereby the second clause amplifies and explains the first. The birth of water (water baptism) is in fact a birth of the Spirit; in Paul’s terms, we are ‘baptized by one Spirit’, ‘washed and regenerated of / by the Spirit’. During His ministry, Jesus is never recorded as baptizing people with His own hands, “Jesus Himself baptized not, but His disciples” (Jn. 4:2); and yet John the Baptist spoke of how he baptized with water, but Jesus “shall baptize you with / by the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8). If this refers to Christian baptism, John would be saying that later Christian baptism would be in a sense performed by Jesus by the Spirit [Gk. *en* in the instrumental again, as in 1 Cor. 12:13; “with” is a very poor and

misleading translation]. I fail to see any promise in these passages that miraculous Spirit gifts would be the experience of every believer upon baptism; our Christian baptism is by the Spirit, it is a fruit of the work of Jesus through the Spirit. In order to testify to this, some believers in the first century did experience miraculous Spirit gifts immediately after their baptisms in order to prove that the dipping of water that had occurred really was the work of the Spirit, and not anything more human than that.

My point is, we are baptized in a sense *by* God and Jesus, working through the Spirit. Baptism is therefore into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19); not that there is any 'Trinity' as commonly believed, but in the sense that these three entities are all so involved in a person's baptism. Jesus taught that the baptism with which He had been baptized with would be our experience; we would "be baptized", the Greek implying by someone, just as He was (Mt. 20:22,23). He had "a baptism to be baptized with" (Lk. 12:50); for the very Greek verb 'to be baptized' implies to be baptized by someone. And that entity is God and His Son. The appeal to "be baptized" (Acts 2:38) is asking us to let something be done to us; and the ultimate doer of baptism is the Father and Son. Israel's crossing of the Red Sea was a prototype of Christian baptism; the people were baptized into Moses, as we are baptized into Christ (1 Cor. 10:2). "They were baptized" again suggests they were baptized by someone-

God. If the idea was that they had of their own volition put themselves under water, the Greek [and English] would be different- something like ‘They baptized themselves into Moses’.

Christadelphian Relevance

The Christadelphian movement began in the work of John Thomas in the mid 19th Century. The movement was initially open- people were attracted to join it because they came to see that the bullet points of Christadelphian theology concerning the nature of God, the Lord Jesus, His Kingdom, the death state, Satan etc. were in fact truly Biblically based. But there was no demand for rebaptism in order to get involved. As time went on, both John Thomas and especially his successor Robert Roberts began to demand rebaptism of others, and the concept of membership became ever stronger, as a movement for Biblicism and radical spiritual reformation descended into a mere denomination. Elements of the spirit of openness which permeated original Christadelphia have survived to the present day in the community. One of them is the way in which the constitutions of most Christadelphian ecclesias include a phrase taken from the model ecclesial constitution of the 19th Century- that membership is open to all, “baptized by whomsoever”. In practice, this is no longer upheld, in that the Christadelphian Bible Mission and many individual ecclesias demand the

rebaptism of those who hold Christadelphian beliefs but who were baptized by others apart from themselves or their clique of ecclesias. Certain Central Fellowship Christadelphians and organizations were even publically named in *The Christadelphian* magazine in 2004 as being brethren whose baptisms would not be accepted as valid. And the Christadelphian Bible Mission have published a position that they do not consider baptisms performed by women in the Russian speaking world as valid. The reasoning about rebaptism presented above is surely an appeal to return to the original spirit of Christadelphia in accepting those baptized “by whomsoever”, placing no significance upon the human baptizer. The Biblical evidence is so strongly upon the work of the Father and Son as our baptizer; therefore all questions concerning whose human hands held another man’s shoulders in the water ought to fade into insignificance.

6 The Old Testament Community

The Old Testament equivalent of the 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). 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. But that unity was not predicated upon any statement of faith, and the history of Israel has no example of

the faithful minority removing themselves from association or “fellowship” with the majority, who clearly were unfaithful in both theology and practice. Indeed, the record of Elijah appears to critique any tendency to separate from the body of Israel as a whole. Jeremiah stuck with the rebellious house of Judah, even going down to die with them in Egypt, whither they went in studied rejection of God’s word. 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).

The Israel : Judah Division

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. To wilfully divide is to as it were punish ourselves, to condemn ourselves. For the division of the one Israel was their condemnation. God recognized their unity despite huge theological differences within Israel brought about by their continued involvement in the idol cults. Indeed, God 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 and their acceptance of the New Covenant (e.g. Jer. 3:18; Ez. 37:16,19; Hos. 1:18; 10:11; Zech. 9:13:). But we today have accepted that New Covenant, and this requires unity between us, memorialized by our common sharing in the "cup of the new covenant" at the breaking of bread. 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 loves to tread out the corn... I will set a rider on Ephraim. Judah shall plough, 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. For us, blood needn't be thicker than water- and a desire to placate family members is a major reason for so much Christian division. Because cranky old uncle Tom can't hack brother Vladimir, therefore, Vladimir must remain out of fellowship.

Fellowship with Gentiles

Leviticus 19:34 clearly stipulated: "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt". They were not to learn the ways of the Gentiles nor to worship their gods; they were to reject both their theology and practice. But they were to have an open door to them, in that Israel were to be the light of the Gentile world around them. The Gospels record how Jesus continually embraced the Gentiles and others considered unclean- as has been observed, "seeming to privilege the prophetic call to justice over the Levitical pursuit of purity".

Within the church there has always been a continual tension between a focus on purity and a focus on outreach to others. The outreach can of course go too far, we can make ourselves "all things to all men" to the extent that we are just

as “all men” and there is no crucial difference between us and the unsaved world. On the other hand, we can turn inward to guard purity to such an extent that we are no longer the light of the world, hiding it beneath the bucket of our fear of contamination. We must recognize that these tensions have always been there, and they are manifest in our generation only as they have always been throughout history. Continual reading and re-reading of the Gospels, however, would seem to indicate that the spirit of Jesus was of *personal* holiness whilst reaching out with arms outstretched to the sinners and unclean, welcoming all and sundry to His table fellowship.

Excursus 3: Could Gentiles Eat the Passover?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7 The Open Jesus

7-1 The Open Jesus

All the parables have some element of unreality to them. The parable of the wheat and weeds in Mt. 13:25-40 is no exception. All farmers weed, and would never turn down some assistance offered in this backbreaking work. But this farmer does- he allows the weeds to grow together with the wheat, reasoning that he will sort out the difference at harvest time, the day of judgment. No farmer behaves like this. But this is how God operates in His "field", which the Lord Jesus defines as "the world". Quite clearly, wheat and weeds, the people of the Kingdom and those not of the Kingdom, are to grow together in this life. The point is that the natural desire of every religious person- to separate from the weeds- is being challenged here by Jesus. It's radical stuff, and so many have stumbled at this hurdle. Closed table thinking is just another example of trying to get away from the weeds. But it's surely portrayed in this parable as they very opposite to God's intention. The parable was told against the background of an exclusive class within the ecclesia of Christ's day who thought that separation from sinners was all important. The "sinners" and religiously inferior who were weeded out by the more religious Jews were the very ones from whom Christ built His ecclesia. It was those who

wanted to do the weeding who were in fact the ones who were not ultimately Kingdom people- and we need to take that reality very seriously when we consider rejecting people from our religious fellowship. The Greek word *aphete* translated "let" as in "let them both grow together until harvest" is the same word elsewhere translated to suffer or to forgive. We are to suffer the weeds to be near us, right next to us in the field, rather than to root them up. God will do that in His own way and in His own good time. But the point of the parable is that for us to allow God to do this is absolutely counter-instinctive; it's the hardest way to go. The easier way is to go weeding, fence the table, identify the weeds, pre-judge the judgment seat. That's as natural and instinctive as it is for a farmer to weed. But if we are truly Kingdom people, we will take a grip on ourselves and live otherwise- the harder, more inclusive, non-judgmental way. We are called to live our lives as in a year of Jubilee- and that would've been the only year in Palestine when wheat and weeds literally grew together.

The Lord Jesus is portrayed as being at great pains to not stop anyone coming to Him. Women and children, who were considered best neither seen nor heard in public unless they were aristocracy, were welcomed by Jesus- with stern rebuke of those who had tried to bar them from access to Him. His table manners and open table were perhaps the greatest essay in His openness to all. To fence His table

seems to me to run directly counter to the spirit of the Christ whom we meet in the Gospels. It is a strong psychological temptation for a community to create some kind of shibboleth or exclusive ritual in order to define themselves, and to provide themselves with protection against others. Breaking our bread just with our own could well be the kind of spiritual selfishness and elitism which is so deeply unacceptable to the Lord; it would mean that we have hijacked *His* table and turned it into *our* table. Frequently we note how the New Testament speaks of how the Jews had hijacked God's institutions and turned them into *theirs*. The Law of Moses became "*your* law" (Jn. 8:17; 10:34; 18:31), and the Passover feasts of *Yahweh* are described as feasts "of the Jews" (Jn. 5:1; 6:4; 7:2; 11:55; 19:42). His table, His Passover, had become merely theirs. We wonder too about the purposeful mention of "synagogues *of the Jews*" several times. Why add "of the Jews"? Isn't that painfully stating the obvious and axiomatic? Possibly the suggestion is that the Jews had hijacked God's meeting places and turned them into their own. And the new Israel run the same risk in seeking to act as the host at the Lord's table, turning His meeting into their own. Quite simply, the love of John's Gospel and the example and teaching of Jesus "is not the self-affirming reassurance of the like-minded", using religion in order to affirm ourselves and our long established social grouping-but rather an outreaching, inclusive love that seeks to accept

and bring people to Him by sharing with the world Him and His achievement in His own body and blood.

7-2 The Table Manners of Jesus

The Meaning of Table Fellowship

Meal times and table manners were used in the first century to reinforce social boundaries and statuses; those who broke those codes elicited the anger of others because they had acted dishonourably. And society was based around honour and shame; tradition was exalted and seen as the duty of every man to uphold. This of course is different from the Western worldview, where challenge to norms has become the cool thing to do, rather than it being cool to uphold tradition. People felt comfortable with the existing system of table manners and invitations- they preferred to eat with people of their social class because eating with a higher class or more elite group demanded that they must in turn invite those people to *their* table and entertain them appropriately. The open invitation of Jesus to dine with Him, and His utter overturning of these values in His teaching about inviting the desperate who cannot ever recompense you, was radical indeed. He was consciously challenging religious exclusivism. The anger vented against those who argue for an open table approach to Christian fellowship unites us with Him. Whom Jesus ate with led the Pharisees to

conclude that he couldn't be from God (Lk. 5:30; 7:39; 15:1,2), and this is so often the case today- if you are "open table", then you are rejected, no matter how you have given your life for the Lord and believe all the right doctrines.

The generation that crucified Jesus was perhaps the most studious, technically obedient, Bible-study and holiness oriented of any generation of Israel. The Jewish apocryphal writings had prepared the way. In the period in between the Testaments, not eating with Gentiles and sinners became an obsession. Judaism became increasingly exclusive. Tobit is told "Give none of your bread to sinners" (Tobit 4:17) and Tobit likens table fellowship between a righteous man and a sinner to that between a lamb and a wolf (13:17); the story of Judith tries to teach that table fellowship can make the difference between life and death (Judith 13:6-11); the additions to Esther claim that Esther had always refused to eat at Haman's table nor with the king (Esther 14:17); Sirach urged "Let righteous men be your dinner companions" (Sirach 9:16) (1); bread was not to be shared with the sinner (12:5; 13:17). Jubilees 22:16 warns Jacob to separate himself from table fellowship with Gentiles lest he be contaminated by association with them. Against this background, the Pharisees had become obsessed with food and whom you ate with. One's fellowship or contact with uncleanness became for them the ultimate indicator of standing with God. Jerome Neyrey has summarized their

concerns well (2):

“A. WHO: Who eats with whom; who sits where; who performs what action; who presides over the meal

B. WHAT: What is eaten (or not eaten); how it is tithed or grown or prepared; what utensils are used; what rites accompany the meal (e.g., washing of hands or full bath); what is said (and silence)

C. WHEN: When one eats (daily, weekly, etc.; time of day); when one eats which course during the meal

D. WHERE: Where one eats (room); where one sits; in which institution (family, politics)”.

The table manners of Jesus consciously sought to challenge all these assumptions. A poor person would decline an invitation to a good meal because he knew that he was expected to invite the inviter for a meal of a similar nature. The parables of Luke 14 argue that we should invite those who cannot repay us exactly because we are the beggars who are invited to His table by the pure grace of Jesus (Lk. 14:14,15). We are surely intended to imagine how hard it would've been for the servants who ran around the lanes and hedges urging people to come in to the wonderful banquet. The difficulty would've been persuading the beggars of grace, that grace is for real, all notions of fairness, reciprocity etc. have been overturned in God's urgent zeal to

fill His Kingdom with people.

“In the first century, given the intimate and culturally significant nature of the setting of meals, dining was an occasion to draw boundaries, solidify kinship, and perpetuate social values. To eat with people of a different rank or class, to eat with sinners, or to eat with the unclean was to defile oneself and recognize their status as either acceptable or equal to one’s own. Loyalty to God was expressed through eating the right kinds of foods with the right kinds of people (i.e. the people who shared and adhered to the same vision for what obedience to God meant). The fact that Jesus shared meals with those who had no right to eat with a true Jew has monumental implications” (3). Table fellowship was especially significant for the Jews because of the connection they made between their table and the Lord’s table. Jacob Neusner explains: “The Pharisees thus arrogated to themselves—and to all Jews equally—the status of the Temple priests. The table of every Jew in his home was seen as being like the table of the Lord in the Jerusalem Temple. Everyone was a priest, everyone stands in the same relation to God, and everyone must keep the priestly laws” (4). The extreme sensitivity of the Pharisees to table fellowship means that it would be fair to say that it was the Lord’s radically open table which was a major factor in their mad hatred of Him which resulted in His crucifixion.

The Table Manners of Jesus

It's clear that in Luke's Gospel Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal. Huge emphasis is placed upon His approach to table fellowship; eating with people was without doubt one of His most common strategies. Mass addresses to the crowds followed up by meals with a smaller group would in any case be a logical pattern. The Gospel records are full of accounts of Christ's meals. He was so often eating that He was slandered as a "glutton and drunkard" because He ate with "sinners" (Lk. 7:34). He was called a glutton because He was so often seen eating- for meals with people was His preferred manner of reaching out to people. And He was called a drunkard because He ate with sinners, which doubtless included drunkards, and His critics applied the principle of guilt by association, just as many religious people do today. If you break bread with a divorcee, you are divorced. I well recall one irate Christadelphian screaming in an old brother's face: "You're a *lesbian!*" after his admission that he "broke bread" with a sister who was a lesbian. That's how guilt by association works, and it worked the same way in Jesus' day as it does today. On one level, for many of us today, whom we literally eat with isn't a significant issue. But in New Testament times it was of an importance which we can't easily appreciate. We must be aware that we are likely to downplay the huge significance of the table manners of Jesus

because we are not in the culture within which He lived. But in essence, many of us are- because we were raised in religious cultures which treated whom we “break bread” with to be of paramount importance. Any other form of fellowship is OK- but to share bread and wine is not, and the act has become freighted with all the phobias, fears and hang-ups which eating together had in the 1st century Mediterranean world. In this sense, the apparent cultural difference between us is not so great at all.

Jesus ate with sinners in order to lead them to repentance; that is the clear justification given by Him for His open table policy (Mk. 2:15-17). He saw His guests as the sick who needed a doctor, and His eating with them was in order to call them to repentance, rather than a statement that they had now attained a suitable level of purity to be worthy of His table. He therefore saw eating at His table as a *means towards* creating fellowship, and not as a *consequence* of being “in fellowship” with Him. This latter misunderstanding is sadly the view of those who insist upon a “closed table”, participation of which is limited to those who have attained a certain “statement of faith” or moral purity. The correct attitude to the Lord’s table arises out of perceiving that it is a means of witness, of creating fellowship with Him. The case of Zacchaeus is another good example (Lk. 19:1–10). People were shocked that Jesus would proactively take the initiative of inviting Himself into table fellowship with Zacchaeus.

Especially *before* Zacchaeus had shown any signs of repentance. But it was that prevenient offer of fellowship and acceptance which elicited repentance within Zacchaeus. Note how *He invited Himself* into the house of Zacchaeus to eat with him, fully aware of the perception that "to stay in such a person's home was tantamount to sharing in his sin" (5).

Likewise the prodigal son- who is each of us- was accepted at the table just because he wanted to be there, not after any check of his theology or sincerity of repentance. The older brother's attitude to table fellowship with his brother was that "If he's going to be at the table, I'm outta here". And so it has so often happened amongst God's people. But the point of the parable is that the son who ended up out in the darkness, outside of the banquet, having placed himself out of reach of even his Father's love, was the son who thought himself too good to break his bread with his brother. This is a sober and grave warning which we ignore at our peril.

No Guilt by Association

It was especially important for Rabbis or religious leaders to be seen as only eating with the right types: "The Rabbis would have been chary of intercourse with persons of immoral life, men of proved dishonesty or followers of suspected and degrading occupations at all times, but especially at meals" (6). The way Jesus wilfully invited such

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

wasn't contaminated by her, but rather her presence at His table meant she left realizing her forgiveness and acceptance with Him (Lk. 7:36-50).

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

practice of Jesus was seen as so offensive by the Jews—because it implied that their exclusive view of the future Kingdom being only for religious Jews was in fact wrong. Anyone who opens up boundaries, breaks a circle, removes one side of a triangle, faces the wrath of those within that construct. Christ's 'open table' policy then and now leads to just such anger. For we are to reach out to the most despised of society, the very poorest of spirit, and actually eat with them in conscious anticipation of how this is their foretaste of God's Kingdom.

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

means just that- moral sinners, bad people in moral terms (8). The way Jesus broke bread with Judas is perhaps the parade example of Jesus demonstrating that His table was indeed open to sinners, even impenitent ones- in the hope that the experience of eating with Him would lead them to repentance (Mt. 26:20-25 cp. Jn. 13:18-30)

The Essenes

John the Baptist clearly had some associations with the Essenes, and yet it was he who prepared the way for Christ. Yet the Lord Jesus seems to have gone out of His way to invert and criticize the exclusivity of the Essenes by welcoming people of all kinds and levels of holiness or sin to His table; He was seeking to clarify that his human support base was in fact quite misguided. The *Manual of Discipline* of the Essenes taught that meals were only to be shared with those of the same level of holiness as yourself; exclusion from eating at table was a punishment for various infringements of law, just as some churches today exclude members from the "table of the Lord" for certain periods because of some 'offence'. The Essenes had the concept of being in 'good standing' with the elders and the community; and only those in good standing could eat at the same table. Table fellowship became something of an obsession with the Essenes- exactly because in sociological terms, it controlled the very definition of the community. It was felt that by eating

with those outside the group, the whole group would be defiled: "To eat with an outsider or a lapsed member was a highly serious offence, because it was to eat or drink an uncleanness which then crept into the human sanctuary and defiled it" (9). Jesus and the later New Testament teaching of imputed righteousness contradict this; holiness can be passed on by contact with Jesus, whereas we can't pick up any guilt by association from whom we eat with. The guilt by association mentality was rife in first century Judaism: "The demand for separation was based on a desire to avoid contamination through contact with outsiders" (10). Time and again, Jesus consciously challenges these positions; He welcomed children and the lame and blind who came to Him in the temple (Mt. 21:14), when the Damascus sect of the Essenes didn't permit "the blind, lame, deaf, feeble-minded and under-age... even to enter the community" (11). The Qumran group's interpretation of Ps. 41:9 is significant. The familiar friend "who ate my bread with me" is interpreted in the New Testament as referring to Judas, who fellowshiped with Jesus but betrayed Him. But 1QH 13:23,24 interpret this as meaning that woe is prophesied to any who share table fellowship with sinners and therefore their judgment is just and avoidable if they had only eaten with the righteous. Jesus was aware of this of course and seems to have purposefully fellowshiped Judas, knowing the consequences. His wilful, conscious critique of Essene sensibilities about table

fellowship was humanly speaking foolish; because this was the very power base which John had prepared for Him to establish His Kingdom upon. But instead He shunned that and preferred to establish His Kingdom on the basis of tax collectors, the despised, the morally fallen, the irreligious. Even more fundamental was Christian teaching that atonement and forgiveness of sins was to be achieved through the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross and a willing association with His blood, through which His righteousness, which was God's righteousness, was imputed to the believer. Qumran and Judaism generally believed that holiness was "attained by strict devotion to the Law and by conscious maintenance of cleanness from any physical and ethical impurity... [this] was considered an alternative means for atonement" (12). Crudely put, if you sinned, then you atoned for that by keeping distance from sinners. The Lord Jesus taught that forgiveness was from Him, from His death and association with a crucified criminal, and you met together with other sinners to celebrate this by eating together with Him and them. This was so different to the Jewish view.

7-2-1 An Analysis of Table and Eating Incidents

An analysis of the eating incidents in the Lord's ministry reveal that He purposefully used them in order to turn established patterns of table fellowship on their head. Within

His community, there was to be a profound disregard for the notions that your bread was to be broken only with those of appropriate relationship to you, status or purity. The following table, adapted from another writer, shows if nothing else how many are the incidents of table fellowship recorded in the Gospels; and how insistently and consciously the Lord worked to demonstrate that table manners were radically changed at His table.

A Chronological List of Table-Fellowship Incidents in Jesus' Ministry

Category A – Jesus uses meals to reconfigure kinship relations
 Category B – Jesus disregards a person's status during a meal
 Category C – Jesus disregards purity rituals involved in meals

Incident	Cat	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Wedding Feast at Cana	A				2:1-11
Banquet at Levi's House	A	9:10-17	2:15-22	5:29-39	
Picking grain on the Sabbath	C	12:1-8	2:23-28	6:1-5	

Sinful Woman at Simon's	B			7:36-50	
Too busy to eat; family comes	A		3:20-21		
Feeding the 5,000	A	14:15-21	6:35-44	9:12-17	6:4-13
Eating with unwashed hands	C	15:1-20	7:1-23		
Feeding the 4,000	A	15:32-38	8:1-9a		
Mary & Martha	B			10:38-40	
Eating with unwashed hands	C			11:37-52	
Prominent Pharisee/dropsy	B, C			14:1-14	
He eats with sinners	A, B			15:1-2	
Zacchaeus	A			19:1-10	
Anointing at	A, B	26:6-13	14:3-9		12:1-11

Bethany					
Jesus washes the disciple's feet	B				13:1-17
Lord's Supper	C	26:26-29	14:22-25	22:17-20	
Two on route to Emmaus	B		16:12-13	24:13-32	
Appearance to the Ten	A		16:14	24:36-43	20:19-25
Breakfast by the Lake	A				21:11-14

It could also be noted how frequently the Lord uses food and meals as a basis for His teachings (e.g. Mt. 11:18,19; 15:20; 22:2-14; 24:38; 25:1-13; Lk. 10:7; 11:5-12; 12:36; 13:26; 14:16-24; 17:8; Jn. 4:31-34; 6:25-59). There is simply huge emphasis within the Gospels upon eating and table fellowship. The meals of Jesus are noted, and His parables often refer to meals and eating together (Mt. 21:31,32; 22:1-14; Lk. 7:36-50; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 12:35-38; 14:1-24; 15:1,2; 11-32; 19:1-10; 24:30-32; Jn. 2:1-12; 21:1-14). Sorry to keep underlining the point, but this is without doubt

a major theme of the Gospels. Clearly, we are intended to learn something from this emphasis. The huge focus upon meals and table fellowship which we find in the Gospels clearly carried over in significance to the early church; because having given such emphasis to Christ's open table fellowship in his Gospel, Luke in Acts records how the disciples broke bread with each other in their homes as a sign of their unique fellowship in Christ (Acts 2:42,46). Significantly, it was by eating with Gentiles that Peter openly demonstrated that God had accepted Gentiles (Acts 10,11). In first century Judaism "meals... were principal expressions within Judaism of what constituted purity. One ate what was acceptable with those people deemed acceptable" (13).

7-3 The Feeding Miracles

The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels; it is highly significant, not least because of the utterly open fellowship which Jesus demonstrated, especially bearing in mind that the meal was consciously intended as a foretaste of the future Messianic banquet. The food was shared with no respect to boundaries and without any tests of purity or ethnicity. The Pharisees would've been disgusted. Mark especially brings out the connection with the breaking of bread, because he describes both events with the same words and as following the same order of events- Jesus taking the bread, blessing it, and giving to the disciples. Jn.

6:51-59 appears to be John's version of the "breaking of bread" Last Supper discourses in the other Gospels. They record the Lord taking the bread and saying "This *is* my body", but John puts that in terms of Him saying "I *am* the bread of life". The point is that we are to understand in a very deep sense that that bread really "is" Jesus. Not literally, of course, but to such an extent that we accept His actual presence with us at the "breaking of bread".

The Messianic Banquet

The Bible images salvation as a feast with God at His table. The salvation of Israel from Egypt forms the source material for many later allusions to our salvation in Christ- and it was celebrated by Israel being invited up to Mount Sinai to eat and drink with God (Ex. 24:9-11); and it was regularly commemorated in the Passover meal. The future Kingdom of God was spoken of as a meal on a mountain, "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, for all peoples" (Is. 25:6-8). Then, death itself will be on the menu and God will swallow it up. It is pictured as an eternal feast which will last eternally. People from all nations of the earth are to be God's guests. No one is to be excluded. The records of the feeding miracles are presented in terms of this Messianic banquet. They describe the guests as not merely squatting on the ground, but the Greek word for "reclining" is chosen. They likely didn't actually recline, but this word is chosen in

order to heighten the similarity with the Messianic banquet. Jesus set no conditions for participation, nor did He check out the ritual purity or morality of those thousands who reclined there. We are reminded of how at the Last Supper, Jesus shared bread and wine with those who seriously misunderstood Him, of whom He had to ask “Do you now believe...?”, and knowing full and painfully well that one of the twelve was to betray Him. The Lord’s eating with 5000 people, some of whom were likely Gentiles and many were children, was an allusion to the future Messianic banquet to which the “breaking of bread” also looks forward; His meal times were therefore a foretaste of the final banquet, and the point is, He invited all and sundry to be present at them. There was a super generosity of Jesus in the feeding miracles, to the point that baskets full of leftovers were gathered up because of the super abundance of the provision [this point is emphasized in all the records]. This theme of generosity is continued in the way at the early breaking of bread meetings, the early believers “ate their food with glad and generous hearts”, sharing what they had in common. We see here one of many strands of evidence that the Lord’s feeding miracle, with its openness and largesse, was seen as the template for the breaking of bread meetings practiced by the early church.

The Symposium

There was in the first century Mediterranean world a form of banquetting known as the symposium. There was a formal meal, drinking of wine, an address, often of a religious or philosophical nature, and often sexual entertainment. The church at Corinth had clearly turned the breaking of bread meeting into such a symposium. It could be argued that the early church simply adopted the format of the symposium for their communion meetings (14). But there was to be a radical difference- the attendees were of various social classes and races, and men as well as women were to be there [symposia were typically for men, or the women sat separately]. It has been pointed out that the symposia featured "ceremonialized drinking" (15), which helps us see how the breaking of bread meeting instituted by Jesus could so easily have been turned into a kind of symposia. But the symposia were meetings of equals, from the same civic or business association, guild or philosophical college; the idea of the communion service being a gathering of sinful believers in Christ from all parts of society and of both genders, slave and free, was radical. Significantly, Mk. 6:39 describes the huge crowd sitting down to eat with Jesus in *symposia*. He redefined the idea of a symposia. The abundance of food would have reminded the crowds of the descriptions of the Messianic banquet in the Kingdom as having super abundant food. All who wanted to partake were welcome; there was no attempt by Jesus to interview all those men, women and

children and decide who was clean or not. Vine comments on the significant fact that the Lord blessed the meal: "According to the Jewish ordinance, the head of the house was to speak the blessing only if he himself shared in the meal; yet if they who sat down to it were not merely guests, but his children or his household, then he might speak it, even if he himself did not partake". His leading of the blessing was therefore a sign that He ate with these people and / or considered them as His own household. Luke's parallel record speaks of the crowds reclining to eat that meal (Lk. 9:14,15 *kataklino*)- to invite us to see it as a real banquet. The later feeding miracle occurred on the other side of Galilee to Magdala (Mt. 15:39), suggesting the miracle occurred in Gentile territory, with people present from "far off" (Mk. 8:3; hence the guests "glorified the God of Israel", Mt. 15:31). Surely there were Gentiles present at that meal, and the LXX uses this phrase to speak of how Gentiles from "far off" would come and sit down at the Messianic banquet of the last days (Is. 60:4; Jer. 26:27; 38:10; 46:27).

The Feeding Miracles

John's account of the feeding miracle is surely intended to reference the "breaking of bread" meeting; he uses the verb *eucharistein* to describe how Jesus blessed the food, and this word has a ritual, religious sense; it wasn't simply a giving of *thanks* for food, but rather a *blessing over* it.

John's Gospel is different from the synoptics in that he prefers to not state some things which they record but rather expresses them in more spiritual terms. Thus John has no command at the end to be baptized; but Jn. 3:3-5 makes up for this by telling us that we must be born of water and Spirit to enter the Kingdom. Likewise the extended record of the Last Supper discourses in Jn. 13-17 contain no specific command about the breaking of bread. But I suggest this is because John's record of the breaking of bread command is presented by him in the account of the feeding miracle in Jn. 6; indeed those words about the bread of life are often read in order to introduce the breaking of bread service. Strangely, closed table communities often use John 6 to do this; but the context of John 6 is a radically open table to thousands of people! A case can be made that the material in John's Gospel is comprised of a number of sections which in their first usage would've been the exhortation / homily / sermon given at early "breaking of bread" meetings amongst John's converts (16). In this case the seven "I am..." sayings in John would be his form of recording the Lord's statement that "This is My body... This is My blood". "I am the bread of life" is therefore John's way of recording "This is My body". Likewise John's record of the Last Supper discourses focuses upon the abiding presence of Jesus (Jn. 13:8,13; 14:1-6,16-28; 15:1-11,26; 16:7,12-16; 17:20-26). This again is his equivalent of "This is My body... My blood... Me".

Clearly Jesus intended His meal with that huge crowd to be a foretaste of the future Kingdom. To exclude people from the Lord's table is therefore tantamount to saying they have no place in God's Kingdom. Hence Paul warns that we can eat condemnation to ourselves by not discerning the body of Christ; by excluding some from His table, from the one loaf, we are saying they are not in His body, not possible candidates for His Kingdom; and thereby we exclude ourselves from that body. It's not surprising that the early church, at least in Corinth, allowed the meeting to turn into the kind of 'symposia' they were accustomed to. The church of later ages, including our own, has struggled terribly in the same way. The communion service has tended to become a club, a meeting of equals, and too often it has effectively been said "If he's coming, if she's accepted there in fellowship, then I'm out of here". In essence we are faced with the same temptation that was faced and succumbed to in the earlier church- to turn that table into a sign of our bonding with others of our type, rather than allowing the radical challenge of Christ's table fellowship to really be accepted by us as a radical advertisement to the world of Christian unity. The Jewish sensitivity regarding your table companions has too often been transferred to the church of our day.

The Radical Openness of Jesus

The table manners of Jesus were simply inclusive rather than exclusive. And when it came to dealing with those who differed, such as the followers of John the Baptist, His attitude was that whoever isn't against is for (Lk. 9:50). John the Baptist's followers clearly believed in demons, yet God still worked with them; they were against fellowship with the disciples of Jesus, and yet for all their practical and doctrinal failures, Jesus graciously considered them "for" Him and not "against" Him. The fact that at His very last supper, He chose to eat with the man whom He knew was not at all "with" Him shows His insistence upon trying to teach to the end that He sought to treat people as family in order for them to become family, He shared His Kingly table with sinners in order to invite them to His level. And it was not only in His choice of table companions that the Lord challenged existing beliefs about purity and fellowship; He did away with the concept of clean and unclean foods, declaring all foods clean (Mk. 7:19). It was hard for even His disciples to accept this (Acts 10:14-16; 15; 1 Cor. 10:23-27); how much harder for the Jews as a whole. The Lord also refused to uphold the idea of ritually washing before meals; He had none of the paranoia about uncleanness being picked up through how you ate and whom you ate with.

As taught throughout Luke 14, the idea of the Messianic Banquet as a table for "the just" and "the blessed" was reversed- rather would it be populated by the unclean and

unrighteous living on the edge of town. Truly “In Jesus’ interpretation of the heavenly marriage feast and other traditional statements about politico-religious and social relations, the significance of the meal- the food, the host, the guests, the circumstances- is absolutely reversed. Temple and sacrifice, family, priesthood, and nation are radically redefined... in contrast to the Passover that brings the family together, Jesus’ sacrifice breaks it apart to create new bonds” (17). Meals served as boundary markers between groups, reflecting religious and social stratification- and Jesus reversed all that by opening His table to all. Although 21st Century Western society has departed somewhat from this, meals have been that way in most cultures over history. For only humans eat collectively as families; there is a sense of assurance and community in eating together (18). The way Jesus opened His table was and is radical indeed. It is just as radical for those of us brought up to think that the “breaking of bread” must be closed and fenced off to any believers who interpret Scripture differently to us, or “who fellowship with those who do”, as stated in the “Four clauses concerning fellowship” of the church of my youth. We mustn’t fail to perceive how radical were Jesus’ actions at His table: “When Jesus subverted conventional mealtime practices, he was doing far more than offering sage counsel for his table companions. Rather, he was toppling the familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its socially

constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a scandalous alternative” (19).

7-4 The Breaking of Bread and the Table Manners of Jesus

The question, of course, is whether we are to understand the “breaking of bread” as a religious meeting as being a continuation of the meals Jesus ate. The simple fact is that meals were religious acts in the time of Jesus. Indeed, nearly all the meals recorded in the Bible have some religious or spiritual significance. Especially in the book of Genesis, meals are used as signs of covenant making, reconciliation, peace, agreement, forgiveness and acceptance. There was far more to meals than merely eating together. The fact is that for many of us today, there is no significance attached to which table in McDonald’s you sit at. But we are quite wrong to read that attitude back into the meals we read of in the Bible. So I believe we are to see all the meals of Jesus, including the Last Supper and His continued eating with us today, as all on the same continuum. His table manners were radical, there can be no doubt about that; it would be strange indeed if a ministry noted for those radical meals was to be concluded by a Passover-style meal with a closed table and an expectation that we should keep it likewise closed.

The connection between the Last Supper and the previous meals of Jesus during His ministry ought to be obvious- it was one other meal, and meals had religious significance in the context in which Jesus held them. The participants are spoken of as “coming together to eat” (1 Cor. 11:33), as if the “breaking of bread” was also a meal, after the pattern of the original “breaking of bread” being a Passover-style meal. Hence it is called a “love feast” (Jude 12), and Acts 2:42,46,47 speak as if it involved eating a communal meal together. If we can accept that the original “breaking of bread” was indeed a meal, it would seem almost axiomatic that access to the “bread and wine” as in the “emblems” would have been open. For would the early brethren really have said: “You’re welcome to eat everything on the table except the unleavened bread”? Or would they really have invited those present to pray and worship with them before and after the meal, but not while they were praying for and taking the bread and wine? There is no hint even that this was the case.

The disciples perceived the link between their eating with Jesus at meal tables, and the future Messianic banquet- for James and John asked that their favoured places at Jesus’ table during His ministry be retained in the future Messianic banquet (Mk. 10:35). There was a super generosity of Jesus in the feeding miracles, to the point that baskets full of leftovers were gathered up because of the super abundance

of the provision [this point is emphasized in all the records]. This theme of generosity is continued in the way at the early breaking of bread meetings, the early believers “ate their food with glad and generous hearts”, sharing what they had in common. We see here one of many strands of evidence that the Lord’s feeding miracle, with its openness and largesse, was seen as the template for the breaking of bread meetings practiced by the early church.

The same Greek words for "break bread" are used in the healing miracles, where Jesus broke bread and gave it to the crowds (Mt. 14:19; 15:36), and for how Jesus took bread and broke it at a meal with the Emmaus disciples (Lk. 24:30); those two words are also used to describe how Paul 'broke bread' with the passengers and crew onboard ship (Acts 27:35). So the evidence would seem to be that the meals of Jesus [which were open to all, sinners included] were of the same category and nature as the memorial meal known as "the breaking of bread"- for the same phrase 'breaking bread' is used (Mt. 26:26; Acts 2:46; 20:7; 1 Cor. 10:16; 11:24). The same rubric of taking bread, blessing and giving to the disciples is found in the feeding miracles as in the Last Supper, and in the Lord’s post-resurrectional eating with the couple in Emmaus- as well as in Paul’s exposition of the Christian “breaking of bread” which we have in 1 Cor. 11. Mark’s Gospel seeks to draw a parallel between the Lord’s feeding miracles and the last supper “breaking of

bread”. In each account, there is the same action recorded: Taking, blessing, dividing and giving out (Mk. 6:41-44 cp. Mk. 14:22-25). That same four fold theme is to be found in the “breaking of bread” which Paul shared on the stricken ship in Acts 27:33-37, where we note that how he “gave thanks” is described using the verb *eucharisteo*. Truly “One cannot escape the Eucharistic shape of [that] story” (20).

It’s a hard job for those who wish to separate the open ‘breakings of bread’ performed by Jesus and Paul from the “breaking of bread” as in our Christian ritual of remembrance of Christ’s death. They would have to argue that ‘breaking bread’ is used in different ways in the New Testament. Contrary to what their position requires, “”Breaking of bread” was not a standard Jewish designation for a full meal, but only for the ritual act that initiated it” (21). The Emmaus disciples were particularly struck by the way in which Jesus blessed and broke the bread (Lk. 24:30-35), showing that ‘breaking bread’ isn’t used to simply refer to any kind of eating. Note how Luke comments on Paul’s “breaking bread” at Troas: “After he had broken bread *and* eaten” (Acts 20:11). ‘Breaking bread’ isn’t equal to simply eating any old meal. Likewise the word *eucharistesas* is associated with the “giving thanks” for the bread and wine at the breaking of bread (Mt. 26:26; Mk. 14:22; Lk. 22:17-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25; Acts 2:46); but this isn’t the usual word which would’ve been used to describe giving thanks for a

meal. That would've been *eulogia*, equivalent to the Hebrew *berakah*. The word *eucharistias* seems to have a specific ritual, religious sense (as in Rom. 14:5; Jubilees 22:5-9); some argue that it means to give thanks *over* something, in this case the bread, rather than to simply give thanks *for* e.g. a meal. It is therefore highly significant that this is the word also used for Christ's breaking of bread to the 5000 strangers, Gentiles and semi-believers in the desert, and Paul's breaking bread with the sailors on the doomed ship (Jn. 6:11,23; Acts 27:34-36). This strongly suggests that we are to see in those incidents a spiritual, ritual 'breaking of bread' rather than a mere sharing of food.

Our tendency is to suppose that there were different types of meals together; some religious and some secular. Closed table communities, faced with the inclusive example of Jesus' meal tables as recorded in the Gospels, are forced to assume that He was just simply eating with people with no religious overtones. But that is simply not the case; all eating together at the same table was seen as a religious act. If it were not, then there wouldn't have been the scandal caused by His eating with sinners (e.g. Lk. 15:1,2). "All meals in the ancient Mediterranean world were to some extent ritual occasions... our concern for distinctions among types of meal fellowship was not theirs" (22). Especially in first century Palestine, the teaching of the religious Jews had made table fellowship of huge importance. They taught that

the way to resist the Roman occupation of their holy land was to themselves be holy, to only break bread with faithful Jews, to magnify Jewish religious separation and unity amongst themselves. For Jesus to teach and practice an open table to Gentiles and non-religious Jews was infuriating for the Jewish religious elite. It has been well observed: “Jesus welcomed those outcasts into table-fellowship with himself in the name of the Kingdom of God, in the name of the Jews’ ultimate hope, and so both prostituted that hope and also shattered the closed ranks of the community against the enemy. It is hard to imagine anything more offensive to Jewish sensibilities” (23). And many believers of our day have likewise been crucified by their brethren for adopting the same position as their Lord.

But just as meals are a major theme of the Lord’s ministry before His death, so they continue to be after His resurrection. Nearly all the resurrection appearances feature Jesus eating with people (Lk. 24:13-35, 36-43; Mk. 16:14-18; Jn. 21:1-14). Not only are the words used for the “breaking of bread” meeting identical with those used at the feeding miracles of Jesus in His ministry, but the order of events is identical- He took bread, blessed it, and gave to the disciples to give to others (Mt. 26:26; Mk. 14:22 re. the “breaking of bread”, and Mk. 6:41; 8:6; Lk. 9:16; Jn. 6:11). Luke’s Gospel records seven meals of Jesus (Lk. 5:27-39; 7:36-50; 9:10-17; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10),

and then presents the *last* supper (Lk. 22:7-38) and two meals after the Lord's resurrection- the breaking of bread at Emmaus and then with the disciples in Jerusalem (Lk. 24:13-53, 36-53). The meals recorded are all either in Jerusalem or on the way to or from Jerusalem. It appears that Luke intends us to see them all as seamlessly connected. The "breaking of bread" scenes are just as "open" as the other meal scenes at which Jesus radically challenged the "closed table" mentality of the Judaism of His day. It would be strange indeed if Luke were to record how Jesus was radically "open" in His table manners and then intend us to understand that the *last* supper was a closed table affair- and that fellowship in the community of believers depends upon upholding a closed table.

There is the strong sense that if you break bread with someone, then you are sharing their theological positions and lifestyle. This is perhaps the strongest psychological reason why some make a closed table the litmus test of a church they are willing to belong to. But the table manners of the Lord Jesus showed the very opposite approach. In any case, if, e.g., the leadership of a church are teaching a non-trinitarian Jesus, a full blown Trinitarian will not come near that church. And if they do and if they take a nip of bread and sip of wine- so what? That doesn't make you a traitor to the cause of non-trinitarianism. The sense that we have become as others who are breaking bread with us is really guilt by

association; and this is not taught in Scripture, indeed the very opposite is taught; not least in the example of the Son of God who became so closely involved with sinners in order to save them. There really would have to be hard Bible evidence provided that we are counted as those with whom we break bread; and it's not there.

Notes

(1) This point is exemplified powerfully in Patrick Skehan, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira* (New York: Doubleday, 1987) p. 220.

(2) Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1991) pp. 361-387.

(3) Scott McNight, *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, Eds. Michael Wilkins and J.P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) p. 64.

(4) Jacob Neusner, *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) p. 83, and see too his *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973).

(5) I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) p. 697.

(6) Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (New York: KTAV, 1967 ed.) p. 55.

(7) J. Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (London: Doubleday, 2000) p. 231.

- (8) E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: S.C.M., 1985) pp. 174-211.
- (9) Bilha Nitzan, 'The idea of holiness', in D.K. Falk, F.G. Martinez and E.M. Schuller, *Sapiential, Liturgical and Poetical Texts from Qumran* (Leiden: Brill, 2000) p. 145.
- (10) P.R. Davies, 'Food, Drink and Sects', *Semeia* Vol. 86 (1999) p. 161.
- (11) M.A. Knibb, *The Qumran Community* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1987) pp. 109,110.
- (12) Craig Blomberg, *Contagious Holiness* (Leicester: I.V.P., 2005) p. 81.
- (13) Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (London: Doubleday, 2000) p. 473.
- (14) Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist* (MN: Fortress, 2003).
- (15) W.J. Slater, *Dining in a Classical Context* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991) p. 7.
- (16) Barnabas Lindars, *Behind the Fourth Gospel* (London: S.P.C.K., 1971) pp. 23,47,61.
- (17) Gillian Feeley-Harnik, *The Lord's Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) pp. 130,131,144.
- (18) See Mary Douglas "Food as a System of Communication" in *In the Active Voice* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) pp. 82-124.
- (19) Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans, 1997) p. 550.

(20) Mark Stamm, *Let Every Soul be Jesus' Guest* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006) p. 45.

(21) John Koenig, *The Feast of the World's Redemption* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000) p. 91. This is confirmed in Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) p. 131.

(22) Stamm *op cit* p. 47.

(23) Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) p. 103. Indeed Perrin goes so far as to argue that it was Jesus' table fellowship behaviour which led Him to His cross.

7-5 The Parables of Luke 14 and 15

Luke 14 begins with the Lord Jesus at a Sabbath meal with the Jews, closed table enthusiasts *par excellence*. A man with “dropsy”, likely crippled, wanders in to the function (cp. how the sinful woman wandered in to Simon's banquet in Lk. 7:39)- and Jesus heals him. The Jews are disgusted. Jesus goes on to tell the host that at a *wedding feast*, he ought to be inviting the “poor, lame, maimed and blind” to his table. The added detail- a *wedding feast*- was surely to draw attention to the fact that our tables are a foretaste of the

final Messianic banquet of which the Last Supper is the quintessence. This was a total inversion of accepted table manners; not only to criticize your host, but to suggest that those from the despised classes should be given table fellowship with no test of their spiritual qualifications. A man interjected with a classic Jewish blessing: “How blessed are those who sit down at the messianic banquet in the Kingdom of God!”. Jesus takes that as a cue to tell a parable of how God invited guests to that banquet, but they refused, and so He ended up urging the “poor, lame, maimed and blind” to come in to His banquet. Absolutely anyone who said “yes” was welcome to that wonderful table- with no checks by the servants upon their suitability for table fellowship. The section is concluded with the Lord then giving solemn warnings about the cost of carrying His cross and how this will result in the loss of very dear human relationships.

Clearly Luke- who gives so much emphasis to table fellowship issues- has carefully chosen this material in order to make a point. The entire chapter is thematic and the incidents connect with each other. The repetition of the “poor, lame, maimed and blind” makes it clear that we are to understand *our* invitations to our tables as reflective of the way God has invited *us*, the “poor, lame, maimed and blind”, to *His* table and final Messianic banquet. Putting the two teachings together, our open table is to be the response to

Christ's open invitation to all to come to His table. That the two teachings are connected is reinforced by realizing that the "place" or "room" thrice spoke of in Lk. 14:9,10 is the same Greek word translated "room" in Lk. 14:22- there was still "room", there were still places at the table. The places we take *and offer* at the Lord's table today are related to the places at the future Messianic banquet. The language of "sitting down at table" (Lk. 14:10) is the same phrase used about the Last Supper (Lk. 22:14; Jn. 13:12) and the feeding miracle of Jn. 6:10, which I have elsewhere suggested looked forward to the future Messianic banquet, and the language of which in John's account is full of allusion to the "breaking of bread".

The Immediate Context

The man with dropsy- who was perhaps in every sense the "poor, lame, maimed and blind"- lingers in the story, silently present. For there is no record that he was quietly removed from the scene. The point surely is that he is all of us. For if we hope that we are the ones who shall finally sit at the Messianic banquet, then we are the "poor, lame, maimed and blind". Further, Jesus taught that the ones who would finally be at His table were the maimed, those with dropsy- and thus He was inviting the Pharisees and even the host of the meal to make a huge paradigm change and consider that spiritually, they were that man. "Dropsy" referred to the strange

formations and appearances of a person who was retaining liquid- and yet the ancients often noted that the person with dropsy had too much water and yet an insatiable thirst for it. “Dropsy” therefore became a term for the greedy and lovers of money (1)- and Luke sees the Pharisees as exactly guilty of this (Lk. 11:37-44 cp. 16:14). It has also been noted that “poor, lame, maimed and blind” and those living in the very locations from which the guests would be taken is all language which appears to be alluding to various lists from Qumran about those who could not be eaten with because they would not possibly be eaten with eternally (2).

There is no doubt that Jesus was trying to convert the host, and those present. The host had carefully selected his guests on the basis of worth and recipricocity, and they had accepted the invitation after careful consideration, realizing they were now obligated to provide a similar feast. But Jesus tries to take them further- to realize that they would only be seated at the Messianic banquet if they recognized that they had nothing to offer in return. Those who would be seated there had to be “compelled” to enter exactly because of this fear- that they had nothing to respond with. The parable throws up the question- if God is the host, well why didn't He invite the “poor, lame, maimed and blind” right away, instead of [apparently] inviting His own class and kind, and then only when they were inexplicably disinterested and rejective of Him did He turn to the lower classes? It would

appear that the point of this aspect of the parable is that *the host changes his attitude*. We may be unwise to push too strictly the parallel between host and God. Perhaps the point simply is, in outline terms, that the host who initially followed Jewish table practice in inviting only his own type and class, radically turned it all upside down. He decided to invite the very poorest. And this is of course exactly the conversion which Jesus wished his own host would make. And yet the connection between the host and God remains inevitably in our minds, and for those unafraid to think where God's word leads, we are left with the question as to whether God Himself changed in this matter. The point upon which He does not change is that the wayward sons of Jacob are not ultimately consumed by His wrath but saved by His grace; that is a constant, unchanging feature. But the rest of God's dealings with us seem very open to change insofar as He is highly sensitive to human behaviour. There was some legal code before that of Moses; this was replaced by the laws of the Old Covenant; that was replaced by the New Covenant. God's stated punishments upon Israel at the time of Moses [and many other times] didn't happen; within 40 days Nineveh was not destroyed; Adam did not die in the day he ate the fruit. This isn't fickleness, but rather hypersensitivity to repentance and human positions. And could it not be that in the opening of the Kingdom table to all, God Himself moved on? And so it happens so often with spiritually minded

believers; they begin with closed attitudes, sincerely held; but develop towards open table, more open attitudes to baptism into Christ etc. I have seen this move from closed to open happen in the lives and positions of very many finely spiritually minded believers in Christ. And we see it too in the Bible characters, and in the biographies of some of the Lord's more recent servants. This move from a closed table to an open table was the change Jesus wished to see happening in his host, and he models that wish in the story of the host who changed his table practice.

The Invited

There is a repeated and purposeful emphasis by the Lord upon the theme of being 'bidden' or invited: "He told a parable to those that were *invited*... lest a more honourable man than you be *invited* by him... When you are *invited* by anyone to a marriage feast... he that *invited* you shall come... But when you are *invited*... that when he that has *invited* you comes... He also said to him that had *invited* him... When you make a dinner or a supper, *invite* not your friends... unless they also *invite* you... *invite* the poor, the maimed... A certain man made a great supper and he *invited* many... he sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were *invited*... none of those men that were *invited* shall taste my supper" (Lk. 14:7-10,12,13,16,17,24). This is an undoubted, repetitive emphasis- to the point that it seems

almost overdone. We can't fail to notice it. The point surely is that we are at the Lord's table as *guests*. It was unheard of for guests to start excluding other guests. Especially if they were in the lowest place, taken of their own volition, realizing that they were in a place which by rights was 'not for them'. And this is where we are at the breaking of bread meeting- for it is a dry run of the marriage supper of the lamb. The two teachings about feasts and inviting are of course related- just as Jesus exhorts us to "invite" the poor, maimed, lame and blind (Lk. 14:13), so He goes on to teach that this is because *we* are in fact the poor, maimed, lame and blind who have been invited to the marriage supper of the lamb (Lk. 14:21). Quite simply, the Lord's gracious invitation of *us* is to be reflected in who *we* in our turn invite to our table. We will only get the point if we accept that we really are in that category of the poor, maimed, lame and blind.

The logic of the Lord's teaching in Luke 14 keeps coming back to us- we are *His guests*, reclining by grace at *His table*. It is simply not for us to draw up the guest list and to tell some they cannot be there. The boundary drawn in the parable of Lk. 14:21-24 is between those who refuse the invitation to dine with the Lord, and those who accept it. But that boundary is self-imposed by the people who hear the call; there is no suggestion at all that those who respond then tell others they can't attend. Indeed, the spirit of the parable

is surely suggestive of the fact that to do so would be utterly out of order and inappropriate.

We are to take the lowest place amongst those who are invited (Lk. 14:8). And who are those invited to the Lord's table? Surely- everyone. All are called, but not all respond. The way those invited reject the call for various not very convincing reasons, because life simply got in the way, speaks of how the people of this world reject the call of the Gospel today. The invited are therefore the world. For the sound of the Gospel has gone out into all the world, and those likely to attend a "breaking of bread" meeting have for sure heard that call. The sound of the Gospel has gone out into all the world (Col. 1:6). We are "called" or invited "by [Gk. *dia-* through, by the channel of] the Gospel" (2 Thess. 2:14). All who hear the invitation have heard the invitation... they are called. They have been invited, and they can't say they didn't hear. The call of the Gospel has gone out to all men, the sounds of it are in all the earth, as Paul puts it in Rom. 10:18. All men are invited; and therefore we are to invite them to sit with us in fellowship and learning of the gracious host, until the second call comes to literally go to meet and sit down with Him again. The same Greek word translated "bidden" is found in Lk. 5:32 and Mk. 2:17, where Jesus defends His manner of sharing His table with sinners- by saying that He came to "call" or bid the sinners to repentance. And He did that by eating with them.

Christ died on the cross with outstretched, beckoning arms-willing all men to come and partake in “the world’s redemption” which He achieved there. For His death is repeatedly described as being for “all men”, “the world”. To turn people away from participation in the commemoration of what He did is therefore done in the very face of the crucified Christ. I for one cannot do that. And neither should you. The parables of Luke 14 clearly teach that the Lord’s table is indeed *His* table and not ours; we are present there as awed, humbled guests, marvelling at His grace even to *me*. By fencing His table, allowing this one but not that one, those but not these, we are turning it into *our* table. And the clear emphasis of Luke 14 is that we are invited guests. If we are ever in some sense hosts, then we are to reflect the Lord’s gracious, open invitation to His table- to the extent that we are not really the hosts, because we are to be Him, inviting all as He invites all. Putting all this more theologically: “It is the *Lord's* supper, not something organized by a church or a denomination. The church owes its life to the Lord and its fellowship to his supper, not the other way around. Its invitation goes out to all whom he is sent to invite. If a church were to limit the openness of his invitation of its own accord, it would be turning the Lord's supper into the church's supper and putting its own fellowship at the centre, not fellowship with him. By using the expression 'the Lord's supper' we are therefore stressing

the pre-eminence of Christ above his earthly church and are calling in question every denominationally limited 'church supper'" (3).

The only other reference to being called / invited to eat at a feast is in 1 Cor. 10:27, where Paul's approach would've shocked Jewish sensibilities: If a pagan idol worshipper invited you as a believer to his table, where almost certainly the food had first been offered to idols- then, it was quite OK to go to it, and not fuss about the "guilt by association" with idols, and not to ask about the meat's recent history. The context makes it clear that table fellowship with others is quite OK, even with Gentile idolaters- because after the pattern of Jesus' table manners during His ministry, it's an opportunity to lead those people to Him. Even the slightest element of "guilt by association" in Paul's inspired thinking would have led him to warn against attending such a meal, or at least to clarify the connection between the food and idol worship. But there is none of that- in fact, the very opposite.

Jesus effectively became the host at the meal where He was a guest, telling the host whom he should have invited. This even today would be seen as discourteous, and in first century Palestine it would've been highly offensive. Notice how again at Emmaus, Jesus the guest became effectively the host, by taking the bread and blessing it and then giving it back to His hosts. Jesus is stressing His desire to share

fellowship with these categories- and they were the very categories which the Qumran community rejected from their table fellowship (1Q 28A 2.3-10). They did so on the basis that Lev. 21:17-24 excluded these groups from priestly service. So the Lord is teaching that those very categories who are rejected by the spiritual elite because of their disqualification from His service are in fact the very ones we should invite to His table- because we, in fact, are those very types ourselves. This is admittedly hard for white middle class Protestant religionists to come to terms with; but so it was in the first century too. In this we see the radical challenge of Jesus echoing down to our own generation.

The Blessed

Having spoken of how “the just” will be recompensed at the last day, a man interrupts Jesus with the traditional Jewish exclamation: “Blessed he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God!” (Lk. 14:15). Jesus’ subsequent parable turned that on its head- as was the manner of Jesus. He radically challenged the assumption that the Messianic banquet of the last day would be attended only by those whom Judaism considered “the just”, “the blessed”. No, it will not be, and is not, a table of white faced saints, hobby theologians and the like. The Lord’s next parable made the point- those who will finally sit down there are the “poor,

lame, maimed and blind”, those like the man with “dropsy” whom the host didn’t allow to eat at his table. The whole point of Luke 14, when the incidents and parables are read together, is that the essence of that future table of the Lord is lived out by us now. And it is those whom the religious reject who are to be accepted there, for it is they who will populate that table at the last day.

Some years later, the Lord Jesus seems to have returned to the man's comment when He inspired John to record: "Blessed are they which are *called* [s.w. "bidden" or invited in Lk. 14] to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). The Lord is saying that we should not just perceive the future banquet as a wonderful, blessed time for "the just"; the wonder is that the blessedness is in the fact that we have been invited, and have responded to that invitation, right now!

Carrying the Cross

The final section in Luke 14 records Jesus challenging us to pick up His cross, at the risk of losing human relationships. His cross in the context of Luke 14 was His insistence upon a radically open table. And many are the believers whose practice of this cost them their human friendships. For many are the cases of adultery, doctrinal or moral failure which have been kindly overlooked; but having an open table appears to be the “sin” for which there is no forgiveness in

the eyes of many in the body of Christ. This for us is part of carrying His cross. To give up all things (Lk. 14:33) isn't really to be taken literally in material terms; rather is it the willingness to lose all our standing, our acceptance by others, in order to envelope all men within the inclusive invitation of the One who invited and saved us by His grace. The connection between the 'cross carrying' material and the earlier accounts of Christ's table manners is clear- in the same way as the man who began building a tower and couldn't finish it is "shamed" in the eyes of others (Lk. 14:29), so the man who takes the highest place at table will be "shamed" in the eyes of others (Lk. 14:29). The man who realizes he has but 10,000 men behind him compared to the Lord's 20,000 must debase himself. In the context of the chapter, this self-debasement is in terms of taking the lowest place at the Lord's table, as a homeless, crippled beggar, and to sit there marvelling at the grace of the invitation we have received- rather than excluding such people and assuming a higher place at the table.

Radical Implications

If we perceive our own moral desperation, fully grasping that even the most righteous are "scarcely saved" (1 Pet. 4:18), we will reflect the utter grace shown to us in inviting us to the Lord's table by inviting others to it whom the world will regard as the very dregs of society. No longer will His table

be fenced by us to only allow the drearily righteous to attend. A case can be made that earliest Christianity was a religion of undesirables, questionable characters and sinners. The pagan critics of Christianity mocked the community as being comprised of largely dubious individuals on the very edges of society. Celsus criticized the Christian community as being eager to invite to their eucharist table “anyone who is living an immoral life, or who is simpleminded or sinful – the more unjust the better... thieves and poisoners and graverobbers are welcome... if you wanted to put together the best gang of ne'er-do-wells you could imagine, just go along to one of their Eucharists”. Origen, in response to Celsus, doesn't defend Christianity by claiming Celsus had his facts wrong. He actually agrees with him but defends the Christian church by saying that the church “is not a haven for saints but a hospital for sinners” (4). And this is to be the spirit of our invitation of the very dregs of society to the Lord's table. And surely the point is that if we invite the very dregs of our societies, we are to invite all men. Of course, Christianity became respectable, especially once Constantine decided to make it the official religion of the Roman empire. The priests were dressed up (and still are to this day) in robes and insignia which were the dress of Roman senators. No longer was it the religion of the marginalized. It was the religion of the respectable. The damage done by Constantine wasn't simply in the introduction of pagan doctrines such as the

Trinity and seeking to merge paganism with Christianity. Probably the greatest damage he did was in making Christianity the religion of the respectable, of the core members of society, and thus excluding the marginalised. But the parables of Luke 14 teach that the essence of Christianity is for the marginalized. For the refugees, illegal immigrants, homeless, the druggies, the guilty. One good thing that arises from the postmodern mocking of Christianity as a religion for the simplistic and losers, for the unfashionable, is that in fact we finally have a 1st century position to work from once again. All attempts to desperately fence the Lord's table are really standing in the way of that turning tide and will ultimately come to nothing, as the Lord leads His body into a position whereby they can truly welcome Him at His return.

Summary

The parable of the great supper in Luke 14 really says it all. People were begged to come in, anyone, whoever they were, street people, and those living in the countryside near the city. These people were "drawn from the ranks of those people who live close to the city precincts because their livelihood depended on the city, but not within the city walls because the nature of their business was too naturally noxious, socially odious or religiously suspect... an assortment of refugee aliens, disenfranchised villagers, run-away slaves, prostitutes, roving beggars" (5). Yet these very

people are in the parable invited to the Messianic banquet. The Targums on the Old Testament depictions of that feast stressed that it was a feast for righteous Jews who had been despised by the Gentiles in this life. Jesus absolutely contradicts this; "He is toppling the familiar world of the ancient Mediterranean, overturning its socially constructed reality and replacing it with what must have been regarded as a scandalous alternative" (6). The radical import of an open table is no less scandalous today in many Christian groups. Hence one of the chief complaints against Jesus was that He welcomed sinners *and ate with them* (Lk. 15:1,2). His answer was that this is but a reflection of the openness of God towards each of us; for we are all, would we but realize it, the irreligious and marginalized. And Jesus wasn't passive in this; He in an outgoing way sought to fellowship with such people. This is our personal comfort, and yet also our challenge insofar as we are to reflect that to others.

The Parables of Luke 15

The teaching of Luke 14 moves on seamlessly to the parables of Luke 15, which were given in order to address the observation that the Lord Jesus ate with sinners (Lk. 15:1,2). Most if not all of the parables have an element of unreality to them; and those elements of unreality are signposts to an essential teaching point of the story. One such element of unreality is that the shepherd and the woman are so

ecstatically happy over the recovery of an apparently small thing. The shepherd brings the sheep into his *home* rather than return it to the fold; and then invites his friends and neighbours to come feast with him in celebration. They would've found it somewhat strange to be invited to such a feast for such an apparently trivial reason. After all, 1% loss isn't bad at all. But their friend and neighbour is strangely fanatic about the recovery of the lost animal. The feasting of the shepherd and the woman is an explanation of why Jesus broke Jewish table culture and ate with all and sundry. For that is the purpose of these parables- to explain His table manners (15:1). The woman and the shepherd invited all they could- for in village life, everyone in your society falls into the category of either a friend or a neighbour. The passion of the woman and the shepherd to invite all and sundry to their celebration is the passion of Jesus- in inviting all humanity to His table, to rejoice with Him in the salvation He has achieved. Even if they come bemused and misunderstanding Him- He wants them there, to share His joy with Him at His table.

One of the main elements of unreality in the parable of the prodigal son is that the Father doesn't interview the son before inviting him to the feast. We expect a series of questions, an interview, the forcing of a penitential confession. But there is none of that. There was no check made as to the son's worthiness to sit at the table. And the

final crunch point of the story is not about the prodigal son, but about the older son who chooses to remain outside the Father's family because he simply can't hack this. Closed table communities need to ponder whether they are in fact seriously missing the whole point of Christianity by effectively saying 'We're out of here if s/he is going to be at the table'. That, surely, is the sober point of the parable. That by saying that, you end the story of your life out in the darkness, separated by your own choice from the Father's table. His grace may well yet be enough to save those who do this- but it would be a fool indeed, willing to gamble away their eternal salvation, who ever said "I will not break bread if *you* are present and partaking".

Notes

- (1) Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1995) pp. 30,34.
- (2) Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) p. 553.
- (3) Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977) p. 244.
- (4) Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 3.59ff.
- (5) Braun, *op. cit.* p. 93.
- (6) Green, *op. cit.* p. 550.

7-6 The Tolerance of Jesus

Patient Leading

The Lord Jesus spoke the word to men “as they were able to hear it”, not as He was able to expound it (Mk. 4:33). He didn't always relay to men the maximum level of understanding which He Himself possessed. The language of Jesus as recorded in John's Gospel is very different to that we encounter in the other Gospels. Indeed, the difference is so striking that some have claimed that John put the words into Jesus' mouth in his account. My suggestion is that the Lord did in fact say all the words attributed to Him in all the Gospel records. But He had two levels of talking with people- a Heavenly, spiritual kind of style (which John picked up on); and also a more earthly one, which Matthew, Mark and Luke tended to record. In our context, the simple point that emerges is that Jesus spoke in different ways to different people; He tailored His language in accordance with His audience.

There is a tendency amongst some personality types to turn every disagreement over interpretation of Scripture into a right : wrong, truth : error scenario. To turn the interpretation of every Bible verse into a conflict area is a recipe for disaster in relationships. This is perhaps why the Lord seems to have let some issues go without immediate comment- His

use of the language of demons is a major example. He lost a battle to win the war- of showing men that the power of God was so great that there was no room for belief in the existence of demons. Yet on the way to that end, He commanded 'unclean spirits' to leave men, with the result that observers marvelled that 'even unclean spirits obey him!'. He didn't on that occasion challenge the wrong belief directly, even though this meant that in the short term the wrong belief was perpetuated. But over time in His ministry, and in the whole New Testament, reference to demons becomes less and less, as His preaching of Truth by example and miracle made the point that these things really don't exist. Likewise the gods of Egypt were not specifically stated to not exist: but through the miracles at the Exodus, it was evident that Yahweh was unrivalled amongst all such 'gods', to the point of showing their non-existence (Ex. 15:11; 18:11). When accused of being in league with 'satan', the Lord didn't read them a charge of blasphemy. He reasoned instead that a thief cannot bind a strong man; and likewise He couldn't bind 'satan' unless He were stronger than Satan (Mk. 3:23-27). He doesn't take the tack that 'Satan / Beelzebub / demons' don't exist; He showed instead that He was evidently stronger than any such being or force, to the point that belief in such a concept was meaningless. Faith must rather be in Him alone. We too must speak the word as others are able to hear it, expressing the truths of Christ in

language and terms which will reach them; and patiently fellowship them along their road to truth, just as we do our own children.

The Tolerance Of Jesus

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

fellowship (Rom. 16:2; Phil. 2:29). The Lord fellowshiped people in the belief that this would lead them to repentance, following His Father's pattern of using grace in order to lead people to repentance (Rom. 2:4). He didn't wait for people to get everything right and repented of and only then fellowship them, as a sign that they were up to His standards.

7-7 The Teaching Style Of Jesus

The Lord and the Gospel writers seem to have recognized that a person may believe in Christ, and be labelled a 'believer' in Him, whilst still not knowing the fullness of "the truth": "Then said Jesus to those Jews which had believed on him, If you continue in my word, then are you truly my disciples; and you shall know the truth" (Jn. 8:31,32). Clearly the Lord saw stages and levels to discipleship and 'knowing the truth'.

Consider some examples:

The Demon Issue

The centurion seems to have believed in demon possession. He understood that his servant was "grievously tormented" by them. He believed that the Lord could cure him, in the same way as he could say to his underlings "go, and he goes" (Mt. 8:6-10). And so, he implied, couldn't Jesus just say to the demons 'Go!', and they would go, as with the 'demons' in

the madman near Gadara? The Lord didn't wheel round and read him a lecture about 'demons don't exist' (although they don't, of course, and it's important to understand that they don't). He understood that this man had faith that He, as the Son of God, had power over these 'demons', and therefore "he marvelled, and said... Verily... I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel". He focused on what faith and understanding the man had. With the height of His spirituality, with all the reason He had to be disappointed in people, the Lord marvelled at a man's faith. It is an essay in how He seized on what genuine faith He found, and worked to develop it, even if there was an element of false understanding in it (1).

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

misunderstanding of demons and sinners being thrown into the abyss. This was in keeping with the kind of healing styles people were used to at the time- e.g. Josephus records how Eleazar cast demons out of people and placed a cup of water nearby, which was then [supposedly] tipped over by the demons as they left the sick person [*Antiquities Of The Jews* 8.46-48]. It seems to me that the Lord 'went along with' that kind of need for reassurance, and so He made the pigs stampede over the cliff to symbolize to the healed man how his disease had really left him.

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

There may well be more examples of this kind of thing in the New Testament than may appear to the English reader. The warning that the wicked will be cast into the everlasting fire prepared for the Devil (Mt. 25:41) was referring to the apocryphal fate of supposedly 'wicked angels' as recorded in 1 Enoch 54. The references to Tartarus and sinful angels in 2 Peter and Jude are also clear references to wrong beliefs which were common in Jewish apocryphal and pseudo-

epigraphical writings. These wrong ideas- and they are wrong- are not corrected directly, but rather a moral lesson is drawn from the stories. This is the point of the allusion to them; but there is no explicit correction of these myths in the first instance. The way the Lord constructed His parable about the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is proof enough that He Himself alluded to false ideas without correcting them, but rather in order to make a moral point within the faulty framework of understanding of His audience. Indeed, the Bible is full of instances of where a technically 'wrong' idea is used by God without correction in order to teach a higher principle. Thus an eagle doesn't bear its young upon its wings; it hovers over them. But from an earth-bound perspective, it would appear that [looking up], the eagle is carrying its young on its wings. God accommodates Himself to our earthly perspective in order to lead us to Heavenly things. He doesn't seek to correct our knowledge at every turn, or else His end aim would not be achieved.

"Satan has an end"

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

instance. The Jews accused the Lord of being in league with the prince of the demons, Beelzebub. His comment was that if the family / house of Satan was so divided, then Satan "has an end" (Mk. 3:26). His approach was 'OK you believe in demons, Beelzebub etc. Well if that's the case, then according to the extension of your logic, Satan will soon come to an end, will cease existence. That's the bottom line. As it happens, I am indeed 'binding the strong man', rendering Satan powerless, making him 'have an end', and so whichever way you look at it, believing in demons or not, the bottom line is that My miracles demonstrate that effectively Satan is powerless and not an item now'. The way the New Testament is written reflects the same approach. When the Lord was alone with His disciples, He explained further: "If they have called the Master of the House [i.e. Jesus] 'Beelzebub', how much more shall they call them of his household?" [i.e. the disciples] (Mt. 10:25). By saying this, the Lord was clarifying that of course He didn't *really* mean that He was part of the Satan family, working against Satan to destroy the entire family. Rather was He and His family quite separate from the Satan family. But He didn't make that clarification to the Jewish crowds- He simply used their idea and reasoned with them on their own terms.

Other Examples In The Teaching Of Jesus

- The Lord's men were accused of 'threshing' on the Sabbath

because they rubbed corn in their hands (Mk. 2:23-28). The Lord could have answered 'No, this is a non-Biblical definition of working on the Sabbath'. But He didn't. Instead He reasoned that 'OK, let's assume you're right, but David and his men broke the law because they were about God's business, this over-rode the need for technical obedience'. The Lord Jesus wasn't constantly correcting specific errors of interpretation. He dealt in principles much larger than this, in order to make a more essential, practical, useful point.

- The eagerness of the Lord for the inculcation of faith is seen in the way He foresees the likely thought processes within men. "Begin not to say within yourselves...." (Lk. 3:8), He told a generation of vipers; and He eagerly strengthened the centurion's faith when it was announced that faith was pointless, because his daughter had died. And we sense His eager hopefulness for response when He said to the woman: "Believe me, woman..." (Jn. 4:21 GNB). Even though she was confrontational, bitter against Jewish people, and perhaps [as it has been argued by some] pushing a feminist agenda...the Lord sought for faith in her above correcting her attitude about these things. God too seeks for faith, and some of the 'flash' victories He granted in the Old Testament were to otherwise unspiritual men who in their desperation turned to Him. He so respects faith that He responded (e.g. 1 Chron. 5:10-20).

- When the Jews mocked Him for saying that He had seen Abraham, the Lord didn't respond that of course that wasn't what He meant; instead He elevated the conversation with "before Abraham was I am".

- The disciples didn't have enough faith to cure the sick boy. Jesus told them this: it was "because of your little faith... if ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove..." (Mt. 17:20 RV). Think carefully what is going on here. They had not even faith as a tiny grain of mustard seed; they didn't have the faith to cure the boy. But Jesus says they did have "little faith". He recognized what insignificant faith they did have. He was so sensitive to the amount of faith in someone, even if it was insignificant in the final analysis. We likewise need to be able to positively and eagerly discern faith in those we preach to and seek to spiritually develop. In a similar kind of way, God was disappointed that His people had not only been disobedient to Him, but they had not even been obedient to their conquerors (Ez. 5:7). He so values obedience, and had an attitude that sought to see if they would show it to at least someone, even if they had rejected Him.

- The Lord spoke of not making the Orthodox Jews stumble by not paying the tribute; yet He goes on to say that one must beware lest we make the little ones who believe, to stumble (Mt. 17:27; 18:6). Is it not that He saw in Orthodox Jewry

the beginnings of faith... a faith which was to come to fruition when a great company of priests were later obedient to the faith in Him? None of us would have had that sensitivity, that hopefulness, that seeking spirit. It is truly a challenge to us. As the Son of God, walking freely in His Father's house, Jesus didn't have to pay the temple tax. He could have insisted that He didn't need to pay it, He could have stood up for what was right and true. But doing this can often be selfish, a defence of self rather than a seeking for the Father's glory. And so He told Peter that "lest we should offend them", He would pay it. He was so hopeful for their salvation one day that He was worried about offending these wretched men, who weren't fit to breathe the same air that He did. We would have given up with them; but He worried about offending what potential faith they might have.

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

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

- Another woman thought that by touching His garment, she would be made whole. She had the same wrong notion as many Orthodox and Catholic believers have today- that some physical item can give healing. The Lord corrected her by saying telling her that it was her faith- not the touch of His garment- that had made her whole (Mt. 9:21,22). Again, He had focused on what was positive in her, rather than the negative. We know that usually the Lord looked for faith in people before healing them. Yet after this incident there are examples of where those who merely sought to touch His garment were healed (Mk. 6:56; Lk. 6:19). They were probably hopeful that they would have a similar experience to the woman. One could argue they were mere opportunists, as were their relatives who got them near enough to Jesus’

clothes. And probably there was a large element of this in them. But the Lord saw through all this to what faith there was, and responded to it. It is perhaps not accidental that Mark records the link between faith and Jesus' decision to heal in the same chapter (Mk. 6:5).

- Yet another woman was evidently a sinner; and the Lord made it clear that He knew all about her five men. But He didn't max out on that fact; His response to knowing it was basically: 'You're thirsty. I've got the water you need'. He saw her need, more than her moral problem; and He knew the answer. When she replied that she had no husband, He could have responded: 'You liar! A half truth is a lie!'. But He didn't. He said, so positively, gently and delicately, 'What you have said is quite true. You had five men you have lived with. The one you now have isn't your husband. So, yes, you said the truth' (Jn. 4:16-18). He could have crushed her. But He didn't. And we who 'have the truth' must take a lesson from this. He let Himself be encouraged by her response to Him, even though her comment "Could this be the Messiah?" (Jn. 4:29) implies she was still uncertain. Raymond Brown has commented: "The Greek question with *meti* implies an unlikelihood" (2). And so this Samaritan woman was at best being deceptive when she said that "I have no husband / man / fella in my life" (Jn. 4:17). The Lord could have answered: 'Don't lie to me. You know you're living with a man, and that you've had five men in your life'. Instead, the Lord picks up

her deceptive comment positively, agreeing that her latest relationship isn't really a man / husband as God intends. I find His positive attitude here surpassing.

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

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

- There is no record that the Lord corrected the disciples' misunderstanding that He was going to commit suicide in

order to “go unto” Lazarus (Jn. 11:16). He let events take their course and allowed the disciples to reflect upon the situation in order to come to a truer understanding of His words.

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

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

- The Pharisees had reasoned themselves into a position whereby plucking heads of corn whilst walking through a

corn field on the Sabbath was regarded as reaping. When the Lord was questioned about this issue, He didn't reply as most of us would have done: to attack the ridiculous definition of 'work on the Sabbath'. He seeks to teach by general principle that the extent of His Lordship meant that He and His men were free to do as they pleased on this kind of matter.

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

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

it. But He saw that they recognized Him as the bridegroom, as Messiah, and He exalted in this, and saw their lack of fasting as partly due to the deep-down joy which He knew they had.

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

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

- The Lord evidently knew how Judas was taking money out

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

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

- This focus on the positive is shown by the way the Lord quotes Job 22:7 in the parable of the sheep and goats: "You have not given water to the weary to drink, and you have withholden bread from the hungry". These words are part of Eliphaz's erroneous allegations against Job- for Job was a

righteous man, and not guilty on these counts. Yet the Lord extracts elements of truth from those wrong words, rather than just contemptuously ignoring them. Likewise Job 22:25 speaks of God being our “treasure... our precious silver” (RV). Surely the Lord had this in mind when saying that our treasure must be laid up “in heaven”, i.e. with God (for He often uses ‘Heaven’ for ‘God’). And James follows suite by approvingly quoting Job 22:29 about the lifting up of the humble (James 4:6).

- The Lord's tolerance is demonstrated by how He handled the issue of the tribute money (Mt. 22:21). The coin bore an image which strict Jews considered blasphemous, denoting Tiberius as son of God, the divine Augustus (3). The Lord doesn't react to this as they expected- He makes no comment upon the blasphemy. He lets it go, but insists upon a higher principle. 'If this is what Caesar demands, well give it to him; but give what has the image of God, i.e. yourself, to God'. He didn't say 'Don't touch the coins, they bear false doctrine, to pay the tax could make it appear you are going along with a blasphemous claim'. Yet some would say that we must avoid touching anything that might appear to be false or lead to a false implication [our endless arguments over Bible versions and words of hymns are all proof of this- even though the present writer is more than conservative in his taste in these matters]. The Lord wasn't like that. He lived life as it is and as it was, and re-focused the attention

of men upon that which is essential, and away from the minutiae. Staring each of us in the face is our own body, fashioned in God's image- and thereby the most powerful imperative, to give it over to God. Yet instead God's people preferred to ignore this and argue over the possible implication of giving a coin to Caesar because there was a false message on it. Morally and dialectically the Lord had defeated His questioners; and yet still they would not see the bigger and altogether more vital picture which He presented them with.

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

John the Baptist showed the same spirit of concession to human weakness in his preaching. He told the publicans: “Extort no more than that which is appointed you” (Lk. 3:13 RV). He tacitly accepted that these men would be into extortion. But within limits, he let it go. Likewise he told soldiers to be content with their wages- not to quit the job. Consider too how the disciples responded to the High Priest rebuking them for preaching; he claimed that they intended to bring the blood of Jesus upon them (Acts 5:24). The obvious, logical debating point would have been to say: ‘But you were the very ones who shouted out ‘His blood be upon us!!’ just a few weeks ago!’. But, Peter didn’t say this. He didn’t even allude to their obvious self-contradiction. Instead he positively went on to point out that a real forgiveness was possible because Jesus was now resurrected. And the point we can take from this is that true witness is not necessarily about pointing out to the other guy his self-contradictions, the logical weakness of his position... it’s not about winning a debate, but rather about bringing people to meaningful repentance and transformation.

Another example of the Biblical record going along with the incorrect perceptions of faithful men is to be found in the way the apostles nicknamed Joseph as ‘Barnabas’ “under the impression, apparently, that it meant ‘son of consolation’ [Acts 4:36]. On etymological grounds that has proved hard to justify, and the name is now generally recognized to... mean

‘son of Nabu’”(4). Yet the record ‘goes along’ with their misunderstanding. In addition to this, there is a huge imputation of righteousness to human beings, reflected right through Scripture. God sought them, the essence of their hearts, and was prepared to overlook much ignorance and misunderstanding along the way. Consider how good king Josiah is described as always doing what was right before God, not turning aside to the right nor left- even though it was not until the 18th year of his reign that he even discovered parts of God’s law, which he had been ignorant of until then, because the scroll containing them had been temporarily lost (2 Kings 22:2,11).

Notes

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

(2) Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According To John* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) Vol. 1, p. 173

(3) Documentation in E. Bammel and C.F.D.Moule, eds.,

Jesus And The Politics Of His Day (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1984) pp. 241-248.

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

8 Fellowship in the First Century Church

8-1 The Openness of Judaism and the Early Church

An Open Table

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

It's easy to assume that the arguments about "regulations about food" (Heb. 13:9) in the first century hinged about

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

Yet Luke's writings (in his Gospel and in the Acts) give especial attention to meals and table talk. Societies tended to distinguish themselves by their meal practices (1). Who was allowed at the table, who was excluded- these things were

fundamental to the self-understanding of persons within society. So when the Lord Jesus ate with the lowest sinners, and Peter as a Jew ate with Gentiles... this was radical, counter-cultural behaviour. No wonder the breaking of bread together was such a witness, and the surrounding world watched it with incredulity (Acts 2:42,46; 4:32-35). Note too how Luke mentions that Paul ate food in the homes of Gentiles like Lydia and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:15,34).

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

Christianity began as a sect of Judaism. And Judaism was focused upon external behaviour rather than being united by a common theology. There was a wide range of beliefs

tolerated within first century Judaism, as there is within it today. The openness of Judaism, out of which early Christianity arose, was reflected in the fact that "attendance in the synagogue was a matter of reputation; no one kept complete records" (2). "Fellowship" was something experienced between those present and wasn't based on a strict membership list nor subscribing to a detailed list of theology.

8-2 Paul's Attitude to Corinth

Paul's reasoning in 1 Cor. 10-12 seems to be specifically in the context of the memorial meeting. The issue he addresses is that of disunity at the Lord's table- different groups were excluding others. It is in this context that he urges believers to "discern the Lord's body" (1 Cor. 11:29)- and the Lord's body he has previously defined as referring to the believers within that one body. For in 1 Cor. 10:17 he stresses that all who have been baptized into the body of God's people "being many are one loaf, and one body". There's only ultimately one loaf, as there's only one Christ. All within that one body are partaking of the same loaf whenever they "break bread", and therefore division between them is not possible in God's sight. "The bread which we break, is it not the *koinonia*, the sharing in fellowship, of the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16). By breaking bread we show our unity not only with Him personally, but with all others who are in His one body. To

refuse to break bread with other believers- which is what was happening in Corinth- is therefore stating that effectively they are outside of the one body. And yet if in fact they *are* within the body of Christ, then it's actually those who are refusing them the emblems who are thereby declaring *themselves* not to be part of Christ.

Having reminded us that "by one Spirit are we all baptize into the one body" (1 Cor. 12:13), Paul makes the obvious point- that as members of that body we *cannot*, we dare not, say to other members of the body "I have no need [necessity] of you" (1 Cor. 12:21). To fellowship with the others in the body of Christ is our "necessity"; this is why an open table to all those who are in Christ isn't an option, but a necessity. Otherwise, we are declaring ourselves not to be in the body. Indeed "those members of the body which seem to be more feeble, are necessary" (1 Cor. 12:22). By rights, we ought to be condemned for such behaviour; for by refusing our brethren we are refusing membership in Christ. And yet I sense something of the grace of both God and Paul when he writes that if someone says "Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?" (1 Cor. 12:15). I take this to mean that even if a member of the body acts like they aren't in the body, this doesn't mean that ultimately they aren't counted as being in the body. But all the same, we shouldn't stare condemnation in the face by rejecting ourselves from the body of Christ by rejecting the

members of His body at the Lord's table. That's the whole point of Paul's argument.

Naturally this raises the question: "Well who is in the body?". Paul says that we are baptized into the body (1 Cor. 10:17); and this throws the question a stage further back: "So what, then, makes baptism valid?". Baptism is into the body of Christ, into His person, His death and His resurrection; and not into any human denomination or particular set of theology. If the illiterate can understand the Gospel, if thousands could hear the Gospel for a few hours and be baptized into Christ in response to it- it simply can't be that a detailed theology is necessary to make baptism valid. For the essence of Christ, His death and resurrection, is surely simple rather than complicated. Those who believe it and are baptized into it are in His body and are thus our brethren- whatever finer differences in understanding, inherited tradition and style we may have. The early church didn't make deep theological issues a test of fellowship; indeed, the range of understanding and practice tolerated by Paul in his churches is considerable. And we can't simply argue that Paul was allowing them time to mature; for if fellowship is to be based around strict doctrinal standards, then Paul's tolerance all the same disproves the proposition that fellowship cannot be extended to those in error of understanding. He reasons in 1 Cor. 8:7-11 that the weak brother was one who felt that idols did have some kind of

real power, representative of some real 'god'; and Paul doesn't state that such brethren should be disfellowshipped, rather does he argue that the "strong" should be careful not to cause them to stumble. He doesn't imply that his position is somehow time limited or a special concession to Corinth. He simply didn't have the hang up about doctrinal correctness on every point which so many believers have today.

8-3 The Danger of a Closed Table

Fellowship with each other is based around and a reflection of our fellowship with the Father and Son; the horizontal bond is totally connected to the horizontal bond. By excluding our brethren, we are counting ourselves as out of fellowship with Christ. Denying them fellowship is to deny our own fellowship with Christ. Mk. 9:38-42 contains the account of the question about the disciples of John the Baptist, who were doing miracles but not "following with" the disciples of Christ; in response to the question about what our attitude should be to such persons, the Lord Jesus soberly warned: "Whosoever shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it were better for him if a great millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea". The "little ones who believe on me" would appear in the context to be the misguided and misunderstanding disciples of John the Baptist. Jesus is saying that by refusing to recognize them as brethren, we may cause them to stumble,

and therefore merit the condemnation reserved elsewhere in Scripture for Babylon. The apparently disproportionate connection between rejecting a brother and receiving Babylon's judgment is indeed intentional. We are being asked to see how utterly important and eternally significant is our attitude towards our brethren in this life. If we reject or refuse to recognize them, we may well cause them to stumble. And this happens so frequently. Those disfellowshipped and otherwise rejected so often fall away. But that stumbling is reckoned to the account of those who caused their stumbling by rejecting them. Even if, therefore, some believers in Christ misunderstand Him [as the disciples of John the Baptist appear to have done in some ways], we are to accept them and not reject them- for by doing so, we may cause them to stumble further, to our own condemnation.

The Sense In Which The Lord's Table Was Exclusive

The only exclusivity of the Lord's table was that it was not to be turned into a place for worshipping pagan idols. Paul saw the sacrifices of Israel as having some relevance to the Christian communion meal. He comments: "Are those who eat the victims not in communion with the altar?" (1 Cor. 10:18); and the altar is clearly the Lord Jesus (Heb. 13:10). Eating of the communion meal was and is, therefore, fundamentally a statement of our fellowship with the altar, the Lord Jesus, rather than with others who are eating of

Him. The bread and wine which we consume thus become antitypical of the Old Testament sacrifices; and they were repeatedly described as "Yahweh's food", laid upon the altar as "the table of Yahweh" (Lev. 21:6,8; 22:25; Num. 28:2; Ez. 44:7,16; Mal. 1:7,12). And it has been commented: "Current translations are inaccurate; *lehem panim* is the 'personal bread' of Yahweh, just as *sulhan panim* (Num. 4:7) is the 'personal table' of Yahweh" (3). This deeply personal relationship between Yahweh and the offerer is continued in the breaking of bread; and again, the focus is upon the worshipper's relationship with Yahweh rather than a warning against fellowshiping the errors of fellow worshippers through this action. What *is* criticized in later Israel is the tendency to worship Yahweh through these offerings at the same time as offering sacrifice to other gods. Is. 66:3 speaks of this dualism in worship:

What was offered to Yahweh

"An ox is sacrificed,
 a lamb is slain,
 an offering is brought,
 incense memorial is made,

What was offered to other gods

a man is killed;
 a dog is struck down;
 swine-flesh is savoured
 idols are kissed"

And the new Israel made just this same blasphemy in the way

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

The Heavenly Host

It was apparent that in the breaking of bread meetings, there had to be a host. The host was a vital figure. And yet herein lay the huge significance of breaking of bread meetings being held in homes- presumably the home of a richer believer- and yet it was the table *of the Lord. He* and not the master of the house was the host of that meeting. It's for this reason that it was unthinkable for any invited by grace to their Lord's table to turn away other guests- for it wasn't *their* table, it was the table of another One, and they were but guests. Attempts to bar others from the Lord's table in our own time are equally rude and deeply lacking in basic spiritual understanding.

There are evident similarities between the breaking of bread experience and the marriage supper which we shall eat with the Lord Jesus in His Kingdom. The breaking of bread assembly is called "the table of the Lord"- and yet He says

that we shall eat at "My table" at His return (Lk. 22:30). The Lord clearly taught the continuity between the breaking of bread and the future marriage supper by observing that He would not again drink the cup until He drinks it anew with us at the marriage supper (Mt. 26:29). The parables of how the Gospel invites people as it were to a meal are suggesting that we should see the Kingdom as a meal, a supper, of which our memorial service is but a foretaste. We are commanded to enter the supper and take the lowest seat (Lk. 14:10), strongly aware that others are present more honourable than ourselves. Those with this spirit are simply never going to dream of telling another guest 'Leave! Don't partake of the meal!'. But this is the spirit of those who are exclusive and who use the Lord's table as a weapon in their hands to wage their petty church wars. The very early church didn't behave like this, but instead sought to incarnate and continue the pattern of the meals of the Lord Jesus during His ministry. And this is one major reason why their unity drew such attention, and they grew.

The Teaching of Luke 14

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

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

and the Lord is teaching that our attitude to our brethren at it is in fact going to be reflected in how He deals with us at the latter day marriage supper. It seems so many of our exclusivist brethren are voting themselves out of their place at the Kingdom; although I believe God's grace is such that He has a place even for them.

And our attitude to others will be reflective of our perception of God's grace in calling us- as we were invited by such grace, so we will invite others to *our* table who likewise cannot recompense us (Lk. 14:12). If we are the blind and maimed invited to the Lord's table, we will invite the blind and maimed to our table. The extent of God's grace to us really needs to sink in. When was the last time *you* did an act of pure grace to others like this...? The servant seems surprised that after the crippled and blind beggars have been drafted in to the opulence of the feast, "yet there is room" (Lk. 14:22). Quite simply, there are more places in the feast of the Kingdom than there are people willing to fill them! How encouraging is that thought! The same Greek word for "place" recurs in Jn. 14:2,3, where the Lord Jesus taught that He was going to die on the cross in order to prepare a place for us in His Father's palatial mansion. The effort made in preparing the feast therefore speaks of Christ's life, death and resurrection for us. And it's *so* tragic that most people don't want to know. So in a sense, "all you gotta do is say yes". Just accept the invitation; take the messengers for real.

Although perhaps we are left to read in the detail to the story, that many a desperate beggar just couldn't grasp that the messenger was for real, and preferred to stay put. Maybe only the *truly* desperate thought 'Maybe there's some truth in it...I've nothing to lose'. The many places in God's Kingdom... are only for those who desperately want them. Those who make meaningless excuses about how busy they are, those who can't believe that really God could be true to His word and really give us beggars a place in His wonderful Kingdom... will by their own decision not be there.

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

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

Let's not under-estimate the struggle which there is to believe the simple fact that there are more places in the Kingdom than people willing to fill them; that really God is begging us to come in to the place prepared for us through the death of His Son. When we read of the Master telling the servant to "*compel*" the beggars to come in to the feast, it's the same Greek word as we find used in one of the excuses given for not going in to the feast: "*I must needs go and see*" (the field the man had supposedly bought that evening without ever

seeing it) (Lk. 14:18,23). Just as our loving God, with all the power of His most earnest desire, can seek to *compel* us to accept His offer, so the power of our own flesh *compels* us the other way. The petty human issues had become so large in the minds of the people concerned that they ended up telling obvious untruths or giving very poor excuses to get out of attending; life had gotten on top of them and that was it. The story seems so bizarre; the refusal of such a wonderful invitation would've been the element of unreality which struck the first hearers. The point is that petty human issues, coupled with our lack of appreciation that we are down and out beggars, really will lead people to lose out on eternity. The other such element of unreality would've been the persistence of the host to fill the places with anyone, literally *anyone*, willing to come on in. It's not so much a question of 'Will we be there?' but rather 'Do we really want to be there?'. Because if we do, we shall be.

And we who have firmly accepted the invitation are also the preachers and bearers of the message. *We* are the ones who are to "compel" men and women to just believe it's for real and come on in. And we do this work with all the power of *God's* compulsion behind us. For *He* wishes to see the places filled. And yet we work against the terribly powerful compulsion of the flesh. 1 Cor. 9:13 states that necessity or compulsion is laid upon us to preach the Gospel. This is the same word translated "compel" in Lk. 14:23. The

compulsion is laid upon us by the tragedy of human rejection of the places Christ prepared for them, and the wonderful, so easy possibility to be there. Significantly, this same Greek word is used elsewhere about the 'necessities' which are part of our ministry of the Gospel (2 Cor. 6:4; 12:10). The urgency of our task will lead us into many an urgent situation, with all the compelling needs which accompany them.

The theme of eating continues after Luke 14- for Luke 15 contains parables told by the Lord in answer to the criticism that He ate with sinners (Lk. 15:2). He explained that He had come to seek and save the lost, and that was why He ate with them (Lk. 15:4 cp. Lk. 19:10, where He justifies eating with Zacchaeus for the same reason). Note how in the case of Zacchaeus, the man only stated his repentance after he had 'received' Jesus into his house and eaten with Him. This exemplifies how the Lord turned upside down the table practice of the Jews- He didn't eat with people *once they had* repented, but *so that* His gracious fellowship of them might *lead them to* repentance. The parables of Lk. 15 speak about eating in order to express joy that a person had repented and been saved- the eating was to celebrate finding the lost sheep, coin and son. But the Lord was saying that this justified His eating with not yet repentant sinners. Thinking this through, we find an insight into the hopefulness of Jesus for human repentance- He fellowshiped with them and treated them *as if* He were celebrating their repentance; for

He saw eating with them in this life as a foretaste of His eating with them in His future Kingdom. He invited them to a foretaste of the future banquet. His fellowship policy was therefore to encourage repentance; and seeing He wished all to be saved, He didn't exclude any from His table.

8-4 The Nature of the Gospel Message

Preaching a simple, clear Gospel and not being obsessed with fellowship issues were, in my view, one of reasons why the early church succeeded; and why we in the 21st century so often fail. The conversions recorded in the Gospels, those in Acts 2, and that of Paul himself, all occurred before the letters of the New Testament were written. Yet they were conversions made upon the same basis as we should be making them today- the preaching of "the Gospel" and belief into it. This indicates that the content of the Gospel preached and required for conversion was far less than what we have tended to think- many of the 'extras' refer to matters of interpretation which whilst true in themselves, are not fundamental parts of the Gospel message but rather what distinguishes us from other denominations. As such they may have relevance in terms of securing a sound convert into our group- but not into Christ. The Lord taught that His converts should remain in the synagogues (with all their false

teachings about the death state, Satan, the nature of Messiah and His Kingdom) until they were thrown out (Jn. 16:2). He had absolutely no 'guilt-by-association' mentality which later became so much a part of so many versions of Christianity. This is what the earliest Christians did- they continued attending the temple in Jerusalem until they were driven out. This explains why there is a marked lack of specific corporate identity in the language used in early Acts about what is later called "the church". They are called "brothers [and sisters]" (Acts 1:15), "believers" (Acts 2:44; 4:4), "witnesses" (Acts 2:32). Christianity was a movement, a "Jesus movement", a collection of believing individuals, rather than a denomination with boundaries against others such as Orthodox Jews who didn't believe as they did. And there's also fair historical evidence that Christians remained in the synagogues until they were thrown out. Eventually the synagogues brought in "the blessing of the minim" as one of the eighteen benedictions (*Shemoneh Esreh*): "And for the Minim [Christians] let there be no hope [of eternal life]"- and all present had to repeat this. This of course forced Christians out of the synagogues- but it was a result of Jewish exclusion of them, rather than any fear of guilt by association on their part. This fearlessness in fellowship attitudes was a key to their success, at least initially; and the amount of time and energy expended by latter day believers on the fellowship issue is in my opinion a significant reason

for our failure both in quantity and ultimate quality of evangelism.

Paul's letters were all responses to real, specific situations and problems, answering questions etc. Albeit under Divine inspiration, those letters were written *ad hoc*. They're not as if it were a series of chapters in a consciously planned exposition of the Gospel. People were baptized well before those letters were written- on the basis of the Gospel which is (unsurprisingly enough!) contained in the records of the Gospel. It could therefore be argued that all we find in Paul's letters, true and important as it all is, isn't actually the core message of the Gospel, which is quite simply the life, teaching, work, death and resurrection of Christ. Paul's writings are an elaboration upon it. But the actual content of that elaboration was unknown to those who were first baptized, e.g. at Pentecost. Further, the bulk of first century Christian converts were illiterate; they wouldn't have all heard read all of Paul's letters. Given that all copies of letters had to be written by hand on costly papyrus or similar specific material, and then transported and safely stored, it's unlikely that all Christians had instant access to all of Paul's letters (although interestingly Peter writes as if he was familiar with all Paul's letters, 2 Pet. 3:16). We would be quite mistaken to think of the early Christians as having access to the New Testament books in the way most of us do today. And certainly, the average Christian convert wouldn't

have had access to them before baptism. By saying this I am in no way devaluing the undoubtedly true and important theology, teaching and guidance which they contain. I'm simply saying that people were baptized (in large numbers) without knowing that material. Their source of instruction was from the Gospel records themselves.

Our attitude to others at the Lord's table is of course a function of our general attitude to others. As we have been accepted by grace by the Father and Son, so we also ought to accept our brethren. The Lord Jesus broke his bread with sinners in order to bring them to Him, and not as a sign that they made some kind of acceptable grade with Him. One sees in Him radical outgoing acceptance of people, even to the cost of His own life, rather than seeking to exclude people from His fellowship. God grants us the status of being "forgiven" through our being in Christ; He grants us forgiveness, if you like, before our repentance. This isn't to decry the importance of repentance; but it arises from our effort to be what we are in spiritual status. We are to be unconditionally kind to even our enemies, so that we may heap coals of fire upon their head (Rom. 12:20). I don't understand this as meaning that our motivation for such kindness should be the gleeful thought that we will thereby earn for them greater and more painful condemnation at the last day. Such motives would surely be foreign to all we have seen and known in the Father and Son. Rather am I

attracted to the suggestion that there is a reference here to the practice, originating in Egypt, of putting a pan of hot coals over the head of a person who has openly repented (4). In which case, we would be being taught to show grace to our enemies, in order that we might bring them to repentance. This would chime in with the teaching elsewhere in Romans that God's goodness leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). And this is how we should be, especially with our brethren. The idea of excluding our brethren seems to me the very opposite of the spirit of grace which we have received.

Notes

- (1) Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) Ch. 7, 'Deciphering a meal', pp. 249-275.
- (2) Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Random House, 2005) p. 103.
- (3) Roland De Vaux, *Studies In Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1961) p. 39.
- (4) H. B. Tristram, *Eastern Customs* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004 reprint) p. 82.
- (5) J. Zeisler, *Paul's Letter To The Romans* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989) pp. 306,307.

8-5 The Diversity of Doctrinal Positions

A Clear Focus

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

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

No Division Over Interpretation

The clear focus upon Jesus and the experience of personal reconciliation with God in Him meant that there was little scope for division over any other matters. Christianity developed out of Judaism, and the early believers were

intended to continue attendance at the synagogue until they were cast out (Jn. 16:2). Christian believers are pictured as still attending the synagogue in James 2:2 Gk; the implication of Mt. 5:23 is that Christ's first followers still made offerings, and surely Mt. 17:24 implies they were expected by Jesus to continue to pay the temple tax. But Judaism then and now placed more emphasis on practical living than on what we might call doctrine or theology; it was "not a system and never had a creed" (1) or 'statement of faith'. There were wide variations in how the Bible was interpreted. "With the Pharisees moral theology (*Halachah*) was fixed, but not expository or doctrinal theology (*Haggadah*)" (2). The various Rabbis had different and contradictory interpretations of Scripture- there are very inconsistent interpretations offered throughout books like 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra. The Pharisees believed in a resurrection, Sadducees didn't (Acts 23:8). Because there was no defined 'statement of faith', there were few accusations of heresy in departing from an agreed body of doctrine. What mattered was practical living. It has truly been observed that "It is remarkable how Jewish theology, owing to its lack of system, was able, as it were, to dabble in ideas" (3).

This attitude is continued in the New Testament; no statement of faith is presented, no body of doctrine is explicitly set in stone, and false teaching and heresy was nearly always in the context of a false way of life. Pharisees, Sadducees and

Essenes (John the Baptist's followers) were all converted into Christianity (Acts 6:7; 15:5; 19:1-5). There is no specific statement that they dropped all their previous understandings; indeed Acts 15:5 shows that there were Christians who still called themselves "Pharisees". The uniting and defining feature was their common acceptance of Jesus as Messiah, baptism into Him and commitment to Him. The "one faith" referred to the believers' faith in one and the same person- the one Lord, Jesus (Eph. 4:4-6), rather than only one set of doctrinal propositions about Jesus being "the faith" and all else being apostate. Given the breadth of doctrinal belief within the synagogue system, it's highly significant that the Lord assumed His followers would remain within that system until they were cast out. He established no principle of leaving a community because one disagrees with some of their theological tenets. He in fact taught the opposite; that there is no guilt by association by such things, and His emphasis was on the heart and human behaviour being transformed. It seems to me a romanticizing of the New Testament evidence to suggest that the early church was totally doctrinally united, but was soon fractured by doctrinal declension from a specific set of doctrines and interpretations which were set in stone by the apostles. Rather the amazing unity of the church was and is remarkable in that it was achieved *despite and in the face of* those differences. What split the church was fleshly behaviour,

which in turn utilized doctrinal differences to justify the various divisions. Truly, "Not even within the New Testament is there convincing evidence of a simple, early unity within the church" in theological matters (4). This is not to say that Biblical interpretation is unimportant; there is indeed "another Jesus" whom the New Testament doesn't know nor preach. My point rather is that there was no fixed statement of faith in the New Testament, no concept that there was "saving truth" in Biblical interpretation, rather was salvation posited in the person and work of the Lord Jesus; and there was not division between those "in Christ" over matters of theological interpretation. The divisions were over practical, moral issues.

An analysis of the use of the term "brother" and "brethren" in the NT is an indication that the early brethren did not see the terms as only applicable to those in full Christian fellowship. They clearly weren't hung up on the use of such terminology in the in fellowship / out of fellowship way in which some today reason. The table manners taught by the Lord Jesus involved inviting those other than our "brethren" to the table (Lk. 14:12). And the term "brethren" is used about those "not in fellowship" in the sense of being active Christians. The believers are addressed as "men and brethren" in Acts 1:16 (as in Acts 15:13) and yet the same phrase is then used about an unbaptized crowd of people who were listening to the Gospel being preached (Acts 2:29; 3:17; 13:26,38). It is also

used in addressing those who in no way believed the Gospel (Acts 7:2; 22:1; 23:1,5). We note that Paul was called "brother" by Ananias even before he was baptized (Acts 9:17; 22:13); and Paul's reasoning in 1 Cor. 8:7-13 seems to suggest that he saw "every man" as his "brother", and sought not to put a stumbling block in the way of any and every member of the general public, whom he also calls "brother". This was surely because the early brethren had learnt the lesson taught to Peter; that they were to see all men as potentially cleansed in Christ, seeing that Christ died for all, and individuals are to be invited by us to accept that cleansing - in Peter's case, through extending table fellowship to them.

Notes

- (1) R.T. Herford, *The Pharisees* (New York: Macmillan, 1924) p. 13.
- (2) L.E. Elliott-Binns, *Galilean Christianity* (Chicago: Allenson, 1956) p.50.
- (3) C.G. Montefiore, *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings* (London: Macmillan, 1930) p. 25.
- (4) Paul J. Achtemeir, *Paul and the Jerusalem Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005) p. 1.

8-6 The Historical Development

of a Closed Table

Even as early as the *Didache* in the second century there was a move away from the open table spirit of Jesus: “You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord’s Name. For in reference to this the Lord said, ‘Do not give what is sacred to dogs’” (1). We note that the *Lord’s* table becomes “*your* Eucharist” (emphasis mine). And Scripture is twisted to support that view- for “Do not give what is sacred to dogs” hardly refers in its context to the breaking of bread. Soon after the *Didache* was distributed, Justin Martyr took things further, insisting that only the baptized be present at the breaking of bread lest any unbaptized took the emblems (2). The open table spirit of the Gospels was lost. And in the middle ages, the bread and wine was viewed so exclusively that the priests alone took it weekly, and the congregation were given it only annually, at Easter. Justin continued the mistake of the *Didache* when it claimed that the Lord’s table was “*your* Eucharist”; he reasoned that “no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things *we* [emphasis mine] teach are true” (3). And it was Justin who developed the idea that the bread and wine were somehow more than just bread and wine: “For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these”. The idea that some must be forbidden from taking the emblems is associated with a view that the emblems are

somehow holy in themselves- a position which came to final term in the Catholic view of transubstantiation. And the same trend can be seen in closed table mentalities.

Clement, writing in around AD 220, uses language which would've been quite acceptable to the Qumran community and the exclusivism of first century Judaism which Jesus battled so hard with: "Nor do we take our food from the same table as the Gentiles, inasmuch as we cannot eat along with them, because they live impurely. But when we have persuaded them to have true thoughts, and to follow a right course of action... then we will deal with them. For not even if it were our father, or mother, or wife, of child, or brother, or any other one having claim by nature on our affection, can we venture to take our meals with him; for our religion compels us to make a distinction" (Clementine Homilies 13.4). Thus the Christian church came to adopt the table values of first century Judaism; and thereby they lost the whole sense of Christ's radical table fellowship.

The so called reformers were no better. The Lord Jesus shared His table with sinners in order to bring them to Himself; but John Calvin taught with some vehemence that sinners were not to partake, nor anyone who thought differently to him and was thereby labelled by him as divisive: "In the name and by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ [where did Calvin get that from?!] I excommunicate

all idolaters, blasphemers... all who form private sects to break the unity of the church, heretics [by which Calvin included non-Trinitarians]... all adulterers, fornicators, thieves... and all who lead a scandalous and dissolute life. I declare [on what right or basis?!] that they must abstain from this holy table, for fear of defiling [fear, again, is a major player in all this] and contaminating the holy food which our Lord Jesus Christ gives only to his household and believers” (4). The fear of contaminating Christ is unfounded, in that He is quite capable of defending Himself; He demonstrated in His life and table manners that He cannot be contaminated by others. He was “separate from sinners” although He ate and mixed with them so intimately. What Calvin really meant was that *he* feared contamination by sinners, and he projected and transferred *his* fears onto the Lord Jesus, thus making himself some kind of Jesus, assuming that *his* policy was in fact by the authority of Jesus.

Likewise the Heidelberg Catechism says that those who "by confession and life, declare themselves unbelieving and ungodly" are not to be admitted to the Lord's Supper, for then "the covenant of God would be profaned, and his wrath kindled against the whole congregation." Church leaders are obliged to do all they can to ensure that this does not happen, and hence "exclude such persons... till they show amendment of life" (Q & A 82). The table fellowship position of Jesus was the very opposite. He *included* people so that they might

“show amendment of life”. However, there arose a response to the reformation, called by some “The Radical Reformation”, during which belief in the Trinity, immortal soul etc. was challenged. One of the challengers was Balthasar Hubmaier, one of those quoted by Alan Eyre as being a proto-Christadelphian. He and others quoted by Alan Eyre all generally believed in an open table. In 'A Form for Christ's Supper', Hubmaier records his open invitation to the Lord's table: "Whoever now desires to eat of this bread and drink of the drink of the Lord's Supper, let him rise and repeat with heart and mouth the following pledge of love: Brothers and sisters, if you will to love God before, in, and above all things, in the power of his holy and living Word, and serve him alone, honour and adore him and henceforth sanctify his name, subject your carnal and sinful will to his divine will which he has worked in you by his living Word, in life and death, then let each say individually: I will" (5). The table was clearly open to whosoever wished to partake.

All this sad history shows a failure to realize how intensely personal the memorial meeting is supposed to be. “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” (Mk. 10:38) is an intensely personal question, remembering that the Lord Jesus Himself found that cup almost impossible to drink (Mk. 14:36). It asks so much of us that if we give this question its full weight, we will have no energy left to be looking around the table and seeking to exclude some from it. In many years

missionary experience amongst those previously unreached by the Gospel, I have observed that it is normal for new converts to Christ to assume an open table. It is Western believers who have been schooled into their denomination from babyhood who then come and tell the eager converts that actually, their intuition is wrong on this point. And after a period of socialization (rather than Bible study on this matter), the new convert comes to accept the worldview of their teachers on this point. But it is not the natural, intuitive position of any new convert to Christ.

Notes

- (1) *The Didache* , in Cyril Richardson, editor and translator, *The Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) p. 175.
- (2) *The First Apology of Justin Martyr* in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans) Vol. 1 pp. 185,186.
- (3) *Ibid.*
- (4) John Calvin, *The Form of Church Prayers*, as quoted in R.C. Jasper and G.J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1987) p. 216.
- (5) <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/book/export/html/310>
Accessed June 2012.

9 The Nature of the Breaking of Bread

9-1 The Nature of the Breaking of Bread

Soon after my baptism, I stood one Sunday morning as a newly baptized 16 year old in the kitchen of the community centre where my church met. My first job for the Lord, as I then understood it, was to wash the wine chalices and bread plates. I took the uneaten bread and threw it out of the window, watching the birds devour it as I washed up. A brother dashed into the kitchen and shattered my innocent reverie. Whatever was I doing, throwing the bread to the birds? It was as if we were now fellowshiping mere animals, he explained. Or tried to explain. I was to carefully dispose of the bread in the bin, using those black plastic bags which were laying on the worktop. I'd wondered what they might be for. I wondered whether to remind the irate brother that animals of a different but admittedly smaller sort would eat the bread some time soon. Either the bread is just simply bread, or, it's more than that. During the week, there was a business meeting of the church. I attended, hoping to hear discussion of preaching plans and the like. The heated

discussion was over whether to spend a legacy received on buying a very expensive set of silverware for the emblems. The motion was passed, with me sticking my two 16 year old arms in the air to vote against it.

There is a danger in many Protestant groups of over-reacting against the errors of Catholicism until the positions adopted come almost full circle back to the original Catholic error. The very “high” view of the bread and wine held by Catholics, typically in the heresy of transubstantiation, is effectively repeated by many Protestant groups who treat the bread and wine as the apex of the fellowship experience. They invest the “emblems” with a meaning which was never intended. Scripture presents it as only one aspect of Christian fellowship; the definitions and descriptions of actual Christian fellowship which we find in the New Testament for the most part say nothing about the function of the bread and wine. Yet because of the Protestant heresy of “guilt by association”, it has become imperative for them to ensure that believers do not partake of the emblems if they have different interpretations of Scripture or if they have been excommunicated. The church of my youth spoke freely of “guilt by association” and “contamination by communion”. So their “high” view of the emblems makes logical sense. All manner of intrigue and worry is expended in ensuring that the bread and wine isn’t passed to the wrong person.

As explained in chapter 7, the Lord Jesus didn't have all these hang-ups. He broke His bread freely and openly with any and every sinner whom He could persuade to sit at His table. The cup is "the cup of the new covenant". That "new covenant" wasn't made in the blood of the cross; it consisted of the promises made to Abraham which offered salvation, eternal inheritance of the earth, blessing [interpreted in the New Testament as forgiveness and being turned away from sin] and personal relationship with God. The death of Christ was God commending that love to us, seeking to persuade us by all means that His covenant promises to Abraham were for real. The cup of the covenant is therefore a celebration of the certainty of that covenant. It is an *aide memoire* – and nothing else. We note that Paul uses the formula "bread and cup" rather than "bread and wine" (1 Cor. 11:26,27)- as if to emphasize that they are merely symbols, whether or not actual wine is used is not the ultimate question, rather is it what that cup represents. Likewise the water of baptism of itself doesn't save; it saves by its representation of what does really save, which is the resurrection of Christ (1 Pet. 3:21). The "breaking of bread" is a teaching tool, rather than a ritual which in some metaphysical sense ensures our association with the covenant. Entrance to the covenant promises to Abraham is through faith and baptism into Christ, Abraham's "seed" (Gal. 3:27-29)- not through participating in the breaking of bread service. In Genesis 15 we find the

covenant was confirmed by God passing between two parts of a slain animal sacrifice. This was the typical way of confirming a covenant- but the difference was that both parties passed between the animal parts, as if to say “May I die if I break this covenant”. But humanity’s representative, Abraham, didn’t pass through the pieces. Instead he lay powerless and fearful, asleep but in a nightmare “horror of great darkness”. The point was powerfully made- that God’s new covenant is a unilateral promise from God to us. It is not of works, but of faith and acceptance on our part, as patterned for us in Abraham, our spiritual forefather. The new covenant being of unilateral acceptance of us, there is nothing wrong with our allowing others to partake in the celebration of it. Nothing metaphysical is going on with that bread and wine; forgiveness isn’t mediated to us through those elements. Of course, the *meaning* of our participation in the celebration will differ between those who have been baptized and those who have not been. But the very participation in celebrating God’s promises will beg the question: Is this true for me? Have I associated myself with these things? We are to examine *ourselves* and not others at the breaking of bread, Paul soberly teaches. I would argue that allowing the unbaptized and / or uncommitted to take the emblems and participate [if they so wish] in celebrating and remembering the new covenant of salvation is psychologically helpful to them- because their participation

begs the question of them: Why don't I commit myself to that which I am remembering and celebrating? By excluding them, we run the risk of presenting them with a mismatching message: God's covenant love is unilateral, but we deny you a part in celebrating that covenant. And of course there ought to be, indeed there can be, no question that all who have been baptized into the seed of Abraham should be permitted to celebrate the covenant they have entered into. It is not we or the elders or decision makers of our ecclesia who made the covenant with anyone; so it is not for anyone to forbid another to celebrate their covenant with God through His Son.

Breaking bread is a sign of our connection with Christ more than a sign of theological agreement with those who also partake of it. Whoever wishes to be part of the body partakes of Christ. The "one bread" was a Rabbinic title of Christ. Seeing we can't define who is in the one body, we can't say that some cannot partake of it. There is therefore no New Testament injunction that believers should not break bread with certain people. That silence is significant, and cannot easily be answered by those arguing for a closed table. There is a major theme in the New Testament- that exclusivity can lead to our eternal condemnation. But there is no such major theme warning us that being too inclusive can lead to our condemnation. If we reject our brother, then we are in danger of rejection. It's that simple. But there is no corresponding

antithesis which states that if we accept those who in the end God will reject, then we will be rejected. God is the judge, and not us; if we are not to “judge” in the sense of condemning others, then it is not for us to say that we reject a person because we feel God will reject them. Hence Paul’s simple statement in the breaking of bread commands in 1 Cor. 11:23-29: we are to examine ourselves- not others.

9-2 The Breaking of Bread in Corinth

Luke’s record of the last supper seems to be the one upon which Paul bases his instructions about the breaking of bread in 1 Cor. 11:23-29. Luke’s record suggests that there was a meal in between the taking of the bread and the taking of the cup (“likewise after supper the cup”, Lk. 22:20 = 1 Cor. 11:25). Formal meals were held in two stages; “the main meal being followed by a “dessert” or “symposium” at which there could be further guests who had not been at the earlier stage... the “religious” gathering at Corinth corresponded to the “dessert and drinks” part of the meal... preceded for the rich by the “main meal” to which each brought their own food... The poorer members of the church could not come so early (because of their work commitments) nor bring food of the same quality” (1). The point to note here is that the “dessert and drinks” was a very

open session, not simply for those who had been invited. And it is exactly *this* part of the meal which corresponded to the taking of the cup of the new covenant. The eating and drinking unworthily which Paul refers to was nothing to do with *whom* you had present; it was a very personal failure to not discern the Lord's body through being divisive, excluding some, and being gluttonous and selfish. Note that the grammar doesn't imply that the person partaking might of themselves be "unworthy"; the point is that they may eat "unworthily" in the sense of the manner in which they partake in relation to others. The unworthiness is in the exclusion of others.

This is the very real danger for many in the 21st Century church- yet instead of looking at themselves, so many are obsessed with *others* and who else might be present. Paul warns that if we do not discern the body, then we drink condemnation to ourselves; and the same idea occurs in 1 Cor. 16:21 where there is a curse upon those who don't love the Lord. The addition of "Maranatha!", "Come, Lord!" is likely an allusion to the breaking of bread "until he come", and it appears in the order of service for the breaking of bread found in the *Didache*. To not love the Lord is to not love His body, the church.

The Breaking of Bread as Celebration

One of the many ways to understand the breaking of bread

meeting is as a victory celebration. The parables of Luke 14 and 15 speak of eating with Jesus as being a celebration of the salvation of the lost and as a celebration of marriage. Jesus spoke of how in the Kingdom, He would dine with the faithful (Mt. 8:11; Lk. 13:28,29); and He clearly had in mind the Kingdom prophecies of a Messianic banquet found in Is. 25:6-8 and Zech. 8:7-23; 9:16. I have elsewhere pointed out that the feeding miracles, with the crowds described strangely as “reclining” as if at a feast, also has this final banquet in mind. But that banquet is a victor’s celebration; the breaking of bread clearly has elements of this within it. The triumphant Messianic prophecy of Gen. 49:10-12 speaks of Him as binding His foal and His donkey’s colt to a vine, and having an abundance of wine in which He washed His clothes. This speaks of a revelry in triumph. The way Jesus set up the Last Supper involved with a tied up donkey [which perhaps He Himself had tied, according to the prophecy] shows that He saw this prophecy as having fulfilment in the “breaking of bread”. Significantly, the early Christian *Didache* spoke of the breaking of bread as having a prayer uttered in thanks to God for Christ as “the holy vine of David” (9:1,2). A celebration feast isn’t some secret, sober and sullen closed table affair. A victory feast is surely open to all, inviting them to come and celebrate the victory. And naturally, only those who think there’s anything worth celebrating will pitch up. My point is that the whole concern

about fencing the table against those not up to a certain level is simply inappropriate to the image of victory feast which is clearly present in the breaking of bread. The Lord's final discourse features Him many times speaking of His work as if it were finished, as if He had already "overcome the world" even before He had actually died on the cross. And so it is in keeping with that for Him to keep a victory feast, expressed in terms of the Passover- which was after all Israel's classic celebration of victory.

Notes

(1) I.H.Marshall, "The Lord's Supper", in G.F. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: I.V.P., 1993) p. 571.

9-3 "What do you mean by this service?"

The breaking of bread is in a sense a meal like any other meal, and yet also a meal like no other meal. It points three ways- to the past, present and future. It is a continuation of the Last Supper, which was presented as a Passover, even if it was celebrated a day ahead of time. It looks back to the deliverance of God's people from the bondage of sin by the shed blood of the Lord Jesus, just as the Passover celebrated the blood of the lamb which was used by God to deliver

Israel from Egypt. It reminds us of our present fellowship with the risen Lord; for where even two or three are gathered, He is there present with us. The meeting is called “the table of the Lord” because we are there as His guests, with Him as the host. And it looks forward to the great Messianic banquet at His return- for He reminded us that He would not again drink the fruit of the vine *until* He does so again with us at His second coming. We are to keep the feast “until He comes”, which points our minds ahead to that time. Indeed, the Aramaic “Maranatha!”, “Come, Lord!” was traditionally pronounced at the breaking of bread, according to the *Didache*. And it’s likely that the use of the term in 1 Cor. 16:22 is taken from an early breaking of bread liturgy: “Greet one another [at meeting] with the kiss of peace. If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be cast out. Maranatha! Come, Lord!”. This suggestion is made because of the evident links between this verse and the *Didache*’s record of the breaking of bread service:

MINISTER: Let grace come and let this world pass away!

PEOPLE: *Hosanna to the Son of David!*

MINISTER: If any one is holy, let him come. If any one is not, let him repent.

PEOPLE: *Maranatha! Amen!*

It will be noted that the *Didache*, the earliest Christian

document we have after the completion of the New Testament, doesn't record any test of fellowship being made. Rather the individual was left to examine themselves, as per Paul's command in 1 Cor. 11:23-29 for a man to examine *himself*. Our humble tables of remembrance, spread as they are in the obscurity of this day of small things, are all looking ahead to that great day when we shall in reality sit with Jesus in Jerusalem, and true to style, He will come forth and serve us (Lk. 12:37). So often the Lord Jesus used images of eating and drinking when He sought to explain the good news of the future Kingdom of God upon earth. Indeed, no other group of metaphors is used so consistently in describing the Kingdom of God (Mt. 8:11; 22:2; 25:1,10; Lk. 6:20; 11:2; 13:28; 15:11-32). He insisted that He would keep the feast again with us at His return (this is stressed in the records- Mt. 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:18). Paul therefore, in obvious allusion to this fact, reminds us that we perform the breaking of bread "until He comes" (1 Cor. 11:26)- as if each breaking of bread is in a sense a dry run of the final banquet of victory and celebration which we will keep with Him at His second coming.

We are therefore called upon to engage in an acting out of the future Messianic banquet in the Kingdom; and to act out, as in a play, a skit, the Last Supper of 2000 years ago. For we perform it as a "remembrance" of Christ then, the Greek *anamnesis* meaning something like a re-collection, a bringing

to mind again, of the Last Supper and the Lord as He was there, pregnant with performing the ultimate act of our redemption. Acting out the supper must be seen in the context of significant evidence that the Gospel records themselves (especially Mark) were initially presented to illiterate audiences as acted out plays. This kind of thing is appropriate to illiterate audiences; acting out the parable of the supper each week would've been immensely powerful for those without access to the written records. The same is true of baptism- this too is an acting out of Christ's death and resurrection, and our decided participation in it. The whole service becomes what Augustine called "a sort of visible word" (*In Johannem* 80,3). Jesus was a prophet, in the spirit of Isaiah and Ezekiel, who acted out their message visually. It is perhaps only those in the modern period for whom this idea of acting something out is found novel or unusual. The Jewish understanding of hope and memory is such that past events can be presented again through rituals like the Passover in a very palpable manner; and "This is my body... this is my blood" is a classic example. Paul's language of "showing the Lord's death" at the breaking of bread (1 Cor. 11:26) is rooted in the Passover being a 'showing' of what God had done in the death of the Paschal lamb (Ex. 13:8). The breaking of bread is therefore a calling to an acting out, just as the Passover was. This isn't transubstantiation; that tragic misunderstanding arose, as did so many false

doctrines, as a result of being unable to apply a Hebraic mindset to the interpretation of words which first fell from Jewish lips to a Jewish audience. Maybe we could speak of “trans-event-ualization”, to coin a word. The body and blood referred to by Jesus had *event* rather than *substance* in view. The first century disciples easily perceived the link between their eating with Jesus at meal tables, and the future Messianic banquet- for James and John asked that their favoured places at Jesus’ table during His ministry be retained in the future Messianic banquet (Mk. 10:35). They perceived effortlessly that their meals with Jesus were seamlessly connected with the “breaking of bread” at the last day.

Where two or three are gathered together in Christ’s Name, He is in some sense present there (Mt. 18:20). The bread “is” His body and the wine “is” His blood, not in any Catholic sense of transubstantiation, but all the same, it seems to me, somewhat more than mere mechanistic “representation”. After all, if we take it upon ourselves to act out the Last Supper, imagining the Lord’s presence, is He from Heaven indifferent to our attempt to remember and image Him there amongst us? Is He not in some special sense “present”? Jn. 6:51-59 appears to be John’s version of the “breaking of bread” Last Supper discourses in the other Gospels. They record the Lord taking the bread and saying “This *is* my body”, but John puts that in terms of Him saying

“I *am* the bread of life”. The point is that we are to understand in a very deep sense that that bread really “is” Jesus. Not literally, of course, but to such an extent that we accept His actual presence with us at the “breaking of bread”. All existence in Scripture is bodily, personal existence. There is no “disembodied spirit” existence. The presence of Jesus amongst us is therefore in some sense “literal”. Even before AD70, when Jews could not kill a lamb for Passover, they used matzah bread in its place; and this became common immediately after the AD70 destruction of the temple (1). Jesus surely had this in mind in the new type of Passover which He instituted; He was the Passover lamb, and so the bread was His body. Whether or not Gentiles could have kept the Passover in Old Testament times is a debatable point, but the *new* type of Passover is to be open to all who wish to partake in the Lamb and commemorate His victory.

The Lord Jesus was “made known in the breaking of bread” at the Emmaus table (Lk. 24:34), the Greek *en* (“in”) implying instrumentality; the breaking of bread was what revealed / made Christ real to the disciples. It has been argued that the “this is my body... this is my blood” of the new covenant is the equivalent of eating of the animal sacrifices under the old covenant. Who are we, therefore, to forbid those who wish to partake in Christ? “This *is* my body... my blood” very intensely and personally associates

Jesus with those emblems. People become very agitated when *their* treasured symbols are abused or misused- when a war memorial is desecrated, a flag flown upside down. Why? Because those symbols are symbolic of themselves. If the war memorial was in another nation or to ‘the other side’, or if the flag is not *your* flag- the upset is negligible or zero. If you were to hear that the Latvian flag had been hung upside down somewhere in Riga Latvia by a crowd of disgruntled Russian Latvians, you would likely not feel anything. Because probably you aren’t Latvian. It’s not *you* who is affected. The bread and wine are not symbols of *our* life, work and sacrifice in death. They are symbols of *Christ’s*. Perhaps people get so incredibly worked up about who takes the emblems because they are turning *the Lord’s* table into their *own* table, just as Israel did. Some will say that their sensitivity to sharing the emblems with others is because they love Jesus. But such people would have no objection nor concern if the individuals they wish to exclude were to agree to leave and then go to another church or into another room, with a different loaf and wine bottle, and prayerfully partake of the emblems. Their point is, they can’t stomach the thought of those individuals taking *their* bread and wine. That surely clinches the point- the concern about symbols is all because they have misunderstood those symbols as symbols of themselves rather than of Christ, turning *His* table into theirs.

When we “break bread”, we are acting out the scene at the

Last Supper and as it will be at the future Messianic banquet. Some have argued that this ‘acting out’ aspect to the breaking of bread explains Paul’s apparent request in the breaking of bread teaching in 1 Cor. 11-14 that male and female believers ‘act out’ the relationship between Christ [represented by the men present] and the church [represented by the women]. Depending how you read it, this might involve head coverings for sisters at that time, as part of the role play (2). Whatever, we are intended to actively feel His presence there at that table. And in that sense, He *is* there—it’s just that our eyes are held from physically seeing Him. We at that table, in that acting out, long for His physical presence, for the dress rehearsal to end and for it all to be finally fulfilled; and He too, meeting by meeting, service by service, looks upon His assembled people with that same longing as He stands and walks amongst us there. How can we, in His actual presence, reject people from fellowship at His table? This is easy enough to do if we consider the “breaking of bread” a ritual defining *our* fellowship, the boundaries of inclusion or exclusion of *our* human community. But once we give full weight to the fact that it is *His* table which we are acting out, with Him and not us as the hosts, then we have little option but to be inclusive rather than exclusive. If our re-enactment of the Last Supper is a group recognition of the presence of Jesus as the One who welcomes sinners, then surely the “all men” for whom He

died should in fact be urged to participate, rather as Paul urged the sailors, soldiers and passengers on the stricken ship to “break bread” with Him (notice how the language and ideas of taking bread, on the 14th day none less, giving thanks for it, breaking it and giving to others in Acts 27:33-36 are without doubt an allusion to the Lord’s Last Supper breaking of bread).

“Where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there among them” (Mt. 18:20) suggests some special presence of the Lord Jesus when His people gather together. And the natural assumption in the first century context is surely that those gatherings would’ve been the breaking of bread meetings. The context is all about ecclesial life (Mt. 18:15-19). In this case, one suspects a connection between “I am there” and the simple truth that “This is my body... This is my blood”. It has been commonly pointed out that the Lord’s words in Mt. 18:20 appear to be some allusion to the rabbinic writing Aboth 3:2: “When two are sitting and words of Torah pass between them- the Presence [*Shekinah*] is with them... When three eat at a single table and talk about the teachings of Torah while at that table they are as if they ate at the table of the Omnipresent” (3). This clearly has a meal / table context in mind. Perhaps the Lord Jesus was indeed alluding to this, but suggesting that He is the Torah made flesh. Mt. 18:20 has evident connection with Mt. 28:20, when the Lord concludes the great preaching commission by

promising that “Remember, I am with you all the days to the end of the age”. In this case, He would be envisaging the use of the open table as a means of effecting the missionary commission; and I have shown elsewhere in these studies that Luke records the growth of the early church in Acts 2 (based as it was around the breaking of bread meetings) in terms of the great commission.

The actual presence of the Lord Jesus at the breaking of bread perhaps sheds light upon one of Scripture’s most enigmatic passages- when in the context of the breaking of bread, Paul urges women to wear a head covering and a man not to wear one “because of the Angels” (1 Cor. 11:10). I have read many attempted explanations of this verse, including by good and respected friends in Christ. None of them satisfies me, and my suggestion here likely won’t satisfy many. But, for what it’s worth, it is this: Just as Jesus is in some sense literally present at the “breaking of bread” meeting, so are the Angels. In order to assist the Corinthians to grasp that reality, Paul suggested the women wear a head covering out of respect for their presence, and the men removed their head coverings, likewise a sign of respect in the presence of someone. That Divine “Someone” was none less than the Lord Jesus, and the Angels- who are in some sense literally present. For me at least, and I may well stand with my back to the world on this one, that is my best shot at 1 Cor. 11:10. And at least in the context of my belief that we

are acting out the Last Supper and future Messianic Banquet in the very presence of Christ, it makes sense. To me at least. For after all, the Lord Jesus shall return from Heaven to keep that Banquet with us “with all the holy Angels” with Him (Mt. 25:31; Mk. 8:38), and it is in their presence that the Lord Jesus will distribute the cup of wine at the Messianic Banquet (Rev. 14:10).

We do the “breaking of bread” “until He come”, in the spirit of how the *Didache* records that the cry *Maranatha!*, “Come, Lord!”, went up at the end of the “breaking of bread” in the early church. We are asking the Jesus who is actually present to be literally seen by us in His second coming. This is of course similar to how the risen Jesus was present at the meals of the disciples after the resurrection, but their eyes were at times “held” so that they didn’t see His actual presence. The very same is happening today at our breakings of bread. This is why some at Corinth were criticized for not discerning the body of Christ; they were so busy with holding their exclusive, selfish feasts whilst ignoring the poorer and “little ones”. In so doing they failed to “discern” Christ’s presence; their attitude to the body of Christ in the sense of Christ personally was reflected in their attitude to His body in the sense of His people. They acted as if they were invisible- and thereby they treated Christ, the Heavenly host who was present at those meetings, as likewise effectively invisible.

Let us remember that the Lord Jesus has commanded us: "Do this in remembrance of Me". It is a command from Him to all who would be His people. Is it for us to fence that table of remembrance and say "No, we do not permit you to obey what the Lord has commanded you, nor will we facilitate your remembrance of Him; sit in this seat or on this row of chairs where the emblems of His love will not be passed to you"... ? Hopefully we have all experienced a real meeting with Christ at the table of remembrance. Perhaps not every time, not as often nor as deeply as we would wish; but surely we have all had positive experiences of the breaking of bread whereby we have felt very much His presence. This is not to say that the bread and wine transubstantiate into His actual body; but there is a very clear sense of His personal presence which is intended by the whole ceremony. Are we to deny this to others? To tell them that we do not permit this for them? What if our eyes were opened and we saw Jesus actually there at the breaking of bread service? Would this affect your policy? Would you, in His presence, continue to exclude some? What if He took command of the service and in (as seems to me) His characteristic way, invited all and sundry to the table? How would you then feel, as you saw the neighbours whose property adjoined the church hall, the children, some guy passing by outside, warmly welcomed by Him to sit down with Him and partake? For those of us who practice an open table, there would be nothing out of the

ordinary. I truly dare not allow myself to imagine how the closed table followers of Jesus would feel...

The proof of the pudding on the whole question of closed or open table is clearly in the eating. A review of the history of closed table communities over the last 100 years reveals progressive subdivision and breakup, with new converts in the Western world typically leaving unless they marry into the community. Open table communities by contrast have tended to expand, those who leave do so with no looking back in anger at a divisive, cranky and exclusive community, and the openness of the community has an abiding attraction to the world. And after all is said and done, the mission of any church community is to reach out into the world with the message of the Lord Jesus, and to minister to those who accept that message.

Notes

- (1) Evidence provided in John Koenig, *The Feast of the World's Redemption* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000) p. 30.
- (2) See Andrew Perry, 'Scoping Symbology at the Breaking of Bread', *Christadelphian EJournal of Biblical Interpretation*, Vol. 6 no. 3, July 2012 p. 20.
- (3) As translated by Jacob Neusner, *Torah from Our Sages: Pirke Abbot* (Chappaqua, NY: Rossel Books, 1984).

9-4 The Breaking of Bread as

Witness

The real presence of Jesus in the breaking of bread, as explained in the previous section, means that the meeting has an element of witness about it; for it presents Him to others. This is why we should invite those as yet uncommitted to partake in that meal and meet Him there, and thus move from the bread and wine to the baptismal bath rather than vice versa. This is so important to me that I wish to repeat some of the reasoning used above- to make the point.

The record of the rapid spread of Christianity in Jerusalem in Acts 2 seems to associate this with the huge emphasis upon 'breaking bread' by the believers. It seems associated with witness and conversion of unbelievers. They ate daily, and believers were added to the church "daily". That seems an intentional parallel. Jesus ate with sinners in order to lead them to repentance; that is the clear justification given by Him for His open table policy (Mk. 2:15-17). He saw His guests as the sick who needed a doctor, and His eating with them was in order to call them to repentance, rather than a statement that they had now attained a suitable level of purity to be worthy of His table. He therefore saw eating at His table as a *means towards* creating fellowship, and not as a *consequence* of being "in fellowship" with Him. This latter misunderstanding is sadly the view of those who insist upon a "closed table", participation of which is limited to those

who have attained a certain “statement of faith” or moral purity. The correct attitude to the Lord’s table arises out of perceiving that it is a means of witness, of creating fellowship with Him.

The breaking of bread has an element of witness and preaching to it. It is a “proclamation” of the Lord’s death to this world (1 Cor. 11:26). The Greek *kataggelo* translated “show” or “proclaim” here definitely means to preach or witness- and that’s how it’s translated in all of the other 16 occurrences of the word in the New Testament (Acts 4:2; 13:5,38; 15:36; 16:17,21; 17:3,13,23; 26:23; Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 2:1; 9:14; Phil. 1:16,18; Col. 1:28). This is fair evidence which must be given its due weight. If the breaking of bread were to be intended as a private affair just in-house for baptized believers, why use this word? A good case can be made for understanding the whole of 1 Cor. 11-14 as a section specifically addressing required behaviour at the breaking of bread. 1 Cor. 14 speaks of the meetings of the church as being open to the public- for if there was a misuse of Spirit gifts there, then those who “believe not”, the “unlearned or unbelievers” who “come in” to the gathering, will think that “you are mad” (1 Cor. 14:22,23).

By contrast, if things were done “decently and in order”, there would “come in one that believes not, or is unlearned, he is convicted by all of you... and so falling down on his

face he will worship God, and report that God is among you of a truth” (1 Cor. 14:24,25). There was to be something about the meetings which persuaded unbelievers of the presence of God there. I have elsewhere suggested that the breaking of bread is a “visible word”, an acting out of the situation at the Last Supper and that which shall be when Christ returns and holds the Messianic banquet with His people. But in our acting out of the scene, Jesus is actually present- it’s just that we can’t see Him. And likewise 1 Cor. 11:10 had taught that in some sense “the Angels” are present at the breaking of bread meetings, again invisible to human eyes. In passing, *kataggelo* is literally *kata-aggelo*, and *aggelo* is the usual word translated “Angels”. This real presence of God, Jesus and the Angels will be perceived by unbelievers, and thus the breaking of bread becomes a meeting of witness which convicts unbelievers. The language is similar to the Lord’s majestic prayer for unity in John 17, where He predicted that the unity between the believers and their God would be enough to convert the unbelieving world (Jn. 17:23). That unity is to be especially manifest at the breaking of bread meetings, where we meet with the full presence of the Father, Son and Angels. The bread which we break “is” the body of Christ; not in any sense of transubstantiation, but also, I feel, in a sense stronger than merely “representing” His body. He really is there. By refusing some believers access to the table, fencing the altar,

upholding barriers against people etc. we are disallowing this unity, we are hurting the Father and Son, in their very presence, and our lack of unity and inclusion means that we are no longer proclaiming / preaching the Lord's death as we are intended to. And this was exactly the situation at Corinth; the divided nature of the congregation at the breaking of bread was causing the general public to mock the body of Christ rather than convicting them of the presence of the Father and Son. And we are no better than Corinth if our divided tables have the same effect upon people. Of course, a tiny minority of visitors will assume that it is right that they should not be included, or that some brethren should be excluded; but of that tiny minority, nearly all will have learnt that behaviour and worldview from previous exposure to closed table, divisive situations which they have come to accept as the correct norm for church life. But the vast majority of people I have been involved in helping to baptism from non-Christian backgrounds have assumed that open table is the right and normal thing for believers to practice; the closed table mentality and upholding of divisions and fences is learnt behaviour that has to be carefully explained to them, and usually without any Biblical basis given for the explanation.

1 Cor. 14:23,24 twice speak of the unbeliever as "entering / coming in" to the gathering of believers. It's the same word used many times for entering in to the Kingdom; and let's

remember that one aspect of the breaking of bread service is an acting out of the future Messianic banquet ahead of time. The usage in Mt. 22:12 is instructive: “How did you come in without a wedding garment?”. The ‘entering in’ is to the feast, the ‘entering in’ to the sheep fold (Jn. 10:9). But the door of the Corinth ecclesia was to be open to all, to allow them to “enter in”. To enter in to a house was itself a religious act; the word is used repeatedly about how Peter entered in to the home of Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10:24,25,27 use the word three times); and Peter was accused by the legalistic brethren of having not only eaten with a Gentile but also of “entering in” to his home (Acts 11:3). Likewise Lydia felt that Paul could only enter in [s.w.] to her home if he had judged her to be faithful to the Lord (Acts 16:15,40). But the assumption is made in 1 Cor. 14:23,24 that the doors of the ecclesia should be open to even unbelievers who wished to “enter in”, with all that implied. James 2:2 uses the same word twice in describing how both rich and poor strangers were ‘coming in’ to “your assembly”, and being given different treatment by the assembled believers. The point is, they “came in”- there was no barrier to them. The church and its table was open.

That the breaking of bread is intended as a witness to the world is in line with the fellowship meals which the Lord Jesus held with sinners during His ministry, and which our breakings of bread ought to continue the spirit of. ““Why

does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”. Jesus replied, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”” (Mk. 2:16,17). His eating with sinners, sharing His table, breaking His bread with them, was in order to call them to repentance, and our continuation of His meals and table manners at the “breaking of bread” is likewise intended to have an element of witness and appeal about it. It has been well commented: “Jesus offered a common sense response: just as a doctor must have intimate contact with the sick, so also I must have intimate contact with sinners. There was certainly no place more intimate than the table, and Jesus’ response indicated that his contact with the unacceptables and outcasts was part of the restorative process” (1).

We have earlier noted that Paul’s ‘breaking of bread’ on the doomed ship in Acts 27 is described in terms evidently designed to recall the “breaking of bread” service. On the 14th night (cp. the 14th Nissan), Paul took, blessed, broke and shared the bread- all terms associated with the “breaking of bread” in a religious sense. Further, the word *eucharisteses* is used in Acts 27:34-36 to describe Paul’s giving of thanks, and this is the word elsewhere used about the breaking of bread service. We noted in chapter 7 that this is not the usual word used for simply giving thanks for a meal, but has religious overtones. “I urge you to take some food” uses *metalabein* which literally means not to just “take” but to

“receive one’s share in”- the same express used by Luke in describing the early breaking of bread meetings in Acts 2:46. We can immediately perceive a witness element to this “breaking of bread”. Paul was surrounded by people who were despairing of their lives, who had not eaten for some time either because of seasickness or from fasting to various gods for safety. And in the midst of those people he proclaims Christ to them through the breaking of bread, urging their participation, and thereby using the breaking of bread just as the Lord Jesus did- to draw people further into God’s plan of salvation.

The Central Place of the Breaking of Bread

A fair case can be made from the New Testament that the breaking of bread was central to Christian life in the first century. I want to make that case because it highlights the fact that our attitude to it is something that we need to get right. I believe I demonstrate in the section about “The breaking of bread as witness” that it was a central part of the church’s outreach, and the openness of that table was a major reason for the rapid growth of the Jerusalem ecclesia as recorded in Acts 2. Most people [over 90%] were illiterate in the Mediterranean world of the first century. And many Christians were slaves or the poor of this world. The Biblical witness to that chimes in with what mentions we have of Christianity in contemporary writings. Christians

didn't have much free time, and most of them likely got to a Christian meeting only once / week. And it makes perfect sense to assume that meeting was the breaking of bread meeting. The inspired letters of the New Testament writings along with the Gospels would've been read out to the largely illiterate audience at those meetings. Didache 10:7 suggests that the inspired word was spoken at the time of the breaking of bread: "Permit the prophets [inspired speakers-forth of God's word] to hold eucharist". It's a fair hypothesis therefore that those letters to young churches were intended to be relevant to the breaking of bread meeting. I have elsewhere argued that the letter to the Hebrews was indeed as it claims to be an "exhortation in few words"- the transcript of a breaking of bread sermon / exhortation. And others have made that case for 1 Peter.

1 Corinthians 10-16

But we can go further. Take 1 Corinthians 10-16. I submit this section is all relevant to the breaking of bread meetings of the believers in Corinth. 1 Cor. 10 begins with reference to how Israel ate the wrong things [as part of idol worship] during their wilderness journey; "the bread is *communion with the body of Christ*" (10:16,17) rather than with idols or other pagan gods. Chapter 11 specifically talks of the breaking of bread; and then chapters 12 and 14 speak of how church meetings ought to be run. And I suggest the meeting

Paul has in view is the breaking of bread. He seems to be assuming that the meeting he is writing about was a single time of worship, when all members of the church in Corinth came together. Thus he uses *synerchomai* , “to come together”, five times in chapter 11 (11:17,18,20,33,34) and twice in chapter 14 (14:23,26). The reference to “Jesus is Lord!” (1 Cor. 11:23; 12:3) perhaps refers to the standard greeting given to each other at the memorial meeting. This means that the poem about love in 1 Cor. 13 is in fact specifically in the context of love in an ecclesial / church context. And chapter 15 is no less relevant- focusing on the resurrection of Jesus and our partaking in that as those who are “in Him”. For basic Gospel teaching would’ve been given at the breaking of bread meeting, seeing this was the main meeting of the church. Chapter 16 ends with “Maranatha!”, which the Didache (10:6) records was the way breaking of bread meetings were concluded in the early church.

9-5 The Breaking of Bread in the rest of the New Testament

There are other allusions to the meeting which are to be found all through most of the New Testament letters. Take the command “Do not get drunk with wine... but rather give thanks [*eucharistountes*- the word specifically associated

with a religious ritual of giving thanks, rather than the more general word for thankfulness]” (Eph. 5:18,20). This sounds like the same point as is made in 1 Cor. 11- don’t get drunk on the wine at the breaking of bread. And we note that this section is clearly parallel to Col. 3:15-17, where again *eucharistountes* twice occurs. “Welcome one another [the Greek can imply to welcome to food, or at table] just as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom. 15:7) is another example of a breaking of bread allusion. Paul is writing there in the context of behaviour within the body of believers, and his point surely is that seeing we have been welcomed as guests at the Lord’s table, it is not for us to refuse that table to other believers. Perhaps Rom. 12:1,2 likewise had the breaking of bread in mind when the appeal is made to “discern (*eis to dokimazein*- the same term in 1 Cor. 11:29 about self-examination at the breaking of bread) what is the will of God” for us.

The Gospel Records

The Gospels were written for the use of the early Christian communities, both as a reminder of the basic facts of the Gospel and as a means for witnessing to others. This explains some of the apparent anachronisms within them, i.e. allusions to things which were of more meaning to the later church than they were to the disciples during the actual ministry of Jesus. The passage in Mt. 18:15-20 about church

discipline is perhaps the most obvious example; it was relevant to the later church but not immediately to the disciples in Galilee. The comment: “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there among them” (Mt. 18:20) would therefore appear relevant to the breaking of bread meeting. And it is clearly to be connected with Matthew’s record of the great preaching commission, concluding as it did with the comfort that “Remember (*idou-* as in the command to ‘remember’ Christ), I am with you [cp. “I am there” in 18:20] always” (Mt. 28:20). Thus a connection is made between the breaking of bread and missionary outreach; the memorial table was in practice a means for reaching out and witnessing to others still in darkness. The idea of Christ’s personal presence at the “gatherings” of two or three appears to have been crafted by the Lord with His mind upon a common Rabbinic text in Aboth 3:2: “When two are sitting, and words of Torah pass between them- the Presence [*Shekinah*] is with them... When three who eat at a single table talk about the teachings of Torah while at the table, they are as if they ate at the table of the Omnipresent”. That Rabbinic text clearly envisages a table and meal setting. If the Lord Jesus was alluding to this- and surely He was- He intended us to see the “where two or three are gathered together” as referring specifically to the breaking of bread meeting. His special presence is mediated there- and this would logically make the breaking of bread

the most appropriate place for witness to those as yet unpersuaded of His real existence. This is why the breaking of bread was and should be a central part of our witness- and that presupposes that unbelievers are present there and the table of His presence open to them.

The significance of the breaking of bread for witness would explain why the Gospel writers give such emphasis to the meals of Jesus. Luke records seven meal scenes prior to the breaking of bread recorded in Lk. 22 (Lk. 5:27-39; 7:36-50; 9:10-17; 10:38-42; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10); and then another two table fellowship scenes after the resurrection (Lk. 24:13-35; 24:36-53). Luke clearly intends us to see the “breaking of bread” at the Last Supper as in the context of the Lord’s other meals- which were all open to sinners. The potential converts would’ve heard the Gospel records read at the breaking of bread meetings- and were invited to re-live the whole thing and be themselves present at the table of the risen Lord, who right before their eyes was and is still holding meals with sinners and rejects.

Luke also wrote Acts, and he continues the theme there. Paul urged people to break bread with him on the stricken ship- “I urge you to take some food” in the Greek suggests something religious (*metalabein trophes*). For “*metalabein* literally means not simply “take” but “receive one’s share in”” (2). Exactly the same phrase occurs in Acts 2:46, where the early

believers “day by day... broke bread at home and ate their food”, and in this context we read that “day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved”. The repetition of “day by day” suggests a connection between the daily conversion of unbelievers and the daily breaking of bread meetings. And in extensive missionary experience I have observed that those who witness a breaking of bread meeting tend to find themselves drawn into the things of the Lord Jesus- if they are freely allowed to participate.

John’s Gospel uses the word *eucharistein* twice when recording the feeding miracle in Jn. 6:11,23. Clearly he intended us to see in that open table feeding of all who were hungry, with no test of their cleanliness or morality, a prototype of the breaking of bread meeting. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in Me... whoever eats Me will live because of Me” (Jn. 6:56) is clearly the equivalent of “This is my body...”. Indeed, all the “I am...” sayings in John are similar to the idea of “This is My body”; not least “I am the bread of life”. Although John doesn’t record any words of Jesus spoken over the bread and wine at the last supper, this is John’s style- to allude to the physical realities recorded in the other Gospels but in more spiritual language. Thus he records no command to be baptized at the end of his Gospel, but his account of the “being born again” discourse in Jn. 3:3-5 is effectively saying the same. And so it is with his approach to the breaking of bread. Although

John doesn't record the specific breaking of bread meeting, his account of the upper room discourses given at that time continually speak of the abiding presence of the Lord Jesus (Jn. 13:8,13; 14:1-6,16-28; 15:1-11,26; 16:7,12-16; 17:20-26). Surely we are to understand that this abiding presence is through the very real presence of Jesus at the breaking of bread meeting- which is again why the meeting was and is intended in a witness context. Where is this Jesus you speak of? Come to the breaking of bread meeting, meet His body, and sense His presence...

The more I read John's Gospel, the more I can see the various discourses as perfectly relevant to a breaking of bread meeting. I would agree with Barnabas Lindars' thesis that these discourses were first used by John in preaching to and teaching the assemblies of interested people and new converts which were to be found in the groups he founded by his preaching (3). For this is how a book often develops- a transcript of various talks given, discussions had and memories shared at meetings or amongst friends.

The Revelation

John continues his interest in the breaking of bread throughout his later inspired work, Revelation. The Revelation was given on "the Lord's day" (Rev. 1:10); this could mean that the whole vision was also given at a breaking of bread meeting and was read at other such

meetings. The scenes of worship in the Heavenly sanctuary are to be repeated by the church on earth- a theme very relevant for breaking of bread gatherings which had worship of the Lamb at their core. Jesus told them that He wanted to come and dine (*deipneso*) with the individual believers in this life (Rev. 3:20), and the vision concludes with a picture of the Lamb's future marriage supper (*deipnon*) in Rev. 19:9-*deipnon* is used about the breaking of bread in Lk. 22:20; Jn. 13:2,4; 21:20; 1 Cor. 11:20,21,25). Thus the point is made that our breakings of bread with Him now are a foretaste of the future Messianic banquet- a point we made in previous chapters. The concluding "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20) can be compared to the "Maranatha!" which concluded early breaking of bread meetings (Didache 10:6 cp. 1 Cor. 16:22). The Lamb's marriage supper "has come" (Rev. 19:7) from Heaven's perspective, and yet in another sense we are the guests who have been invited to it (Rev. 19:9). This "now but not yet" idea surely suggests that in Heaven, our breakings of bread are seen as foretastes of the final marriage supper, indeed they are in a sense seen as exactly that; because it is in Heaven that the marriage supper "has come" (Rev. 19:7). If Rev. 1:10 and 22:20 both allude to the breaking of bread meetings, we can imagine the book being first read to assemblies of illiterate believers at that meeting; and they would've discerned the immediate relevance to themselves as they sat there at the Lord's table.

Finally, let's remember that the open table was as radical in the first century as it is for us today- probably more so. Because if you visited a religion for the first time, you expected to go through some initiation rite before being able to partake of the symbols of that religion. But Christianity, following the style of the Lord Jesus Himself, welcomed people to those symbols first, and on that basis people wished to become inducted into Christ through baptism. We all balk at grace. Can it be really so? Is it so free? Is Jesus *so* open? Even to... *them*? To... *me*? And the good news of the Gospel, hard as it is for us to believe, is that... yes. He is.

Notes

- (1) Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998) p. 103.
- (2) John Koenig, *The Feast of the World's Redemption* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000) p. 191.
- (3) He makes a very strong case for this based on internal Biblical evidence. See Barnabas Lindars, *Behind the Fourth Gospel* (London: S.P.C.K., 1971) especially pp. 23,47,61.

9-6 Was the Last Supper Restricted?

Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the last supper shows twelve disciples seated with Jesus, and this has reinforced the

assumption that the last supper was a private affair. There are other paintings, less well known, which challenge that assumption by showing many others present, including women and children. Bohdan Piasecki's rendition is typical of them:



Tintoretto's likewise:



And if one looks closer at da Vinci's masterpiece, it's hard to avoid noticing that one of those present appears to be female. Maybe even he had his doubts. But what Biblical indications are there that the last supper was a private, exclusive meal between 13 men? This matter isn't insignificant, because the assumption that this was the case has led to the sense that the "breaking of bread" as a re-living of the last supper is to be a closed door affair only for the faithful, who are to sit there with long faces. That assumption itself breaks down at a crucial and obvious point- for Judas was there and partook of the meal, despite the Lord's clear knowledge that he was the apostate *extraordinaire*. That Jesus broke bread with Judas, in the hope, surely, of reclaiming and restoring him, surely has huge implications for our attitude to the Lord's supper today. Note that it was only *after* the Supper had ended that Judas went out.

It's true that the "disciples" and "twelve apostles" are recorded as keeping the feast with Jesus. He did so "with the twelve" (Mk. 14:17), "with the twelve" [disciples] (Mt. 26:20), "the twelve apostles with him" (Lk. 22:14), But there seems no implication that they were the sole guests; if they were, surely that would've been clarified in the record? There's a similar situation in Mk. 9:35,36, where the Lord sits down [to eat, the Greek could imply] and calls the twelve and talks with them. But then He takes a child and exhibits the child to them, inviting them to be like that child. Clearly others were present- at least, a child was- although the focus of the narrative is of course upon Jesus and the twelve. But this doesn't mean others weren't present. In the Middle East today it's almost impossible to have a meal without children and family members from the household somehow being present. If really only the twelve were present, we would expect the record to make that clear and explicit, as it would've been most unusual. But the Gospels' combined lack of comment on this point is significant. At very best, to argue that only the twelve were present is an argument from silence. Arguments from silence are only admissible if there is surrounding evidence supporting the probability of the argument; and there is no such evidence for the proposition that the twelve alone were present. However, there is considerable circumstantial evidence presented below that there were others present.

The twelve were clearly to be understood as the equivalent of the twelve tribes of Israel, the foundation of a new Israel. Often the Biblical records focus only upon *some* aspects of a situation in order to demonstrate a typological point. Thus we read that Jews who were normally *dwellers* (Gk. 'permanent residents') of Mesopotamia were also 'dwelling' (again, as permanent residents, the Greek implies) in Jerusalem at Pentecost. They had come to Jerusalem to keep the feast, but the gathering of Jews from the diaspora and their conversion to Christ is presented by Luke as the initial fulfilment of the kingdom prophecies which spoke of this (Acts 2:5,9). And so it may be with the emphasis given on the presence of the "twelve" at the first "breaking of bread" meeting.

Defining Disciples

The term "disciples" is used about followers of Jesus other than the twelve in Mt. 8:21; Jn. 7:3; 8:31; 19:38; Mt. 12:49 [where they include both male and female- His disciples were as His mother and His brothers]; Lk. 7:11; 19:37,39 [His disciples were "a huge number"- not just twelve, and Jn. 4:1 says that Jesus had more disciples than John]; Lk. 14:26,27 [any who bear the cross and follow Jesus are His "disciples"]; Jn. 2:2 [Mary was one of the "disciples"]; Jn. 6:60-66 [many of Christ's "disciples" turned away at His teaching]; Jn. 9:27,28 [the healed blind man was a "disciple"]

of Jesus] . There seems a difference between "the disciples" and "the twelve disciples", as if the twelve were a subset of the larger group of "disciples". The "disciples" of Jesus are presented in the Gospels alongside the "disciples" of John the Baptist (Mk. 6:29) and the "disciples" of the Rabbis (Mt. 22:16; Mk. 2:18); the term clearly means followers or students. The early believers were called "disciples", and they numbered 120 by the time of Acts 1:15. "The twelve" are even differentiated from "the multitude of the disciples" in Acts 6:2. Indeed, the word "disciples" is used no fewer than 28 times in Acts to refer to the followers and believers in Jesus- and not specifically to the twelve. Both "the apostles" and "the disciples" were present at the last supper (Lk. 22:14,39), implying they referred to two different groups, although all the 12 disciples were apostles. It should be noted that even the term "the apostles" is applied to believers other than the twelve- e.g. to Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:4,14; Rom. 1:1; 11:13), Sosthenes (1 Cor. 1:1 cp. 1 Cor. 4:9), the elders in Corinth (1 Cor. 12:28 cp. Eph. 4:11), Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25 Gk.), unnamed co-workers of Paul (1 Thess. 2:6; 2 Cor. 8:23, AV "messengers" is the same word translated "apostles") and to Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7).

Other Considerations

A few other considerations, none definitive in themselves,

are worth bearing in mind:

- If the Last Supper was a Passover, then not just males were present; the evidence is that men and women, along with the extended family of the host, kept Passover together, singing and praying together; even if they sat at separate tables, they were in the same room and ate from the same lambs (1).
- Mk. 14:13,17 records the Lord sending two of His disciples to prepare the Passover, and then He arrives “with the twelve”. The suggestion could be that those two disciples were separate from “the twelve” and yet still presumably partook of the Passover they had prepared.
- "It is one of the twelve, that dipped with me in the dish" (Mk. 14:20) would suggest that there were others present; but it was not any of them, as the questioner likely implied; it was one of the twelve. If only the twelve were present, this seems a strange thing to say in response to the question as to who the betrayer was.
- John says that “Judas, not Iscariot” asked Jesus a question (Jn. 14:22). He may or may not have been the other Judas mentioned in the list of disciples- but seeing Judas was such a common name at the time, not necessarily.
- Judas Iscariot’s replacement was to be from one of those “who have accompanied us during all the time

that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us” (Acts 1:22). Surely presence at the Last Supper was implied in those qualifications?

- Clopas (Lk. 24:18) and his companion [his wife, perhaps- see Jn. 19:25] recognized Jesus at Emmaus “in the breaking of bread” (Lk. 24:35)- presumably because His mannerisms and style were so identical to what they had witnessed a few days before at the Last Supper.
- Early Christian tradition and liturgies consistently speak of how both disciples *and* apostles were present at the Last Supper- e.g. The Anaphora of Basil of Caesarea: “[Jesus] took bread, blessed, sanctified, broke and gave it to his holy disciples and apostles ...”. This is the same formula used today by the Coptic and Orthodox churches. Whilst this proves nothing of itself, the question of course is *why* the two terms were used- the implication is surely that from earliest times there was the tradition that the twelve apostles *and* other “disciples” were present.

- A fair case can be made that “the disciple whom Jesus loved” who leant on His chest at the Last Supper was not in fact John, as is commonly assumed (Jn. 13:23-26). John’s Gospel has previously

identified Lazarus as the disciple whom Jesus loved: "Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus" (Jn. 11:5); and Lazarus is presented in Jn. 12:2 as sitting with Jesus at another such meal, being "one of them that sat at the table with him". The anonymity would be understandable in order to protect him from persecution as the Gospel accounts were distributed. Mark's Gospel likewise speaks of "a certain young man" (Mk. 14:51). Bullinger in *The Companion Bible* suggests this person was also Lazarus: "That this might be Lazarus, is probable: (1) because the Lord had returned to Bethany each preceding night of that week; (2) because Lazarus would be looking out; (3) because of the linen robe, betokening his social position; (4) and especially because he was wanted: "The chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death" (John 12:10). None of the apostles were arrested. Peter (though suspected) and another (John 18:15) were unmolested; (5) his name is not given here by Divine guidance, because Lazarus was probably still alive and therefore in danger". If "the disciple whom Jesus loved" was in fact Lazarus, this sheds some light on the ending of John's Gospel in Jn. 21:20-23. Some confusion is clarified over the supposition and rumour that "that disciple should not die". Because Lazarus had been resurrected by the Lord there was

naturally a question as to whether he would die again- and that question is clarified. Note that it is John's Gospel which alone records Lazarus' resurrection, and it is that Gospel which understandably clarifies the question. In this case we need to revisit Jn. 21:24- "This is the disciple which testifies of these things". The "things" in view would then not be the entire Gospel, but the incident by the sea, and it was Lazarus therefore who would've written John 21. That there was a Divinely inspired editorial hand at work in John's Gospel is evident from the comment that "*we* know that his testimony [Lazarus', the eye witness] is true". This suggestion about Lazarus explains the old question as to why John didn't refer to himself more directly in his own Gospel and appears to present himself as anonymous. These are of course just suggestions, but if they appeal to you- then we have another non-member of the twelve present at the Last Supper.

Joachim Jeremias is still likely unsurpassed in the amount of scholarly attention he gave to the Last Supper. And he concludes:

"According to Mark 14 and Mt.26,20, Jesus was surrounded by his twelve disciples at the Last Supper. But we may not without further ado conclude from this that the women mentioned in Mark 15,40 and Luke 23,49-55 had been excluded. An Oriental text does not allow this kind of

argument from silence. Neither may we attach too much importance to the fact that this composition of attendance at the meal (Jesus and the Twelve) reported in Mark 14,17 is nowhere else expressly mentioned in the Gospels: it is certainly a pure coincidence. On the contrary, it is almost certain that during his ministry of preaching, Jesus had the habit of taking his meals with the great circle of those listening to him. That follows from the warning given to hypocrites that it would serve them no purpose to be able to state that they had eaten at the same table as Jesus during his preachings in their country (Luke 13, 26ff). Mark reports that quite often Jesus was so pressed by the crowd around him that it was impossible for him to take his food (Mk.3,20; 6,31). Often, and especially on sabbaths (Mk.1,29-31; Lk.14,1), Jesus was invited to meals with other participants (Mk.14,3; Lk.7,36;11,37; John 2,1-11). Occasionally he himself entertained invited guests (Lk.15,1f; compare Jn.1,39). On one occasion he even had a great number of invited guests (Mk.2,15). The characterisation of Jesus as ‘a glutton and drunkard, friend of Publicans and sinners’ (Mt. 11,19) confirms the fact that meals in large assemblies happened frequently. Often during his travelling around, it was quite natural for Jesus to take his meals surrounded by his disciples and fans.... (Mk.6,32-44; 8,14; Jn.4,8.31; 21,12)” (2).

Notes

(1) Lynn H. Cohick , *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009) p. 90.

(2) Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: S.P.C.K., 1966) pp. 46-47.

10 Christian Identity

If there are strong symbols and principles at the centre of a group's identity, they can be "open" to others with no fear of compromising those symbols and principles. Imagine a political party. Let's say Neo-Nazis. They have the Swastika as their symbol and very clearly anti-Jewish, anti-black, anti-Gypsy principles stated and publicized. But their meetings may be "open to all". No Jew, black guy or gypsy is likely to attend. And the Neo-Nazi party risk nothing by pronouncing their meetings as open to one and all. Many well intentioned Christian believers fear that an open table will lead to their doctrinal beliefs and principles being somehow "sold out" or minimized. The "fear" element is of itself unhealthy and doesn't feature in the spirit of Christ. There is no need to fear that our openness will comprise our symbols and principles- if they are firmly stated, advocated and preached by us. If e.g. as non-trinitarians we openly state our position, it's

unlikely that Trinitarians would wish to attend our table. And if they did and, horror of horrors, take a pinch of bread and sip of wine, that act in no way compromises our core beliefs.

Christian Self-Perception

With nothing less than a touch of genius, David Levin wrote: “Identity holds the most strategic position in our minds, and will have more impact on our behaviour than any single belief or bit of information. We can think of ourselves as *“a child of God,”* or *“a disciple”*. Or, we can think of ourselves as *“a loser,”* or as *“a victim”*. Our identity shifts slowly, and is far more than the sum of what we do and where we do it. Someone once remarked, *“We are human beings, not human doings”*. Whatever we think of ourselves will guide our lives. God sees us at this level, as He does not measure our behaviour or even our attitudes separately. He only sees a whole: a sheep or a goat. There’s no such thing, in God’s eyes, as *“a pretty good goat,”* or a *“not-so-good-sheep”*. He judges, completely and ineffably, at the identity level. Either we are disciples, or we are not. Identity is the most important force in determining our lives. Even more important, God’s assessment of our identity will determine our eternal destiny” (1). And the Lord Jesus came to proclaim “the opening of the prison”, or “the opening of the eyes to them that are bound” (Is. 61:1 RVmg.)- He came to open blind eyes, to change the self-perceptions which imprison most of humanity. The

Israelites were seen as grasshoppers by their enemies- and so this is how they came to perceive themselves (Num. 13:33). Prov. 23:7 RV observes: “As he reckoneth within himself, so is he”. We are defined by our own self-perception. We must come in the end to perceive ourselves from God’s perspective and not according to how men perceive us. We must see ourselves from outside ourselves, and thereby “guide thine own heart in the way” (Prov. 23:19).

We are to live out in practice what we have been made in status by our gracious Father. The very fact He counts us as in Christ, as the spotless bride of His Son, must be both felt and lived up to by us. The way He counts us like this is a wonderful motivation to rise up to it all. Consider how God told Israel that *if* they kept His commandments, *then* they would be His “peculiar treasure” (Ex. 19:5). This conditional promise is then referred to by Moses as having been fulfilled- Israel became His “peculiar treasure” by status even though they did *not* keep His commandments (Dt. 7:6; 14:2 s.w.; Ps. 135:4). Moses concludes by saying that “the Lord hath avouched thee this day to be his peculiar people [s.w.]...*that* thou shouldest keep all his commandments” (Dt. 26:18). See what’s happening here. God said that *if* they were obedient, *then* they would be His special people. Yet He counted them as His special people even though they were not obedient. And He did this so that

they would be so touched by this grace that they *would* be obedient.

Consider how we perceive baptism. Some will say ‘I became a Christian on [20.11.83]’, or ‘I became a member of the XYZ ecclesia on ...’. They mean, that’s when they were baptized. Others will perceive it as: ‘I was baptized into Christ on 20.11.83... I accepted the Truth on...I committed myself to the Lord’s service on... I came to Christ on... I became a Christadelphian / Baptist / Plymouth Brother on...’. None of these are wrong. They are all true. My suggestion, and my own perception of my own baptism, is that it was a personal joining with the Lord Jesus Christ. This, it seems to me, must be the central perception which dominates our self-awareness. The human side of it- the name of the group or ecclesia- is true in a human sense, and needs in some contexts to be remembered, but it is only the human side. The church, the ecclesia we joined...all these things will fade away, as time takes its course. But the essence will eternally remain: that we are in Christ, we share in His life and live it out, seeking to act as He would in every situation we face, and this is the life we will eternally live by His grace.

Present Salvation

It could appear that I am saying ‘It’s not so important what we believe’. No, I don’t mean that at all. What I’m saying is

that first and foremost, we are God's children. The height and depth of who we *are* right now, and who we will be, is such that it makes *all* else, including the fact we bear the name of some particular church, of very much secondary importance. Many a town and village has its share of small time Protestant religions- JW's, Adventists, Christadelphians, Baptists. May it not be that we perceive ourselves as just another such group, and nothing else; just another ordinary guy who wants God in his life, who has a religious conscience which is salved by baptism and attending church meetings. We are saved, in prospect, here and now. We have been translated into the Kingdom (Col. 1:13), we have been saved (2 Tim. 1:9), on account of being in Christ we not only died and resurrected with Him in baptism, but also afterwards ascended with Him and are as it were in heavenly places with Him (Eph. 2:5,6); our life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). We are in the process of receiving a Kingdom (Heb. 12:28 Gk.). "We have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:13). We need to take a long, careful look at this question. You are in Christ; you *will* be there, in the Kingdom. In a sense, you *are* there. Me? Really *me*, *I* will be there? Yes, that's what these verses teach.

Perhaps you work such long hours you have little time to think, perhaps children demand all your attention. Perhaps the problems of your own personality grip your mind as you struggle with them subconsciously, every waking minute. But

please. Make some time. Just 5 straight minutes alone. To think through the above verses. That because you were baptized into Christ and continue in Him, and have not rejected His grace, you *will* be there, and in a sense, you *are* there. We are constituted a Kingdom of priests *now* (Rev. 1:6; Ex. 19:6 cp. 1 Pet. 2:5,9). Take time to think it through, to the point that you feel that little gasp within you. Brethren, this is no philosophy we have believed, no piece of intellectual fascination we stumbled across along life's way. This is the Truth, the eternal and saving Truth. A man cannot face these things and not have a deep impression of the absoluteness of the issues involved in faith and unbelief, in choosing to accept or reject the work of the struggling, gasping Man who hung on the stake to achieve it. It truly is a question of believe and be saved, or reject it and perish. And we have believed. We are not of them who draw back, who throw it all away and end in the gutter, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul by grace (Heb. 10:39). We perceive ourselves [as we walk down the street or play with our children, or as we lay awake at night staring at the ceiling, at the light shade, lost in introspection...] as winners, as more-than-conquerors, as those who will be there, as those who are there, those on the way there. On the other hand, if we perceive ourselves as losers, this is who we will be. Israel felt that "we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight" (Num. 13:33).

According to how they felt that the world perceived them to be, so they felt themselves to be. As it happened, they were wrong; the Canaanite nations were terrified of them, according to Rahab's inside account. If Israel had perceived themselves as those made strong by the Lord, more than conquerors, so indeed they would have been. Self-perception was and is vital for God's Israel.

The Lord bid us cut off the hand or foot that offends, and thus enter into life halt...blind, rather than be condemned in Gehenna (Mt. 18:8,9). It sounds as if 'entering into life' means entering into the Kingdom; and so it can do, for this clause is set as the antithesis for being condemned at the last day. Yet it is hard to imagine us entering the Kingdom somehow maimed, and in any case then we will not need to be without what causes temptation. The figure rings more true to our lives today; if we cut off our flesh *now*, we will live the rest of our mortal days somehow lacking what we could have had. In this case, we enter into life right now, insofar as we cut off the opportunities of the flesh. Jesus told another man that if he would enter into life, he must keep the commandments (Mt. 19:17). Insofar as he kept those commands, he would right now enter into life. We are entering into the experience of the real life, the "eternal life", right now! Likewise the camel must shed its load of riches and goods, so that it can pass through the gate into the Kingdom. But we are doing that right now! We will pass

through the gate into the Kingdom when the Lord returns (Rev. 22:14), and yet through shedding our materialism, we do it in prospect now. John puts it more bluntly and yet more absolutely: now, through the life of faith, we have the eternal life, in that we begin to live now the type of life which we will eternally live. We receive the Kingdom of God here and now, in that we receive the Gospel of the Kingdom; and if we accept it as a little child, we begin to enter it, now- in that the lives we live determine whether or not we will enter it at the Lord's coming. We are on our way into life! We have received the Kingdom, our names were written from the foundation of the world, and only our falling from grace can take that away. This is almost too good news to believe.

Imputed Righteousness

How can it be? Throughout Romans, the point is made that the Lord *counts as righteous* those that believe; righteousness is *imputed* to us the unrighteous (Rom. 2:26; 4:3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,22,23,24; 8:36; 9:8). But the very same Greek word is used of *our* self-perception. We must count / impute ourselves as righteous men and women, and count each other as righteous on the basis of recognising each others' faith rather than works: "Therefore we conclude [we count / impute / consider] that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law... Likewise reckon [impute] ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto

God through Jesus Christ our Lord". (Rom. 3:28; 6:11). We should *feel* clean and righteous, and act accordingly, both in our own behaviour and in our feelings towards each other. Border-line language and expressions, clothing with worldly slogans, watching violence and pornography...these are not things which will be done by someone who feels and perceives him/herself to be clean and righteous, "in Christ". The mind of love imputes no evil to others, as God doesn't to us (1 Cor. 13:5; AV "thinketh no evil", s.w. to count / impute in Romans). And again the word occurs in 2 Cor 3:5: "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to *think* [s.w. impute] any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God". We *are* able to count / feel to ourselves as righteous; for God has counted us righteous.

We are "in Christ" to the extent that we *are* Christ to this world. In this sense He has in this world no arms or legs or face than us. "The Son of God, Jesus Christ, was preached among you through us, even through me and Silvanus" (2 Cor. 1:19 RVmg.). Paul was a placarding of Christ crucified before the Galatians (Gal. 3:1 Gk.); to the Corinthians he was "the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 2:10 RSV). There is a prophecy of the Lord Jesus preaching: "How beautiful are the feet of *him* that preaches the Gospel" (Nah. 1:15); but it is quoted in Rom. 10:15 with a subtle change of pronoun: "How beautiful are the feet of *them* that preach". We are the Lord Jesus to this world, because we are brethren in Him.

This alone is a powerful imperative as to who we are, how we speak, the men and women we show ourselves to be. Imputed righteousness is given us on the basis of our faith. This means that insofar as we can believe all this is true, so it will be. In this sense “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Rom 8:16). We are His dear children (Eph. 5:1), the pride and joy of Almighty God, counted as wonderful and righteous by Him. And further, we are Christ to our brethren. The “master of the house” is representative of Jesus in Lk. 13:25; and yet we are to be the “master of the house” in spiritually feeding our brethren (Mt. 24:43,45 RV). It is through us that He ministers to His household.

The Body Of Christ

We are the body of Christ. We are counted righteous because we are baptized into Him. We are counted as Him; and we are parts of His body, hands, feet, eyes, internal organs. As such, we are inextricably linked in with the other members of the body. We cannot operate in isolation from them. “We are members one of another...we are members of his body” (Eph. 4:25; 5:30). Only insofar as we belong to each other do we belong to Him. We must perceive ourselves not so much as individual believers but as members of one body, both over space and over time. We must soberly ‘think of ourselves’ as someone who has something to contribute to the rest of the

body, even if first of all we are not sure what it is (Rom. 15:3-8). We feel their weaknesses as if they are our own. Self interest must die; their wellbeing becomes all consuming. This is why men like Daniel and Nehemiah could feel that “*we* have sinned...”- not ‘*they* have sinned’. Ezra said that because *we* have sinned, *we* cannot lift up ourselves before Yahweh. And he cast himself down before Yahweh in demonstration of how much he was with his people in this (Ezra 9:15; 10:1)! Esther, in an eloquent type of the Lord’s mediation for us, risked her life because she felt that “*we* are sold, *I* and my people, to be destroyed” (Es. 7:4). If she’d have kept her mouth shut, *she* wouldn’t have been destroyed. But she fought and won the same battle as we have daily or weekly before us: to identify ourselves with our weaker and more suffering brethren. The Lord Jesus didn’t sin Himself but He took upon Himself our sins- to the extent that He *felt* a sinner, even though He wasn’t. Our response to this utter and saving grace is to likewise take upon ourselves the infirmities and sins of our brethren. If one is offended, we burn too; if one is weak, we are weak; we bear the infirmities of the weak (Rom. 15:1). But in the context of that passage, Paul is quoting from Is. 53:11, about how the Lord Jesus bore our sins on the cross. We live out the spirit of His cross, not in just bearing with our difficulties in isolation, but in feeling for our weak brethren.

If we believe that we are counted righteous, we must

likewise assume that all those properly baptized are equally righteous, and will be saved along with us. We cannot condemn each other; therefore we must assume each other will be saved. If we have a positive attitude to our own salvation, we will likewise perceive our whole community. And the reverse is true; if we cannot believe that God sees *us* positively, we will tend towards a negative outlook upon ourselves. My sense is that many of us fail in this area. Paul had many reasons to think negatively of his converts; and yet he writes to the Thessalonians as if 'we all', all his readership, would be saved (1 Thess. 4:17). And likewise to dodgy Corinth, he writes as if they would all be accepted at the Lord's return (1 Cor. 15:52); he saw them *all* as innocent Eve in danger of being beguiled (2 Cor. 11:3).

The Two Pauls

But we are real life men and women, only too aware that although yes, we are in Christ, we are also all too human still. We still sin the sins and think the thoughts and feel the feelings of those around us. We are only who we are, born in such a town, living in such a city, doing a job, trying to provide for a family. In our minds eye we see the spotless lamb of God, moving around Galilee 2000 years ago, doing good, preaching the Gospel, healing the sick. But He was there, and we are here now, today, in all our weakness and worldly distraction. He was as He was, but *we* are as we

are. We each have two ‘people’ as it were within us; we act both as spiritual and as fleshly people. The record of Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18:16 reflects this: “At that time did Hezekiah cut off the gold from...pillars which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, because of the king of Assyria”. The Hezekiah who faithfully overlaid the pillars with gold was the same man, acting a different persona, who then cut it off faithlessly when under pressure. Likewise the Jews could be described as both Abraham’s seed (Jn. 8:37) and not Abraham’s seed (Jn. 8:39); as having Abraham as their father (Jn. 8:56), and yet also having the devil as their father (Jn. 8:39-41,44).

Reading through his letters, it is apparent that Paul saw himself as two people: a natural man, a Jew from Tarsus, a Roman citizen living in the Mediterranean world...and also, a man in Christ. He speaks of how “I bruise myself”, as if the one Paul was boxing against the other Paul (1 Cor. 9:27 RVmg.). This is why in an autobiographical passage in 2 Cor. 12, he says of himself: “I knew a man in Christ”, who had great visions 14 years previously (at the council of Jerusalem of Acts 15), and who was subsequently given a “thorn in the flesh”. “Of such an one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory”, he writes (2 Cor 12:5), as if separating himself from this more spiritually exalted man who saw these visions. Paul is surely telling us that he sees himself as two people. He makes the point clearly: “I will not be a fool...I am

become a fool” (:6,11). He was the greatest apostle; although he was nothing (:11). This language comes to a crisis in 12:10: “When I [i.e. the natural Paul] am weak, then am I [the spiritual Paul] strong”. Consider how this dualism is to be found in many other places:

The Natural Paul The Spiritual Paul

<p>Paul could say: “I am a Pharisee...I am a man which am a Jew” (Acts 23:6; 21:13,39; 22:3; 2 Cor. 11:22)</p> <p>Circumcision and being Jewish has ‘much advantage’ (Rom. 3:1,2). “Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel” (Phil. 3:5). He argues that all Jews are “the seed</p>	<p>But he also stresses that “they are not all Israel who are of Israel” because only “the children of the promise”, those baptized into Christ, are counted as the seed (Gal. 3:16,27-29; Rom. 9:8).</p> <p>The spiritual Paul is neither Jew nor Gentile. The ‘gain’ of being personally Jewish Paul counted as loss (Phil. 3:3-7). His circumcision meant nothing (Rom. 2:29; 1 Cor. 7:19). “We are the circumcision, which of worship God in the</p>
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Abraham”,
including himself,
by birth (2 Cor.
11:22).

spirit...and have no
confidence in the flesh
[i.e. the fact of literal
circumcision, see
context]” (Phil. 3:7)

“We who are
Jews by nature
and not sinners of
the Gentiles”
(Gal. 2:15)

This contrasts sharply
with Paul’s whole
message that in Christ,
there is neither Jew nor
Gentile, and both groups
are all equally sinners
(Rom. 3:9,23). He speaks
of “theirs is the covenants,
the receiving of the law,
the temple worship...
theirs are the patriarchs”
(Rom. 9:4,5). He clearly
dissociates himself from
Jewry. He had to *become
like a Jew* in order to
save them, although he
was Jewish (2 Cor. 9:20).
He carefully kept parts of
the law (Acts 18:18;
21:26; 1 Cor. 8:13). To

the Jew he became [again] as a Jew; and to the Gentiles he became as a Gentile (1 Cor. 9:20). He acted “To them that are without law, as without law...”. He was “dead to the law” (Gal. 2:19) He was a Jew but considered he had renounced it, but he became as a Jew to them to help them. He saw no difference between Jew and Gentile (Gal. 3:27-29) but he consciously acted in a Jewish or Gentile way to help those who still perceived themselves after the flesh. “...(being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ)” (1 Cor 9:21).

I am carnal (Rom. 7:14) But in Christ he was not carnal (1 Cor. 3:1 s.w.)

No flesh may Paul, in his spiritual man,
glory before God as counted righteous
(1 Cor. 1:29) before God, could glory
(Rom. 15:17).

“Not as though I had already attained, were already perfect”
“Let us therefore, as many as be perfect...” (Phil. 3:12,15). In 1 Cor. 13:10, he considers he is ‘perfect’, and has put away the things of childhood. Thus he saw his spiritual maturity only on account of his being in Christ; for he himself was not “already perfect”, he admitted.

“ I laboured more abundantly than they all...
... *yet not I*, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor 15:10)

God set the apostles *first* in the ecclesia (1 Cor. 4:9)
God set the apostles *last* in the ecclesia (1 Cor. 4:9)

“I live...

... *yet not I*, but Christ liveth in me [the new ‘me’]... I [the old ‘me’] am crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20) ⁽²⁾

“I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office” (Rom. 11:13). He considered himself rightfully amongst the very chiefest apostles (2 Cor. 12:11).

He “supposed”, the same word translated “impute” as in ‘imputed righteousness’, that he was amongst the chiefest apostles (2 Cor. 11:5). He knew this was how his Lord counted him. But he felt himself as less than the least of all saints (Eph. 3:8). “For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:9-10).

This all shows that Paul wasn't so heavenly that he was no earthly good. He saw himself from outside himself, as a Jew, as a Pharisee from Tarsus. And he used that self-understanding to get his message over to ordinary people. He could turn it on and he could turn it off; to the Jew he acted as a Jew, to the Gentiles as a Gentile. To the spiritually weak, he became as weak. He didn't think 'Well this is how I am, you'll just have to put up with me and take me for who I am'. He was far more sensitive to others than to be so selfish. Sadly, this former attitude is all too common amongst our community. We can delude ourselves that it is a sin to adapt, concede, compromise, tolerate, submit...obtuseness and angularity can become glorified in the name of upholding a true position. But in spiritual reality, others don't have to put up with us- we have to make ourselves all things to all. Paul did this to the extent that he was slanderously accused of inconsistency by the Corinthians. Although Paul made himself all things to all men, he didn't just seek to please men (Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:4). He sought their salvation and approached them in appropriate terms, but he didn't just seek to please them from a human viewpoint. He didn't cheapen the Gospel. But most importantly, his own internal self-perception was that he was neither Jew nor Gentile but in Christ; a citizen of Heavenly Jerusalem, far more than earthly Rome (although he used that Roman citizenship at times). The

Corinthians were mainly Gentiles, but Paul speaks of them as “When ye were Gentiles...” (2 Cor. 12:2 RV). They had a new racial identity in Christ, and yet, he also reminded them at times that they were Gentiles. We too cannot obliterate who we are or where we came from. But superimposed upon this must be the realisation that now, we are in Christ.

All this opens a window into our understanding of 2 Cor. 10:10: “His bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible”. Yet this is hardly how Paul comes over at his trials. The conclusion surely is that Paul made himself a weak person in his dealings with Corinth. He could truly be all things to all people, he wasn’t constrained by his natural personality type as so many of us allow ourselves to be. This is why Paul could go on in v. 11 to warn Corinth that the next time he visits them, he won’t be weak. He will ‘be’ as he is in his letters. In all this we see the full import of the sacrifice and crucifixion of self of which the Lord repeatedly speaks. Putting meaning into words, this means that we will genuinely ‘be’ the person we need to be in order to help others. And thus he could say: “I protest by that glorying in you, brethren, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily” (1 Cor. 15:31 RV). By this he perhaps means that because he was daily crucified with Christ, he was thereby able to rejoice in them; to overcome the pain and hurt which their treatment of him would naturally give rise to, because he could be another person. That new person could rejoice in

the Corinthians and view them so positively.

The Self-Perception Of Jesus...

Likewise the record of the Lord's wilderness temptations is almost certainly a reflection of *His* self-perception; He spoke to the 'devil' / personification of sin which was within Him, He saw Himself as two people, and His spiritual man triumphed gloriously against the man of the flesh. Lk. 4:8 records how "Jesus answered and said unto him, Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve". He understood that we can only serve two masters: God or the flesh ("mammon" is another personification of the flesh, similar to 'satan'). He saw His own flesh, His own internal thoughts, as a master begging to be served which He must totally reject. His words are a quotation from Dt. 6:13, which warns Israel to serve Yahweh alone and not idols. He perceived His own natural mind and desire as an idol calling to be served. When the Lord explained what had happened in the wilderness to the disciples and thereby to the Gospel writers, He opened His heart to them. He gave us all a window on how He perceived Himself, as He sought to explain to men the internal struggles of the Son of God. Bringing it all back home, I must ask firstly how much we even *struggle* with temptation? And as and when we do, would we not be helped by the Lord's example of talking to ourselves, and

personalising Scripture as He did? ‘You don’t want to do *that!* Give up your place in the Kingdom, for that...drug, that girl, that job? Of course not! Come on. There *is* a way of escape; Paul told me God won’t try me beyond my strength, He will make me a way of escape’. The Lord in the wilderness was representative of us all. He was led of the Spirit at that time (Mt. 4:1); and Paul uses just those words of us in our present experience of trial (Rom. 8:14).

...and David

David too writes in the Psalms as if he sees himself from outside of himself. Ps. 132 is a good example, where he speaks of David in all his afflictions. Ps. 131:2 RV has him speaking of stilling and quieting his soul like a mother does a child- as if he saw himself as the mother to his own soul, talking to himself.

Serious Sinners

We shouldn’t be discouraged if in our self perception we see ourselves as serious sinners. We must say of ourselves that “we are unprofitable servants” (Lk. 17:10)- i.e. condemned, for this is how the phrase is used elsewhere in the Lord’s thinking (Mt. 25:30). This is the finest paradox of all. If we perceive ourselves as worthy of condemnation, we will be saved. If we would judge [i.e. condemn] ourselves, we will not be judged / condemned (1 Cor. 11:31). This is written in

the context of the breaking of bread. When we examine ourselves then, and at other times, do we get to the point where we truly *feel* through and through our condemnation? If this is how we perceive our natural selves, then surely we will be saved- if we *also* believe with joy that God's righteousness is counted to us. Over time, Paul's perception of his own sinfulness increased. The following quotes are in chronological sequence:

"I am the least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9);

"Less than the least of all saints" (Eph. 3:8)

"Chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

There is a tension between the fact we are saved *in prospect* and absolutely assured, by grace, of a place in the Kingdom; and the evident awareness we must have of our own inadequacy and condemnation; that sense of the future we might miss. In the age to come, we will no doubt realise that this is how it had to be. But for now, we are left with that almost irresolvable tension.

Christ Centeredness

If we believe that we are counted righteous, we will with joy and gratitude be people who are centred upon another man- the Lord Jesus, the Saviour who made this great salvation possible. We run the risk, it seems to me, of being Bible

centred rather than Christ centred; a community of Bible students, a kind of learned society that has more Biblical learning and erudition than most other 'Christian' communities; but precious little else. The man Christ Jesus must dominate our individual and collective consciousness, and the true doctrines we are blessed to know must enable this the more powerfully in practice. We must see in that Man who had fingernails, hair, who needed to shave, who sneezed and blinked, the very Son of God; the Man who should dominate our thinking and being. And we must grasp the wonder of the fact that from the larynx of a Palestinian Jew came the words of Almighty God. All that was true of natural Israel becomes a warning for us, Israel after the spirit. The tension between the following of Jesus and merely studying the pages of the Bible for academic truth is brought out in the Lord's encounter with the Jews in Jn. 5:39: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: [but] ye will not come to *me* that ye might have life". Surely the Lord is using irony here: as if to say, 'Go on searching through the scrolls, thinking as you do that finding true exposition will bring you eternal life. But you must come to *me*, the word-made-flesh, the living and eternal life, if you wish to find it'.

God Manifestation

We bear the Name of Yahweh / Jehovah, by reason of our baptism into it. His Name is declared as His character-

merciful, truthful, judging sin, patient etc (Ex. 34:5-7). He who will be who He will be, manifesting His characteristics as He does so, must have His way in us too. Babylon and Nineveh were condemned for having the attitude that “I am, and there is none beside me” (Is. 47:8; Zeph. 2:15). Their self-perception was a parody on the Name and being of Yahweh: He alone can say “I am, and there is none else” (Is. 43:11; 44:6; 45:6,21) and seek to be who He is. He alone can seek to articulate the characteristics that make up His Name onto the lives of others, and onto the things that comprise His Kingdom. We are not to be who we are; to ‘just be yourself’; to ‘just do it’, as foolish slogans and adverts encourage us. We are here to show forth His mercy, truth, judgment of sin, patient saving of the weak etc., not our own personality. We are, in the very end, Yahweh manifested to this world, through our imitation of the Lord Jesus. Paul was alluding to the Yahweh Name (as he often does) when he wrote: “...by the grace of God *I am what I am*” (1 Cor 15:10) ⁽³⁾. ‘Yahweh’ means all of three things: I am who I am, I was who I was, and I will be who I will be. It doesn’t *only* mean ‘I will be manifested in the future’ in a prophetic sense; that manifestation has been ongoing, and most importantly it *is* going on through us here and now. Paul felt Yahweh’s insistent manifestation of the principles of His Name through and in himself and his life’s work. We are right now, in who we *are*, Yahweh’s witnesses to Himself unto this world, just

as Israel were meant to have been. Thus he felt “jealous with the jealousy of God” over his converts (2 Cor. 11:2); jealousy is a characteristic of the Yahweh Name, and Paul felt it, in that the Name was being expressed through him and his feelings. His threat that “I will not spare” (2 Cor. 13:2) is full of allusion to Yahweh’s similar final threats to an apostate Israel. “As *he is* [another reference to the Name] so *are we* in this world” (1 Jn. 4:17). Appreciating this means that our witness is to be more centred around who we essentially *are* than what we *do*.

Jesus Is Our Lord

There are some passages which appear to teach [misread] that we go on living after death. It has been observed that Rom. 14:8,9 implies *that Jesus is our Lord* after death as well as in life: “For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living”. We are the Lord’s after death, in the same way as Abraham lives unto Him (Lk. 20:38). We are still with Him. He doesn’t forget us when we die, just as I will remember my mother till the day of my death. But if the Lord doesn’t come, I will die, and my memory, my love, my fondness, will perish (for a small moment). But God doesn’t die, His memory doesn’t fade and distort as ours does;

images of us don't come in and out of His mind with greater intensity and insistence at some times than at others; He remembers us constantly and will remember us after our death, right up until when the Lord comes.

Because of this, He *is* the God of Abraham; Abraham is alive in the mind of God, He remembers his faith and his offering of Isaac, just as much as He was aware of it in Abraham's lifetime. The works of the dead follow them, in the sense that once they finish their labours their works are still in the memory of the Father (Rev. 14:13); for what father would not remember his dead child's ways and deeds? This is why Rom. 14:8,9 says that Jesus is our Lord after death just as much as He was and is during our lifetimes. Why? Because we are "the Lord's", because we were "added to the Lord" through baptism (Acts 2:41,47; 5:14; 11:24), because we are true brothers-in-Christ. From God's perspective, the dead believers are cheering us on as we run the race to the end; He remembers them as they were, and knows how they would behave if they were alive today, looking down upon us as we run the race (Heb. 12:1).

Or in another figure, the blood of the dead believers cries out from under the altar, demanding vengeance on this world: on the Catholic, Protestant, Babylonian, Roman, Nazi, Soviet systems that slew them for their faith (Rev. 6:9). To God, their blood is a voice, just as real as the voice of Abel,

which cried out (in a figure) for judgment against Cain (Gen. 4:10). After their death, those who had already died are spoken of as being given “white robes” and being told to rest a bit longer (Rev. 6:11). Yet the white robe is given at baptism; a man may cast off Christ, but the prodigal is given again the robe if he returns (Lk. 15:22 s.w.); we are given white robes in this life through our acceptance of the blood of Christ and living in response to that redemption (Rev. 7:13,14; 22:14 Gk.). God giving believers white robes after their death can surely only be understood as His remembrance of how in their lives they had put on those robes. But His view of time is different, and He sees them as doing it again and again, as He considers how they had died for His cause and how thereby He will surely raise them. This is just as we would relive in our own minds the baptism of one of our children who has died. We know of course that there is no immortal soul, and that we personally feel nothing in death. But there is an immortal spirit, in that who we essentially are, our personality, lives on in the memory of a loving Father.

In the end...

In the end, we are all only ordinary men, nothing-special women, who have somehow been called by Almighty God to know the ultimately true faith, to have the hope of eternity with Him- life with His nature, with His Son, for ever and

ever and ever... And yet we can treat this relationship, this essential *being*, as just something ordinary. We can fail to grasp the wonder of grace, fail to have grace ruling as a king in our hearts and lives, dominating everything (Rom. 5:21); fail to accept that through such grace, “where the spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is free” (2 Cor. 3:17). For those brought up in the faith, it can just be an unthinking following of the faith of our fathers. Or just a church to attend which we got to know from our work colleague, our distant relative, because it seemed like the logical way at the time. Or just...mere religion, with its traditions and simple ceremonies of baptism and breaking of bread, with its meetings, with its psychology of religious feeling just like anything else. Brethren, this ought not so to be for us. This is the Truth, and the things we stand for stretch on into the spectre of utter infinity; they are the one and only Truth for our whole and eternal existence. It isn't just a crutch to help us through this life, which is all the religion of this world amounts to. It isn't mere Christianity, a badge to wear just as everyone else says ‘I'm a Catholic...a Hindu...a Baptist’. It's infinitely and essentially more than that; so much much more.

Notes

- (1) David Levin, *Legalism And Faith* (The Christadelphian Tidings, 2001).
- (2) Gal. 2:20 and 1 Cor. 15:10 show Paul using the phrase

“yet not I but...” to differentiate between his natural and spiritual self. Perhaps he does the same in the only other occurrence of the phrase, in 1 Cor 7:10: “And unto the married I command, *yet not I* [the natural Paul], but the Lord [the man Christ Jesus in the spiritual Paul], Let not the wife depart from her husband”.

(3) Another example would be Heb. 12:8: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, to day, and for ever”. Paul saw the three elements of the Yahweh Name supremely manifest in the Lord Jesus. Which is surely why ‘Jesus’ in the NT becomes the Name above every Name (Phil. 2:9,10; Eph. 1:21); for only ‘Yahweh’ was exalted above every other name (Neh. 9:5; Ps. 148:13). John’s Gospel points out how the Lord often changed tenses so strangely- to the extent that many have concluded that some of the strange combinations of tenses are a result of John’s later editing. But it could be that the Lord used past, present and future tenses in close proximity in order to show His manifestation of the Name. He is the bread which was, is and will be on the cross. He came, is coming down, and will come (Jn. 6:50,51). The hour was coming and yet “now is” (Jn. 4:23; 5:25; 16:31,32). These mixing of tenses must have seemed strange to the hearers, and they read strangely in the tense-conscious Greek language. About 50 times in John’s Gospel we read the phrase “I am” as having been on the lips of Jesus. And it gets more and more frequent as He nears the cross, as if He

was aware of an ongoing manifestation of the Name which reached its climax there. Or take Jn. 3:13: “No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the son of man which is in heaven”. This man Jesus standing before them was saying [in figurative terms] that He was in Heaven, had been in Heaven, had ascended there. Surely His abrupt shift of tenses and places is to suggest the Yahweh Name being manifested in Him. The language of ‘coming down’ is classically used in the OT in the context of Yahweh manifestation in theophany; yet it often occurs in Acts in the context of the preaching of the Gospel, as if our witness is a manifestation of the Name (Acts 8:5; 10:21; 12:19; 14:25; 18:22; 25:6).

11 Church Discipline

11-1 False Teachers

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 based around their theological interpretations rather than the all important practical business of being "in" and following Christ.

How can we square the open spirit of Christianity with the condemnation of false teachers? Does the openness not extend to them? My resolution of the apparent tension is that teachers are held to a different standard to the flock (1 Tim. 5:20). The Lord's table can be open- but you must carefully guard the platform. The Lord Jesus didn't rebuke the faithful who belonged to an apostate church in Thyatira, but He criticized the "Angel" of the church there who allowed

Jezebel to teach the flock to commit adultery (Rev. 2:20). The Lord's table can remain open to all- but if wolves are rebuked and denied access to the platform, they will soon leave. And this has been my repeated experience in dealing with difficult individuals who have arisen in mission field ecclesias.

It's worth noting, however, that the "false teachers" described in the New Testament are always associated with immorality and teaching a wrong *moral* way of life. There is no New Testament example of a well meaning Christian brother or sister who was honestly astray in theological interpretation being excluded from a church- and then anyone who broke bread with him or her then being hounded out, and their families too for good measure. And this is no straw man- this is the reality of life in closed table communities. Time and again, it was *behaviour* rather than *theology* which was the concern of the New Testament writers, even though we know there was ample misunderstanding of quite basic issues in the first century churches.

False Teaching was Practical

It was "the *deeds* of the Nicolaitans" which were obnoxious to the Lord Jesus (Rev. 2:6). These deeds are paralleled with "the doctrine of the Nicolaitans" (Rev. 2:15). "Doctrine" means teaching- teaching about anything, not specifically theological teaching or Biblical exposition, even though this

is how the word has come to be used in some circles today. The teaching of the Nicolaitans was about immoral deeds. It is spoken of as similar to “the doctrine of Balaam”; his *teaching* was to commit immorality (Rev. 2:14). And this was the same teaching of “Jezebel” (Rev. 2:20). It was the “works” of some in the Sardis ecclesia which had to be repented of (Rev. 3:2). The false teachers Jude contended with taught that sexual immorality was permitted by God’s grace (Jude 4); and sexual misbehaviour is the concern of his letter, as it is in so much of Paul and Peter’s writing- rather than misinterpretation of theology. The “deeds” and “words” of Diotrephes were not specifically theological- rather did they involve an exclusion of faithful believers from fellowship (3 Jn. 9-11). John’s concern with false prophets was that they would be characterized by a lack of love (1 Jn. 4). Their practical effect upon the church in terms of personal spirituality was John’s great concern. John presents these people as having their prototype in Cain (1 Jn. 3), whose chief characteristic was that he didn’t love his brother. Diotrephes is described in terms which John uses in his Gospel with reference to the Judaist opposition to Jesus; he wouldn’t receive the brethren (3 Jn. 9) just as the Jewish world wouldn’t receive Jesus (Jn. 1:11), casting them out (3 Jn. 10)- as the Jews did (Jn. 9:34). His love of pre-eminence (3 Jn. 9) recalls Mt. 23:6; his ‘forbidding’ of others uses the same word as used about the Pharisees in Lk. 11:52.

The “false prophets” of 2 Pet. 2 had “pernicious ways” (2:2), ways of life which would lead to condemnation. Their appeal was to “covetousness” (2:3), and the surrounding world would think badly of those who followed them because of their immoral *behaviour*. The examples of Sodom and Noah’s world are quoted as warning to the false teachers- and Peter focuses upon what was wrong with those societies in moral rather than theological terms. The false teachers had “eyes full of adultery”- they viewed the flock with the eyes of sexual predators (2:14). Those who followed them were eating the vomit of their previous lives which they had previously rejected (2:22). Without question the error in view was practical and not theological. Indeed, there is not a word about any theological error, even though for sure they also had that.

By contrast, a true teacher would have a way of life which was publically on record as a witness to his true teaching and beliefs (Heb. 13:7). The qualifications for leadership in the church presented to Timothy (1 Tim. 5) and Titus (Tit. 1) were therefore based around personal morality. Paul contrasts those who meet those qualifications with those “whose mouths must be stopped”- because they subverted or broke up whole families for the sake of money (Tit. 1:11) with the result that “in works they deny [God], being abominable and unto every good work reprobate” (Tit. 1:16). Paul warned that the great apostasy would happen because

people would want to have teachers who appealed to their own “lusts”- and the Greek word has a definite sexual connotation (2 Tim. 4:3). Paul contrasts his way of life with that of these false teachers in 2 Tim. 3, saying that his “doctrine and manner of life” are clearly displayed (3:10). It was always a question of manner of life rather than theological error. And again, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. There are sincere Christian people who may be theologically astray- but their way of life is without doubt Christ-centred and they give their lives for Him. Such people were not Paul’s concern. It was immoral living and enticing others to it which concerned him. “Profane and vain babblings increase unto ungodliness” (2 Tim. 2:16; wrong teaching and ungodliness are also paralleled in 1 Tim. 4:7); the end result of the type of false teaching which must be outlawed is seen in an ungodly life. This is how we can tell a false teacher- by their way of life. Paul told the Philippians to choose which kind of teacher to follow by considering whether their way of life was like Paul’s, or whether their “God is their belly, and their glory in their [moral] shame” (Phil. 3:17-19).

This is all quite some evidence. False teaching / doctrine was practical. Theological differences of interpretation of the Bible were not of paramount concern to the New Testament writers, even though such differences existed. The cry to exclude false teachers in any case does not affect a

case for an open table; the need is to preserve the flock from those who would abuse them or lead them into moral sin.

11-2 Dealing With Error

The passages used to justify exclusion of false teachers all speak of this as only to be practiced as a last resort and in serious cases of absolutely gross misbehaviour, where the presence of the individual would cause damage to the rest of the community. One can't have a paedophile running rampant in a Sunday School, or a sexual predator preying on vulnerable individuals in the church under the guise of sharing the same faith and being "one of us". But these cases are a matter for the elders of the local congregation to consider and cannot be extrapolated from to justify fencing the Lord's table against others who differ from us. I would also observe, looking back upon 30 active years in church life, that such cases are very rare. The command to "not even eat" with "anyone who bears the name of a brother or sister" who is involved in serious sexual immorality is surely designed to protect the community (1 Cor. 5:5-9). The exact nature of the sexual immorality is hard to reconstruct from the extreme Greek words used by Paul, but we could surmise that it was similar to the behaviour of the individual called "Jezebel" who actually taught the church from the podium how to commit adultery (Rev. 2:20). The phrase "anyone who bears the name of a brother or sister" could even

suggest that these people were not true Christian believers but simply claimed to be; in this case, we would have another reference to these types in Gal. 2:4, which speaks of “false brethren smuggled in to stealthily spy out your liberty”, the “false brethren” of 2 Cor. 11:26 and Rev. 2:9; 3:9. Whatever, the behaviour of these people was habitual, not open to any doubt as to what was happening, and not admitted as sinful by those indulging in it. It would be a wresting of Scripture to use such passages as a justification for excluding others from the Lord’s table because they interpret Scripture differently on some points, or fellowship those who do.

A Range of Responses

It’s been my observation that in many closed table communities there is no range of response in dealing with church discipline. Either an individual is disfellowshipped, or they remain “in fellowship”. The black and white, in or out approach tends towards this. And it means in practice that much behaviour which is in need of rebuke and counselling is allowed to go... and that someone can be disfellowshipped for crossing a line of fellowship policy whilst themselves upholding the one faith and living a very committed Christlike life. Such ecclesias are rather like the schoolteacher or parent who only uses one method of discipline, namely exclusion. The excluded person is

unlikely to 'return' and typically gets bitter. Cut off from the rest of the group or flock, they typically wither further. The hard work of counselling, entreaty, limiting privileges [e.g. access to the platform] etc. is bypassed- disfellowship or exclusion gets rid of the problem visibly, but doesn't consider the wellbeing of the person. And send a child out of a classroom, or a child to bed early, and what will they do there? In the corridor, in the bedroom... alone. What will they be thinking? Typically it doesn't reform them. What they need is dialogue, time, a range of disciplinary measures that make them reflect upon their ways. Exclusion is all too easy a short cut, the word "lazy" comes to mind. It should be noted that although prisons were known in ancient communities [we think of Joseph in prison in Egypt], God's own law never envisaged dealing with poor behaviour by excluding from the community. Either a person was to be killed and thereby excluded totally from God's people, or the erring person was to be disciplined whilst remaining *in situ* within the community. This was because God knew that excluding an individual from His people, e.g. by isolating them in prison, would be to their spiritual detriment.

The New Testament letters allude to a range of disciplinary methods, e.g. "rebuke before all" (1 Tim. 5:20). Tit. 3:10 RVmg. speaks of 'refusing' someone who is factious [AV "an heretic"] after continued rebuke; the context is of Paul advising Titus of how to appoint elders, and so his sense may

be that a divisive elder is to be rejected as an elder, or his desire for eldership was to be refused (so many who claim to be elders in the church today are just that- divisive; and they thereby disqualify themselves from any legitimate claim to eldership). Some were to be treated very severely- not to eat with them in 1 Cor. 5:11. Others who were not working as they might and were demanding welfare wrongly were to be “noted” or “marked” and not socially associated with outside of church life so that they might be ashamed (2 Thess. 3:14). Others were to be “counselled” (Rev. 3:18); others were to be simply “avoided” but not cut off from the body (Rom. 16:17). Yet closed table communities tend to be very tolerant of poor behaviour because they practice only one kind of discipline- exclusion and not “eating with”, not sharing the Lord’s table with those excluded. But that most severe discipline is only spoken of for those actually committing and teaching serious sexual immorality and debauchery (1 Cor. 5:11 and context).

Light and Darkness

Our open approach to table fellowship doesn’t mean we can’t tell right from wrong. Light has no fellowship with darkness. However, our responsibility for working this out in practice is very personal. 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). 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.

Proverbs provides much wise guidance. The faithful Israelite was bidden not walk with, not share a way of life with, those who are unGodly. 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. Even in separating from gross false teachers of the type outlined earlier in this section, we are not 'rooting up' our brethren nor condemning them. *We dare not* do anything of the sort- for the sake of our own eternal destiny, if nothing else. Any such separations (and fortunately they are usually rare in church experience) 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 for gross sexual immorality (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. And association with those who hold wrong theology isn't specifically taught in the Bible; 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 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.

11-3 Wheat and Weeds

The Lord's parable of the wheat and weeds is typical of His parables. It contains familiar things which His hearers

would've easily related to- especially as they were largely the rural poor, familiar with fields and wheat, and how the shortage of firewood meant that even weeds were gathered and burnt. But His parables usually contain elements of unreality which are in fact signposts to the meaning He was seeking to get over. The element of unreality here is that the farm workers were not used to do the gathering up- they weren't told to 'do it later', they were told that they would not do this task at all! Gathering out weeds was and is backbreaking work. The expected response from the rural poor would've been a relieved smile, that they didn't have to do the hard work which they felt was their duty to do. The point is- ultimate judgment is not for us to do, and we should be happy and relieved about that, rather than insisting upon trying to do it.

The Greek word translated "weeds" (*zizanon*) refers to darnel (*Lolium temulentum*), a ryegrass which looks much like wheat in its early stages of growth (1). Roman law prohibited sowing darnel among the wheat of even an enemy (2), so what happened here was common and imaginable. But the farm workers come to the farmer when they think the difference is already clear. Now, surely, was the time to undo the damage. Because the darnel would take up the moisture and nutrients from the soil which were intended and would be better used by the wheat plants. Darnel also hosts *Ergot Smut fungus*, which damages the wheat. And Jesus had only

moments before been telling the parable of the types of ground, warning that some people begin to believe but have their spiritual growth ended by the weeds growing next to them (Mt. 13:7). The answer of the landowner is unusual- No, let the darnel keep growing with the wheat. I will sort it out at harvest time. This would've furrowed the brows of the listeners. By letting the darnel still grow, even once it was obvious what was darnel and what was wheat, the wheat would be damaged. Why not remove it immediately? And they had offered to do this backbreaking work in the field! But the farmer refused their help... The point, of course, was and is that despite our conviction that we know what is wheat and what are weeds, despite our total persuasion that we are doing this solely for the benefit of the wheat and for the good of the Master's cause... we are totally unqualified to do this work. What seems so obviously to be darnel may actually not be that at all. Our experienced eye... is actually not that at all. Even though the darnel does indeed damage the wheat- even more damage will be caused to the wheat by trying to pull out the darnel in this life. That's the point of the element of unreality. And Jesus carefully chose His word in Mt. 13:26: "Then *appeared* the weeds also". The Greek word, like the English, can mean both to 'appear' in the sense of becoming obvious; and also, to 'seem' something which we are not. Hypocrites anoint their faces so that they "*appear* [i.e. they seem] to others to fast" (Mt. 6:16); the Pharisees

appeared beautiful to men when in reality they were nothing of the sort (Mt. 23:27); we can appear or seem approved to men (2 Cor. 13:7).

“The field is the world”

The question, of course, is whether “the world” here refers to the church or to the world as in the whole planet. “The world” is used in a more restricted context in Jn. 1:9- the true light “lightens every man who comes into the world”. This usage of *kosmos* seems to restrict it to the sphere or world of those who have been enlightened by the Gospel. Indeed, many times in John’s gospel *kosmos* appears to refer to the Jewish world rather than the entire planet. But remember that at the time Jesus spoke those words, there was no “church” in existence. He spoke in the context of the “world” known to His immediate hearers, which was the “world” of those who were hearing the Gospel. The “field” (Gk. *agros*) is the area where the seed of God’s word is sown. But it is further interpreted as the “Kingdom” of Jesus- for the reapers are to finally gather the weeds “out of His Kingdom” (Mt. 13:41). The “kingdom” is that area over which the Lord’s kingship has influence. This is the field or “world” which the parable refers to.

We could say that the parable’s scope refers to those who are responsible to Divine judgment at the last day. Not all men will be raised and judged. Those ignorant of the Gospel are

“like sheep laid in the grave”; they will not be judged as they are not responsible to that judgment. Those who will be judged at the last day are not to be judged by us now- that is the clear message of the parable. Therefore, the “field” or “world” which is being judged refers to the world or sphere of those responsible to that judgment. If the world is to be understood as literally the whole planet, then the message would be ‘Curb your desire to root up ungodly unbelievers worldwide, because they will be judged at the last day’. But that is not a relevant message; from where would we “root up” worldly, unbelieving people? And why would they be resurrected at the last day and cast into condemnation if they never knew God? Apply the parable to our tendency to judge those who have heard the Gospel, those within the church today, apparently growing next to us... and it all becomes so much more bitingly relevant. This story of wheat and weeds is naturally suggestive of another image used by Jesus when teaching about judgment to come- that of wheat and chaff. The chaff are, again, those responsible to Divine judgment who will be resurrected, judged and then condemned to the second death.

The Immediate Context

I have noted that *kosmos*, “the world”, is often used in John’s Gospel to refer to the Jewish world. There was no “church” in existence at the time Jesus spoke the parable. The “world”

of Israel were hearing the Gospel, the sowing of the word of the Kingdom by Jesus the sower and farmer. Who were the persons sown by “the devil” who appeared the same as the wheat? In John 8, Jesus speaks with Jews who apparently “believed in Him” (Jn. 8:31). But in Jn. 8:44 speaks of these Jews as being the devil’s children. The disciples were far too quick to reject people. They didn’t want the Gentile woman nor the little children coming after Jesus; they were too harsh and rejective of John’s disciples, and of the Samaritan village who would not show them hospitality en route to Jerusalem. And this is typical, in my observation, of new converts. Their zeal for their new faith in Christ is such that they tend to too quickly and too harshly condemn others, writing off people as weeds rather than wheat. They also too trustingly assume that anyone apparently on their side is therefore wonderful. The Lord Jesus had clearly observed this about His disciples. He’s warning them that there would be Jews who appeared to believe, but didn’t really; and there were even some who appeared as darnel within the Jewish leadership, men like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who actually did believe. The Lord clearly alludes back to this parable when He answered the disciples’ concern that He seemed unaware how much He was offending the Jews by so stridently criticizing their hypocrisy: “Every plant that My Father has not planted shall be rooted up [s.w. Mt. 13:29]. Let them alone; they are blind leaders of the blind”

(Mt. 15:13,14). Here we see the Lord identifying the weeds as the Jewish leadership; and yet He taught that the disciples should remain within the synagogues until they were forcefully expelled (Jn. 16:2), and should be obedient to what the synagogue leadership asked of them (Mt. 23:3). *They* were not to make the judgment call- even though *He* could.

Thus the disciples' overzealous and reckless desire to judge the Jews seems to me to be the perfectly natural and imaginable background for this parable. Piecing together the New Testament evidence, it would appear that there was a Jewish organized campaign to infiltrate and destroy Christianity from within. The "enemy" who sowed the darnel was the Jewish 'satan' (Mt. 13:28)- note how the Jews are called Christ's "enemies" in Lk. 19:27; Rom. 11:28. Despite clearly knowing of it, Paul never once orders the believers to heresy hunt. He had learnt the lesson of this parable, as we must.

Notes

(1) Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) p. 386.

(2) R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

1985) pp. 225-227.

12 A Return to Our Roots

12-1 Original Christadelphia

In a Christadelphian context, and even in the context of other groups with similar backgrounds in the Stone-Campbell movement out of which Christadelphia emerged, what is being suggested in this book is in fact a call back to our roots rather than to a radically new approach. But it's a call even further back, not just to the spirit of the mid 19th century, but to that of the first century. The Christadelphians began as a movement of thought, based around the bullet points which later became expanded upon and over defined in their statements of faith [the Kingdom coming on earth, Jesus as Son of God and our representative, baptism by immersion, the resurrection of the body, an all powerful God- with no Trinity, pre-existent Jesus, infant sprinkling, personal satan, heaven going, hell fire etc.]. As Andrew Wilson has demonstrated in his extensive studies on 19th Century Christadelphianism, what began as a *movement of thought* with an open table and inclusive spirit quickly turned into a *denomination* with closed boundaries, heresy hunting, heavy demands upon members, and endless subdivision. And the number of converts was far higher in the days of open table and open mindedness. Indeed, it was upon the basis of that

openness that the Christadelphian movement had its initial success. This book is a call back to that early spirit.

Brother John Thomas and the early Christadelphians clearly drew a distinction between platform speakers, and those who were fellowshiped in worship at the Lord's table. The Royal Association of Believers in New York, of which brother Thomas was a member, stated in their 1854 constitution: "Being the Lord's table, and not the table of the Association, all of good report within the city or without it, who believing the Gospel of the Kingdom, have been immersed, are cordially invited to worship with us; the only privileges withheld being a participation in the direction of our affairs, and speech without previous invitation". This distinction between teachers and the body of those fellowshiped with at the breaking of bread later became ignored. Brother Robert Roberts imposed a far harsher view of fellowship, whereby the individuals attending the Lord's table had to be checked out as to their total agreement with his statement of faith. And from then on, Christadelphia fell into a downward spiral of extremism and endless subdivision.

Brother Thomas clearly was not a fan of "disfellowship" as it later came to be practiced within Christadelphia. In 1870 he wrote: "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 fellowshiped, 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”.

His view here was clearly unchanged from what he wrote in 1851: “[The] argument is that in fellowshiping [e.g.] slave-owners, and those who fellowship them, the parties so fellowshiping 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). Note the last phrase: “these may be members of the same ecclesiastical organization”. If there is no ‘guilt by association’ nor ‘contamination by communion’ (both phrases much beloved in the church of my youth), then “the purity of [our] neighbour’s faith” cannot be an issue in our decisions about whom to fellowship.

12-2 The Power of Conservatism

Many closed table communities are comprised of even a majority who do not agree with the closedness of the Lord’s table that they are forced to uphold. But fear of upsetting their social situation and concern at the consequences of doing the right thing- practicing an open table- lead them to continue to give power to the minorities who demand a closed table, and thus to continue their tradition. Often the hope is expressed that the younger generation will see sense. But as time goes on, that younger generation grow up and adopt the same positions as their parents’ generation, perhaps with slightly less zeal, but all the same- they adopt them. The point is, by excluding people from the table we are damaging them, and flying in the face of clear Bible teaching and the will of God; and thereby personally hurting the Lord who lived and died and lives again for us His people. We have to decide whether we are merely social Christians, living out the expectations of our fathers, comfortable in our community where we have

been for many years. Or... whether we are willing to hear the radical call of Christ, implicit in His outstretched arms upon the cross, to reflect His saving spirit of inclusion to others. Straight away, we are up against the power of conservatism. The Lord recognized this feature of human nature when He said that nobody tasting new wine will instinctively want it, because he will feel that “the old is better” (Lk. 5:39). And the person will not “*immediately* desire” that new wine- the implication perhaps being that in process of time and thought and God working in his life, he will. The point is, that change does not come “immediately”- because of the conservative nature of the human thought process. It makes an interesting study to look at the 70 usages of the Greek word translated “immediately” in the Gospels. Jesus does things “immediately”, and the ideal response to Him is presented as being likewise “immediate”- e.g. the disciples “immediately” forsook their nets once they perceived the Gospel call (Mt. 4:20). But immediacy of response doesn’t come naturally, according to Lk. 5:39. The ideal is that we perceive God’s word, and immediately respond- before all the “yes, but...” reasons freeze our response. We must keep asking ourselves, ‘When was the last time I perceived God’s word to me in a matter and made some concrete, actual and practical response to it?’. The ‘immediate’ response of people to the Gospel message in Acts led them to immediate baptism, but this is to be the

spirit of life in Christ. When it comes to whom we fellowship, closed table mindsets are indeed challenged to make the required response- even if, in our human weakness, we do not “immediately desire” that implication of the new wine.

The teaching of the Lord Jesus took full account of our human tendency to prefer to remain where we are rather than to change. We may consider ourselves liberal, open to change, anything but conservative, freethinking, unafraid to go to new places and accept new ideas. But we need to recognize that we are only human, and human beings are very conservative by nature. We live our lives by rhythm, doing much the same thing at the same time, repeating patterns of movement, activity and response. We're happier with what we know, and we have a tendency to stay put rather than venture to new places, especially mentally. Even nomads only appear to foreign observers to ‘wander’; their path is defined by habitual responses to perceived opportunities and paths they have trodden before. Yet we are exposed to the process of a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17); we are most definitely being led on a process of change, ever closer towards the rendering of the mind of Christ in us. It's when we resist that change that dysfunction and deep unhappiness and unfulfilment start to be experienced. And that is the case in many closed table communities, which are therefore in decline both numerically and spiritually, with their members

sitting around on Sunday afternoons lamenting the lifelessness in the community yet too fearful to make a break.

Fear of Consequence

The power of conservatism meshes well with the immense power of fear. So many would agree with much or all of the thesis outlined in this book; but for fear of others will not change their closed table practice. The fear- often well grounded- is that: "If we break bread with you, neighbouring ecclesias in our fellowship would not then break bread with us". We must do what is right before God, and not what is smart before men. If others reject us from their fellowship, this is their problem and the responsibility for doing so is solely with them. All manner of crimes have been committed because of fear- most criminal murders are from fear rather than from chronic hatred of another individual. The fear revolves around fear of consequences- someone knew too much, might open their mouth, was a crucial witness... and so forth. If we are living upright lives in Christ and doing our best to base our beliefs and practice upon God's word, we need not fear man nor consequences. If we are rejected by some for being too loving, inclusive and acceptive, then we are fellowshiping in the crucifixion sufferings of Christ. Those who reject us are playing out the role of those who rejected Christ, in Paul's terms, if we do not fellowship with the body of Christ then we are placing ourselves outside His

body. And there is only one body of Christ.

When all we have ever known is a certain group of churches or one “fellowship”, the fear of the unknown and of being rejected by family and friends is significant. But this is where conservatism gets its strength from. It is this very mentality which results in many a Moslem or Hindu remaining in a religion which cannot save, even when they are confronted by the truth of Christ. If we preach that they should have the courage to come forward for Christ and make the huge break with their family and friends, with all they have ever known, in order to connect with the body of Christ... then we should be willing to pay the same price. Not that we are leaving- we are simply extending our fellowship to others, and willing to pay the price of being excluded for our inclusivity by the exclusivists.

I have walked that path, broken that pain boundary in this particular aspect of life, paid the price. And God and His dear Son are waiting to meet you the other side of it, along with many others who believe as you do. Of course, there will be other readers of these words who have had no Christian background before their conversion; for most of them, an open table is logical. Throughout a reasonably wide experience of new converts, the vast majority have always found a closed table illogical and wrong. The natural response to Christ is not to want to reflect His acceptance of

us to others.

12-3 Our Difficulty in Seeing the Big Picture

It seems to me that there is no specific, categoric command in the New Testament that we are not to share the Lord's table with any would wish to be guest there. In the course of this book I have presented evidence why I believe the Lord's table should be open, whilst acknowledging that local church discipline may require in extreme cases the temporary expulsion of a church member. We are left therefore with the need to weigh up the whole tenor of Bible teaching on this matter, rather than seeking to hang an entire position on the possible implications of one or two verses. The closed table mentality requires a rule to be set down and accepted- such and such persons may partake at "our" table, but such and such persons may not. Such legalism is, I suggest, counter to the tenor of the spirit of Christ, whose table it is.

We are accustomed to religious folk building up all manner of strange doctrines on the basis of one or two verses which they have maxed out upon; no matter what the general tenor of Scripture on a matter, their gaze remains transfixed in the glare of one or two Bible verses which they cannot see any other way. They are blinded by their interpretations of those

verses to the general spirit of Scripture. I suggest that learning to hear and speak the language of God is in some ways similar to learning to speak any language. The longer we hear that language, the more words we pick up, we come to intuitively sense what is grammatically right and wrong within that language. This happens to the point that a person may learn a language and speak it well without ever having considered the grammatical rules behind the language. This is of course most commonly seen in the way a child comes to understand their native language. By five years old, a child whose native language is English knows that you form a plural using 's' at the end of the word; that if you want an ice cream, you say "I want an ice cream" rather than "I wants a ice creams". It is also a fact that no matter how consciously familiar one becomes with the grammatical rules of a language, it becomes apparent that there are exceptions to all the rules. And the more we hear and try to speak the language, those exceptions to the rules are picked up by us naturally and automatically, with the intuition which comes from experience in the language. And so it is with perceiving the will of God through hearing His word and language as it comes to us through the Bible and through the experience of walking with Him (see Jn. 7:17!). No longer will our position on something be based around just one or two Bible verses which we can see no other way, and from which we have constructed a law governing, e.g., who may or may not

break bread at “our” church. The fundamental inclusivity of the Lord is, in my judgment, a symphony which is played out throughout the New Testament, and the roots of it are in the Old Testament too. Our difficulty in interpreting a specific verse here or there doesn’t get in the way of that symphony. The closed table approach seems to me (and I can only say how it seems to me) to be focused upon the possible implications of a very few verses- and ignores the symphony of inclusivity which is being played by the Scriptures as a whole. That observation is of course true in many doctrinal areas; people believe in “the Trinity” because John 1 says that “the word was God”. The implication of the rest of Scripture becomes irrelevant, it seems. The command for Israel to keep the Sabbath is focused on by some to the point that all later teaching in the New Testament about the nature of the old covenant and the Sabbath is effectively ignored or psychologically shrugged off. And so it can be with us too, in a host of more practical issues- not least this vexed question of with whom to break bread.

13 Principle and Pragmatism

It seems to me that the majority of the members of Christ's body recognize the truth, the Biblical correctness, of the thesis outlined here- that we should be open, both in baptism and table fellowship. But... we are all located where we are in life, positioned by God within constructs of relationships, history, background etc. On one hand, the spirit of the new creation is to follow the leading of God, through His Spirit and in His word, wherever that may lead; no matter how radically we are asked to break with all we once held dear. On the other hand, because of the limitations of our location and position, we so often have to be pragmatic. Is it worth breaking up a marriage, a family, a church... because of our convictions about fellowship? God gave His all in order to fellowship us, and on the highest level, we should therefore unflinchingly accept whatever price we are asked to pay. If we allow ourselves to play the "pragmatism" ticket too frequently in life's decisions, we end up living without principle, merely cogs in a self-perpetuating human organization, our life path determined by what those around us think; and no longer are we ultimately and radically free in Christ, to be led by Him where He wishes. Indeed we do well to ask ourselves whether Christian pragmatism isn't an

oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Once we start resisting the movement of the Spirit, dysfunction begins. And dysfunction doesn't mean that we totally cease to function spiritually, but rather that our function becomes increasingly stilted, warped and ultimately damaging to ourselves and to others. This is where the Christadelphian and other closed table communities stand at this time. I do not write these things glibly nor impersonally. I suffered the loss of so much for the sake of my belief in openness. And I continue to pay that price.

Let's remember that it was "expediency" which led men to crucify the Son of God (Mk. 15:15; Jn. 11:44-53). R.C. Sproul put it well: "Expediency is an obscene word. It is the word that is ever and always at war with principle. A person who is a Christian is called of God to live by biblical principles. The principles that the Bible reveals to guide our steps are the necessary elements for authentic righteousness. Take away principle, and righteousness is slain in the streets. We need an awakening in the culture and in the church to principle — to working according to truth and to living according to biblical revelation. Without principle, the church as well as the culture will decay, and the church will become a mere echo of the unprincipled pragmatism of secularism".

We must recognize that not being open, especially rejecting

from our fellowship our baptized brothers and sisters, is sin. And it is serious sin, which the Bible clearly teaches excludes us from the body of Christ- for if we reject His body, we are declaring ourselves not of the body. So Paul reasons. Disfellowship causes pain and trauma to sincere believers in Christ, the sheep of His flock. This is not something which those who uphold disfellowship like to dwell upon; but they need to. Even if someone is so seriously astray that they require discipline, remember that the judges of Israel had to have the person they judged worthy of stripes lay down before their presence and be beaten in their presence (Dt. 25:2). The principle being taught was that we should be fully aware of the pain and implications of the judgment we inflict upon others. Those who practice closed communion need to see the tears they are causing, the ruptured marriages, the little children left without a daddy or mummy, the cancer, the stress, the tears every night for life... and unflinchingly look at all that and give a string of Bible verses which says that this is how believers in Christ should treat other believers in Christ. God planted the vineyard of Israel, just as He creates the environment for the new Israel, because He sought (spiritual) fruit. And that fruit was summed up so often in one word: "justice" (Is. 5:2,7). To keep others out of fellowship is unjust. It is a studied, conscious refusal to follow God's will and intention for our spiritual growth and being.

The decisions we are asked to make are in fact quite simple and straightforward. Col. 3:14,15 seem very relevant: “And above all these things, put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ rule [Gk. ‘be the arbitor’] in your hearts- to this you were also called in one body; and be thankful”. What is the “peace of Christ”? Peace in the Bible refers ultimately to peace with God through forgiveness and living in good conscience in Christ. Maintaining this is to be the arbitrator in our hearts; will this or that decision enable me to live in the peace of Christ? Biblical peace doesn’t refer to any feeling of calmness because our old ways and sets of relationships are going to be perpetuated by our decisions; nor does it refer to the illusion of peace which can come from knowing we are following the positions of our fathers and loved ones. Peace with God through Christ is not about those things. The arbitrator in our hearts, in all our decisions, must be our peace with God. We were called to this “in one body”, by grace; and so our response in love towards others is of paramount importance.

APPENDIX 1: Some Wrested Scriptures

Amos 3:3 “Do two walk together, unless they have agreed where to meet?”

The AV rendering "Can two walk together unless they be agreed?" has been misused by exclusivists to demand total agreement between fellow believers. But this is not the context here; neither is it required that there be total agreement before two can walk together. Both Old and New Testaments are full of examples of where believers had differing interpretations, and yet walked together toward the same Kingdom. And unity is not the same as uniformity. What is important here is that there must be an agreed meeting point before the journey can begin. And God and Israel had indeed met together at Sinai and there entered covenant relationship (Am. 3:1). They were being reminded therefore of their ongoing commitment to the covenant, and the need to continue to walk together with God. The idea is picked up in Am. 4:12, where Israel are told to "prepare to meet your God". This was no mere grim pronouncement of doom to come, but a desperately urgent appeal for repentance, for

preparation and willingness to meet their God in renewed covenant relationship, as they had done at Sinai.

If this verse means that we are to have a closed table, then basic objections must be answered: Why then God fellowship Israel when they were not agreed; why does the Lord Jesus apparently fellowship the churches in Rev. 2,3 when there were apostates amongst them; why does Paul accept the Corinthians as his brethren in fellowship when they were so not in agreement with him.

Matthew 18:15-23 “Let him be unto you as a Gentile and publican”

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.

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 separate from 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 parting from him. 'But', the Lord continued, 'For you Peter, I expect a higher level; constant forgiveness of your brother, all day long!'

18:17 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. About the only advantage from the KJV is the way 'thee' signifies a 'you singular' as opposed to 'ye / you' which in KJV 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. Clearly this is talking about personal relationships, not ecclesial disfellowship.

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?'

18:18 The idea of binding and loosing occurs in Mt. 18:18, in the context of warning us not to be too hasty to cast a brother out of the ecclesia. It doesn't mean that any ecclesial decision has God's automatic sanction. But because salvation is related to remaining in the Christ body, the Lord may be saying: "By unnecessarily expelling someone from association with My people, you are endangering their salvation. I won't necessarily come to their rescue; I have delegated the keeping of that brother to you. You are your brother's keeper. If you throw them out, they will probably lose their salvation. What you do on earth in these decisions is not necessarily overridden by Heaven.

The eternal saving of a man is delegated to His brethren, and therefore you also have the possibility of causing him to stumble from salvation". The implication of this is surely that we should only cast out of the ecclesia those who openly and beyond doubt have placed themselves outside of God's salvation. And the Lord surely meant us to compare this against His command not to judge. He is surely saying in this passage: "You can argue it out with your brother, and eventually get the ecclesia to disfellowship him. But by this you'll be saying that he is out of the way of salvation, and what you do may well drive him to condemnation; for it's a hard and unlikely way to the Kingdom without your brethren. And you know that you mustn't condemn him. So better just forgive him, 490 times / day, unconditionally". Paul takes this idea seriously when he says that if he forgives anybody, he does it "in the person of Christ", and so, by extension, the church at Corinth did too, seeing they were partakers in that same one body of His (2 Cor. 2:10).

18:19 Some of the assurances that prayer will surely be answered are in the context of praying for others. "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them" is in the context of concerned brethren trying to win back a weak brother (Mt. 18:19). Likewise "If we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us... if any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them

that sin not unto death" (1 Jn. 5:14-16). Again in a forgiveness context, Solomon asked that God would hear Israel "in all that they call unto thee for" (1 Kings 8:52).

18:21 He asked: "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?". Jesus responds with a parable in which a man who calls his king "Lord" is himself forgiven, but refuses to forgive another man. Surely that parable was specifically for Peter, the one who delighted to know Jesus as Lord. He was warned through the parable that calling Him "Lord" wasn't enough. An appreciation of Him as Lord of his life would mean quite naturally that he had a spirit of frank forgiveness for his brother, not carefully measuring it out, but rather reflecting his Lord's forgiveness of him. If Jesus is really Lord, then everything which He does and all that He shows becomes an imperative for us to follow. 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, even when the repentance is obviously insincere. 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. 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.

18:22 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.

18:23 The king (Jesus) makes a reckoning with His servants right now, and it is for us to be influenced by the gracious accounting He shows towards us, and then in this life reflect an appropriate grace to our brother (Mt. 18:23 RV). The reckoning is going on right now, indeed in a sense it occurred on the cross.

The wicked servant owes 10,000 talents- one hundred million denarii (Mt. 18:23). This was a monstrous, unimaginable sum- in 4BC, the whole of Galilee and Peraea paid only 200 talents per year in taxes, one fiftieth of the amount. The annual income of Herod the Great is estimated at only 900 talents (New Jerome Bible Commentary). The Lord was using shock tactics to show how great is man's debt to God... and to throw into strong relief the sharp contrast with the way the fellow servant has such a trivial debt. The story is plain. The sins we perceive others have committed against us should be as nothing compared to the huge debt we feel personally before God. This explains why the acceptable man prays with his hands on his breast- when every Palestinian Jew would have expected a story about a man praying to feature him with uplifted hands, as was the custom. The unusual element to the story brought out the extent of the man's contrition. Indeed, the total acquittal of the indebted man, with no further penalty at all, would have caught the early hearers by surprise. The man, they imagined, would have walked off surprised by joy, ecstatic, thankful,

relieved. And yet he goes and does something totally unexpected and illogical- he grabs another man and demands he pay up his debts. The unexpected twist of the story of course brings out the madness of any unforgiveness on our part, and the awful nature of human ingratitude for forgiveness- just as in the two carpenters parable.

John 17:3 “And this is everlasting life, that they should know You, the only true God, and him whom You sent, Jesus Christ”

This verse is taken as meaning that eternal life depends upon knowing perfectly true doctrine about God and Jesus, and therefore we should not break bread with anyone who is astray on any point of doctrine.

The verse of course says nothing about breaking bread nor about our attitude to those who do not know the true God. The Lord seems to be speaking of what eternal life will be like- ever growing in knowledge of the Father and Son. For beneath the word “know” is a Greek continuous tense, suggesting ‘ever growing in knowledge’. That fact alone undermines the idea that Jesus is here saying that eternity

depends upon perfectly correct head knowledge; eternity is related to ever *growing* in knowledge. A consideration of how 'knowing' the Father and Son is used in John's Gospel indicates that the idea refers to a relationship, rather than a highly defined set of head knowledge doctrines.

If indeed eternal life depends upon intellectual grasp of a set of doctrines as detailed as that found in many 'statements of faith', then salvation is hardly by grace; and there would have to be some element of a 'doctrinal interview' at the last day. The sense we get from Bible teaching about judgment day is that this will not be the case. Salvation is "in Christ", not in intellectual purity. Job reflected: "These are parts of His ways! How little a portion is heard of Him!" (Job 26:14). We know only a fraction of God's Truth; is it really so that someone who knows a tiny percentage point more than another Christian believer will thereby be accepted, and the other rejected? The essential knowledge is to know Christ in the sense of having a relationship with Him. Theology and personal relationship may be connected but they are not one and the same thing. Would it were all so simple and not personally demanding; that our moral duty in this world were simply to obtain and maintain purity of intellectual understanding of some Bible passages! But the demands of knowing Christ are far greater than that.

If indeed intellectual purity of understanding is so important

in terms of eternal life, then salvation is surely predicated upon intellectual ability; those wired that way would have a greater ‘chance’ of attaining it. Yet if we *do* God’s will, *then* we perceive the right doctrines (Jn. 7:17). It’s an intuitive sense for those who truly love God; not something arrived at by an ivory tower study.

All this is not to say that accurate knowledge plays no role in our relationship with God. In this book, I am arguing for tolerance and against intolerance, and I’m simply pointing out that Jn. 17:3 is no ground for saying “I will not break bread with you because your knowledge is imperfect and therefore you will not receive eternal life”.

1 Cor. 1:10 “Now I urge you brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment”

This verse is taken to mean that a Christian community must believe identical interpretations of Scripture, typically as defined in a statement of faith.

If that were Paul's intention and belief, then he would not have accepted Corinth as an ecclesia in fellowship with him. For it's apparent that they [and the entire early church] had a whole range of positions on various doctrinal issues. The “divisions” which Paul had in mind were not related to different interpretations of Scripture by sincere Christians. The context of 1 Cor. 1 indicates that the divisions referred to related [as ever!] to personalities and following different prominent brethren- Peter, Apollos and Paul (1 Cor.

1:12,13). But the New Testament evidence is that those three brothers all held the same basic doctrinal positions. The divisions, therefore, were not over doctrinal, Bible-interpretation issues. They related to how individual believers chose to relate to those brothers.

Unity is not the same as uniformity. The “same mind” which Paul wished to see in Corinth was the mind of Christ. We have similar language in Phil. 2:2,5: “Being of one mind... let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus”. The basis for unity is in that each individual seeks to have the mind or spirit of Christ. Paul’s focus is clearly on spiritual mindedness, rather than demanding adherence to an identical set of theological positions. Spiritual mindedness, Christ-centred thinking, is what binds believers together. The proof of these things is in experience- for there are literally thousands of examples of where people holding identical doctrinal positions are *not* united. The bitter division between them is proof for all time that doctrine tends to divide, if it is made the be all and end all of spiritual endeavour; it is the experience of the spirit / mind of Christ which unites.

“That you be perfected together in the same mind” speaks of openness to a process- the intention of the Father and Son is that we should each attain the mind of Christ. They are working to bring us to that final state of maturity or

‘perfection’. This is not a command to us to ensure we sing from the same hymn sheet and sign off on the same statement of faith. It’s far more personally spiritual than that. It was this same mind of Christ which was to be the basis for their “judgment”, their opinion on the various church issues they faced. The judgment / opinion of each believer might not be the same, but it was to be equally based upon the exercise of the same one mind of Christ.

If this verse means that we should divide from those who think differently to us, then Paul is surely contradicting himself; for his big theme is that Christ is not divided and neither should we be (1 Cor. 1:13). Paul’s example of dealing with doctrinal controversy is extensively recorded in the New Testament; and never does he advocate that those who hold purer and better understandings should break fellowship with those holding inferior understandings. His approach is epitomized in Phil. 3:15,16: “Let us therefore, as many as are mature, be thus decided; and if in anything you are otherwise decided, this also shall God reveal to you. For now, according to that understanding unto which we have attained, by that same rule let us walk”. Paul is confident that for those who are spiritually minded, God will reveal to them the correct understanding (cp. Jn. 7:17)- even if at present they do not hold the mature understanding which Paul does. And we are to each live [“walk”] according to the understandings God has currently led us to, thereby

maintaining good conscience before Him.

1 Cor. 5:11 “I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler— not even to eat with such a one”

If we take this to mean that we are to have a closed table to sinners, then we seriously risk condemning ourselves. For we are all sinners. If we must be “worthy” to break bread, then none of us should. Otherwise, we become a collection of self-righteous, self-commending people who consider themselves worthy to be at the Lord’s table, but consider others unworthy. The Corinthian ecclesia was full of immorality and some of them even denied the Lord’s resurrection. But Paul doesn’t tell them that they are not an ecclesia, nor appeal for the immoral and doctrinally astray to be barred from the Lord’s table. We would expect to be reading this if the closed table approach is correct; but never do we read about such exclusions from the Lord’s table. This

is a deafening silence, and is merely the unspoken assumption of closed table apologists. We also recall the Lord's acceptance of the ecclesias in Rev. 2 and 3, and His breaking bread with Judas. So what we read about here is a special case; and I suggest that the individual whom Paul says should be separated from was indeed immoral, an idolater, reviler, drunkard and swindler. And there was more to his case than meets the eye; reading between the lines, we find that this person was deeply damaging to the church and was in a position of authority. There are indeed times when the local church must remove a predatory or damaging person from access to the flock. But we cannot extrapolate from this the position that we must only therefore break bread with the morally clean. None of us are, at least not all the time; for we all sin, and tend to keep repeating the same sins.

In 1 Cor. 5:9-13 Paul says that he doesn't intend the converts "to get out of the world" but rather to mix with the greedy, robbers and idolaters who are in the world. We know from later in this epistle that Christians in Corinth were free to use the pagan meat markets, and to accept invitations for meals in pagan homes. The Corinthians seemed to think that because they were self-consciously separate from the world, therefore it didn't matter how they lived within the community. It seems they had misunderstood Paul's previous letter about separation from sinful people as meaning they

must be separate from the world. But Paul is saying that no, one must mix with the world, but separate from sin within our own lives. However, by the end of the 1st century, 'going out of the world' became the main preoccupation with some Christians, even though they themselves often developed low moral standards as a result of this. It was these ascetic groups who so over analysed some aspects of doctrine- for they had nothing better to do with their time- that they ended up with false doctrine. They converted only from within their groups, so the world was not witnessed to, the fire of love and compassion for humanity that was the hallmark of true Christianity was lost, and thus by the 2nd century the Truth both doctrinally and in practice had been lost.

When Peter baptized thousands of people as recorded in Acts, there is no indication that he as it were screened them for morality. Likewise the 'baptismal interview' of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8 focused upon his faith in Christ rather than his personal morality. The spirit of grace which there is in Jesus leads us towards a tolerance of others, in order to patiently lead them towards repentance. The Lord Himself broke His bread with serious sinners- and was criticized for eating with them, seeing that 'eating' with someone was freighted with huge spiritual significance in 1st Century Israel. The apparent command here not to eat with sinners would appear at variance with the Lord's teaching and example, almost purposefully so. Paul writes here in the context of the breaking of bread (5:8), and in chapter 11, he

criticizes the Corinthians for being drunk at the breaking of bread. We know from Rev. 2:20 that there was a female false teacher in at least one ecclesia, who was teaching Christ's brothers to engage in fornication and idol worship.

Bearing this in mind, let's observe that the format of the breaking of bread service was in outline terms similar to the 'symposia' of the trade guilds and religious club gatherings of Corinth; a group of likeminded people sat down to a meal, heard an address from a member of their guild or religion about what was of common interest to them all, and then drank wine to the relevant gods. These meetings, however, were characterized by the presence of male and female prostitutes, drunkenness was common, and the commonality provided by the trade guild or religion was really an excuse for an evening of debauchery and idol worship. It would appear that there was a tendency in Corinth for the breaking of bread meeting to be turned into just such an event, featuring drunkenness and idolatry. The word used here in 1 Cor. 5:11 for "fornicator" is *pornos*, which specifically carries the meaning of a male prostitute- exactly the kind of person to be found at the 'symposia'. The Greek words translated "covetous", "railer" and "extortioner" all carry the idea of someone given over to utter debauchery. Such behaviour would be commonly associated with the drunken sexual debauchery which the symposia could turn into.

It seems that the church at Corinth, and perhaps elsewhere,

was slipping into this kind of behaviour at the breaking of bread. Paul condemns it in the strongest terms. He's saying that if any brother is acting as a *pornos* , a male prostitute, a facilitator and thereby teacher and encourager of this kind of behaviour, he is not to be eaten with. The Greek construction is rather strange: "Any man that is called a brother... with such an one, no not to eat". The grammar could suggest that one specific individual is being spoken about- 'That person who calls himself a brother, yes, that's right, with that one, don't even eat'. And the earlier context of chapter 5 makes it quite clear who that person was- the individual who had married his father's wife, whom Paul had just commanded they separate from (:5) during those times when they were "gathered together" at the breaking of bread meeting (:4). This individual was involved in leading the breaking of bread meeting into gross sexual misbehaviour, alcohol abuse and debauchery. Such a person should not be eaten with, he shouldn't be allowed at that meeting as he clearly had an unspeakably awful agenda. Read this way, this verse doesn't mean we shouldn't break bread with someone who e.g. struggles with an alcohol problem or who is at times "covetous". The question of whether or not such a person has repented is very difficult to decide. But we don't need to struggle with those questions, because this verse doesn't demand that of us. It asks the Corinthians to exclude an individual with the awful, publically advertised, willfully perverted agenda described above, and we likewise of

course should do the same.

1 Cor. 10:17 “Seeing that we, who are many, are one loaf, one body; for we are all partaking of the one loaf”

This verse is taken by some to mean that we can only break bread with those who are in the one body. As explained in chapter 4, the breaking of bread means different things to different people. For baptized believers, it is a Passover-like celebration of their deliverance from Egypt through the blood of the Lamb and passing through the ‘Red Sea’ of baptism. For some believers at some times, the breaking of bread will be a comforting statement of their horizontal connection with others who have likewise been redeemed by the Lord’s sacrifice; at others times, they will feel more deeply the directly vertical aspect of connection with the risen Lord which the bread and wine also speak of. Likewise for unbelievers, the breaking of bread will have meaning but a different meaning to what it holds for the believer. Being invited to participate in celebrating the Lord’s work will likely be a challenge for them towards commitment to Him. There seems no Biblical nor logical reason to think that those who are celebrating something cannot invite others to

participate in that celebration just because they are not yet connected with the cause for celebration. It's rather like staying with some friends for a week; and on the Saturday, they are planning on going to their friend's wedding. So that you aren't left alone in their home all day, they might arrange with their friend for you too to be invited to that wedding. And as a result of that, you become lifelong friends with the couple whose wedding you attended. You may've felt initially awkward being present at their wedding; but there's nothing morally wrong with you being at the wedding, eating and drinking in celebration of two people whom you aren't-yet- personally familiar with. But through the invitation and the experience, they could even become your best friends. This human analogy is not far away from the issue of what goes on when the unbaptized break bread. The celebration has different meanings for different people; but that fact doesn't mean that therefore those for whom it has one meaning cannot share the celebration with others for whom it has a different meaning.

1 Cor. 10:17 was written to believers, and therefore focuses upon the meaning of the breaking of bread for believers. Vine brings out the sense of the Greek better in translating: "Seeing that (ὅτι) there is one bread, we who are many are one body". Vine goes on to offer an interpretation which in my judgment is fair enough: "Paul is deducing the mutual communion of believers from the fact of their communion

with their common Lord. By each and all receiving a piece of the one loaf, which represents Christ's body, they signify that they are all bound in one spiritual body, united to Christ and therefore to each other". Because there is only one Christ, one loaf, therefore, on this basis, we are one body. The implication is, at the very least, that it is wrong for members of the one body to refuse the one loaf, the symbol of the one Christ, to others who are within the one body. There is nothing in this passage which suggests that the bread should not be shared with anyone. Forbidding access to the emblems is simply not in view in the context. Ignatius had this idea in mind in commenting upon this verse: "Take care to keep one eucharistic feast only; for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup unto unity of His blood" (Philadelphia, 4).

Note that believers symbolically "partake of" Christ at the breaking of bread (ἐκ μετέχομεν) (1 Cor. 10:18). The idea is to partake *from*; all believers take from (ἐκ) the one loaf, sharing it among them (μετά). Clearly the bread is not *their* bread. We are partaking in some entity far greater than ourselves, and this language is quite inappropriate if we are to police who may partake, fencing the one bread from others. Likewise we are "partakers of the altar", which is Christ (Heb. 13:10). Philo called the priests κοινωνοὶ τοῦ βώμου, partakers of the altar. Thus Paul is inviting each of us to take on the role of priests, as the "royal priesthood".

This is the same allusion made in Heb. 13:10- that “we have an altar, whereof they (the Jewish priests) have no right to eat who serve the tabernacle”.

The passage in 1 Cor. 10:17,18 must be understood in the wider context of 1 Cor. 10:1-3, which likens baptized believers to Israel baptized in the Red Sea and eating the manna during their wilderness journey. The whole passage is arguing against partaking of that bread, and then partaking in idol feasts. That was where the boundary clearly was-between worshipping Christ and then going down the road to the idol temple. But within that argument there is no sense of fencing the Lord’s table against those who wished to attend having been initially attracted to Christianity.

1 Cor. 10:21,22: “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?”

In the context, this is addressing the problem of idol worshippers who had apparently converted to Christianity. They had a tendency to continue visiting the idol cults as well as the Christian church, and also to turn the Christian worship service into a form and style similar to that of the idol cults. “Demons” here stands for the cults which worshipped demons; the cup and table of demons was that of the idol cults. Christian worship also involved a cup and table, at the Lord’s supper. Paul is saying that we cannot, as Christians exclusively committed to the Lord Jesus, also go and take the cup of idols. The Lord’s table was to be open to the pagans if they wished to attend and convert; but Christians were not to worship both idols and Jesus. So this teaching is not in any form condemning an open table. And having an open table is not the same as attending idol worship in a temple. The commandment here is to “partake of the table of the Lord”; nothing is implied about barring that table to others. Clearly some were partaking of both tables; but Paul doesn’t say that they must be barred from the Lord’s table.

The Greek here is very clear that one *cannot* eat of the Lord’s table *and* that of demons / idols. If Paul meant this simply as a command, ‘*must not*’, then he would have used a different word. His argument is the same as the Old Testament prophets- relationship with the Lord is exclusive.

If we partake of other tables, worshipping other gods; then we have denied the fundamental term of the covenant, which is that Yahweh is the one and only. So, Paul reasons, it is axiomatic that we cannot partake of both, it is an impossibility. As the context makes clear, Israel had failed in the same way- offering sacrifice to Yahweh as well as to idols. But God pleaded with them for generations, rather than automatically barring anyone from Yahweh worship if they were suspected of offering to idols. There was no mechanism within the old covenant to bar Israelites from worship because they also worshipped idols. Judgment was indeed threatened and finally carried out, but they were not barred from Yahweh's table until that judgment came. And it is God and not His people who makes that final judgment.

By having an open table of the Lord Jesus, welcoming all to it, we are not thereby attending an idol temple and sacrificing to demons; we remain seated at the Lord's table. It would be a truly desperate man who tried to make this verse mean that an open table is an idol's table. To "fellowship with demons" means just that- to go to the idol temple and offer sacrifice to demons / idols. To invite demon worshippers to the Lord's table is not the same as fellowshiping the demons / idols themselves. If indeed the idea is that someone who attends both pagan and Christian tables cannot attend the Christian table, then there would need to be some mechanism for achieving this- presumably, an interview of the person

before passing them the Lord's cup. But nothing of the sort is taught by Paul.

Gal. 5:9 “A little leaven leavens the whole lump”

This is used to argue that we should not fellowship with those who understand other than we do... or even with those who are divorced and remarried, those who fellowship others who understand things differently to us... or even those who chew gum in church.

But “a text without a context is a pretext”, and that is so true of how this verse is misused. The context of Galatians 5 is Paul’s concern that the Galatian believers were leaving Christ and returning to the legalism of keeping the Mosaic law. We note that the Lord Jesus spoke of “the leaven of the Pharisees” (Lk. 12:1), and it seems Paul continues the connection between “leaven” and Jewish false teaching. The “little leaven” he has in mind appears to be a specific individual, a false teacher who was teaching the Galatians wrongly:

-“Who did hinder you, that you should not obey the truth?” (Gal. 5:7) clearly has an individual in mind. He was “persuading” them (Gal. 5:8)- implying he was teaching them.

-“He that troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he seems to be” likewise refers to a specific individual who

appeared to have excellent credentials. The Greek word translated “trouble” here is a word from the kitchen- it means literally ‘to stir’ and continues the leaven / yeast metaphor. The Greek for “lump” in Gal. 5:9 means literally ‘that which has been mixed’. This false teacher was stirring in the leaven so that the whole loaf would be leavened. The criticism was that they were allowing such a person to do this, to have access to the lump of dough.

-“Be led *of the Spirit*” (5:18) implies they were being led, but not by a Spirit-filled leader. And Paul appeals to them to instead be led of the Spirit.

We can safely conclude, therefore, that Paul is lamenting that they were allowing a false teacher to lead them astray, from the platform, as it were. I outlined in chapter 11 how we are not to give false teachers a teaching opportunity- lest they influence the community for wrong. But that is not the same as saying that we should close the Lord’s table against anyone who disagrees with us on Biblical interpretation or who are living wrongly. There is no specific statement in Galatians 5 that this individual should not break bread; rather is there the appeal not to be influenced by him and his group, and not to allow him or them a teaching platform.

The whole leaven metaphor is also used by Paul in 1 Cor. 5:6-8, where he speaks of “the old leaven”, suggesting he saw it as related to the things of the Old Covenant. He again

has a specific individual in mind, who had married his father's wife. But the issue was not simply one of moral failure; it would seem that this gross act was being taught as acceptable Christian behaviour. Instead of sorrowing for this person, there were some in Corinth who were "glorying" in it (5:2,6), boasting about it, defending the immorality, caught up in the idea that they could continue in sin so that grace may abound. So there was a teaching element to this man's sin. But it would be a blockheaded way of using Holy Scripture to take this unsavoury incident and therefore proclaim that anyone who fails to attain the perfect standards of the Lord Jesus, or someone who sincerely understands Scripture another way, should therefore be excluded from the Lord's table. As explained in chapter 11, there may well occasionally be times in church life when gross immorality, persisted in and justified, even boasted about, must lead to that individual being excluded from the community. This is really sanctified common sense, to use a phrase of Dennis Gillett. You can't have a paedophile running the Sunday School nor a convicted fraudster as the treasurer. But this is not to say that the Lord's table should not be generally open. And Paul concludes his use of the metaphor with a subtle twist: "Let us keep the feast, not with the old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (5:8). Malice and wickedness, the old leaven of legalism, a tendency to untruth

and insincerity... lurk within each of us. These things, Paul is saying, are just as bad as the leaven of this extreme immorality. 'You in essence each have leaven within you... any exclusion of this brother is not to say that your table is therefore now pure. Because *you* are there, with all *your* leaven”.

Even if we consider the entire Corinthian ecclesia to have become defiled by the leaven of the immoral brother, the fact is- Paul clearly treated the ecclesia as in fellowship with him! If indeed the church of God is to be without any leaven within it, then this would require a regular, frequent investigation of the private lives of every member by some group within the church who had authority, power, insight and ability to do this. There is no such mechanism even hinted at in the New Testament.

2 Thess. 3:6 “Withdraw yourselves from every brother that walks disorderly”

Let's firstly note that in 1 Thess. 5:14, Paul had asked the ecclesia to "*warn* the disorderly" (the same Greek word is used only in these two places). Now he asks them to not associate themselves with such persons, and not even to eat with them (:10 is translated in some Bibles as "don't give

them food"; the force of "withdraw yourselves" seems to suggest that Paul wasn't merely warning the ecclesia not to give food as welfare support to these people, but to not associate with them, and therefore, not to eat with them in a religious sense). The whole passage in 1 Thess. 3:6-12 seems to criticize sloth and sponging off others in remarkably strong language, insisting that those who are think they can get an easy ticket through life at others' expense must be separated from. But the language is *so* strong, that we wonder whether this really is all that in view. We recall that the feeding miracles of Jesus and His general attitude to assisting the sick and needy never incorporated any kind of "means test", a checking out of whether actually every single person in the crowd of 5000 males was in fact genuinely in need of food. Rather does He give, so superabundant in His grace that there were large carrier baskets full of the crumbs afterwards. When we encounter human need, it could probably often be argued that the need could have been avoided by harder work by someone somewhere; but surely the need is the call, to action on their behalf. For any hard hearted "God helps those who help themselves" attitude seems to me at variance with the gracious giving of the Lord to us.

So what may lie behind Paul's tough line against those who refuse to accept that "if any will not work, neither shall he eat" (3:10)? "If any will not work, neither shall he eat" is a quotation from a Jewish Targum [paraphrase] on the curse

upon Adam in Eden; especially the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 3:19. The language of Gen. 3:17-19 about working and eating bread is alluded to several times in 2 Thess. 3:6-12. When Paul speaks of how he "worked in toil and hardship" because he couldn't eat others' bread for nothing (3:8), he clearly has in mind the curse upon Adam. Paul's comment that such persons shouldn't be 'given anything to eat' in 3:10 would then be an allusion to how the serpent gave food to Eve, and she then gave the food to Adam. Genesis 3 is arguably the most used and yet most misunderstood chapter in the Bible, and thus it has ever been. So many of the false teachings circulating in first century Judaism involved misinterpretations of this chapter.

My suggestion would therefore be that there was a teaching going around that actually we are no longer under the effects of the curse in Eden. We don't need to work, we bear no responsibility for our sins nor do we suffer from the effects of Adam's sin. And they believed this to the point that they expected more wealthy Christians to as it were fund their belief by providing for them materially. Now this all involves something far more than the laziness and occasional irresponsibility which at times we all struggle with. They were "disorderly", *ataktos*, not in "order". The word is used in a military context for soldiers falling out of line in marching. By claiming to be more than human, these people were unacceptive of their humanity, their place in the ranks of the rest of humanity. Interestingly, *ataktos* is derived from

the Greek verb *tassein*, "to order", and this verb is several times used by the Septuagint in the context of the "order" decreed by God at the beginning (Lev. 18:4; Dt. 27:1; Job 38:12); it's also used in Jewish writings about the "order" established by God at the time of Adam's sin (M.J.J. Menken, *2 Thessalonians* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 131 provides examples). Sirach 7:15 speaks of how Adam's sin led to "toilsome labour and agriculture, *ordered* by the Most High". The *disorderly* walk of some in Thessalonica was therefore in refusing to accept their own humanity and the consequences of being human; in this sense they were *disorderly* in that they refused to accept that we must work if we are to eat, and sought to get around it, with the implication being that they had not sinned and didn't deserve to suffer under such a curse. And hence they walked around as walkers around up to no good ["which walk... as busybodies" disguises a play on words in the Greek original]. This walking around up to no good sounds very much like the serpent in Eden; and Paul elsewhere fears lest the churches, whom he likens to innocent Eve in Eden, should be misled by such serpents (2 Cor. 11:3). And other New Testament letters suggest that misinterpretations of Eden were being used in the early churches to justify various moral, especially sexual, misbehaviours.

We from our distance are unaware of exactly what was going on in the ecclesia to which Paul wrote, and we don't fully know the false teaching and exact forms of misbehaviour

which he was up against. But the evidence above is surely enough to conclude that whatever the details, Paul wasn't arguing so strongly for the utter exclusion of lazy spongers. There seems to have been far more to this group of people than simply that.

Titus 3:10 “A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject”

Tit. 3:10 RVmg. speaks of 'refusing' someone who is factious [AV "an heretic"] after continued rebuke; the context is of Paul advising Titus of how to appoint elders, and so his sense may be that a divisive elder is to be rejected as an elder, or his desire for eldership was to be refused. The Greek for 'refuse' can definitely carry the idea of turning down an offer or application (e.g. Lk. 14:18; 1 Tim. 5:11). It's a paradox that so many who claim to be elders today are just that- divisive; and they thereby disqualify themselves from any legitimate claim to eldership. The fault for faction is not always with a person who has a different view to something widely believed by the majority. Too often, someone who loves God's word and thinks for themselves is disfellowshipped on the basis of this verse. Coming to a Biblical interpretation which differs from the majority view is to some extent involuntary, part of the natural growth of

every sensitive person who is in relationship with their Lord through His word. It becomes a divisive issue because the majority are intolerant of it. To simply differ from a majority is not factious of itself.

The person Paul has in view is someone who has been “subverted” (3:11). The Greek *ek-strepho* includes the word *strepho* which is elsewhere translated ‘to convert’. This person has been turned right around- by someone else. Within the first century churches there was the problem of Judaist infiltration, with false teachers masquerading as Christians entering the Christian churches (Gal. 2:4; Jude 3,4); and also, turning around some members to be agents of what Harry Whittaker called “the Jewish plot” to undermine Christianity from within. The *modus operandi* in this case is clear from 3:9- to raise endless questions about the Law of Moses, the Old Testament genealogies etc., in order to consciously divide and conquer the fledgling Christian congregations. This kind of wilful infiltration naturally required resistance; Titus opens with a warning that “they of the circumcision” were promoting division and must be silenced (Tit. 1:7-13). But there are few ecclesias today up against this kind of problem, and it seems a long stretch to press Titus 3:10 into service to disfellowship someone who in spiritual and intellectual honesty differs from others in their view of Scripture. The problem with disfellowshipping someone for being divisive is that it begs the question: ‘What norm have

they differed from?'. Who is the power broker, who gets to define the norm from which deviation is judged as factious? And is not the intolerance of a conservative majority factious of itself? By disfellowshipping one who differs for faction rather begs the question: 'And are *you* not therefore committing the very sin for which you are excluding another?'. Unity is not the same as uniformity; difference of interpretation is going to be part of any healthy spiritual family. And of course we must be aware that group think always leads to the idea that anyone who differs must be gotten rid of- in the name of unity. From the far right to the far left, from Nazi death camps to the Soviet *gulag*, the mentality was the same- national unity, the good of the masses, must be ensured by the isolation and elimination of the minority who differed, even when their numbers ran into the millions.

The individual in view in Titus 3 had been radicalized to such an extent that Paul can boldly say that we can 'know' that he is 'self condemned' (:11). Unless we can 'know' that, then we can't apply this passage as a justification for disfellowshipping anyone. And surely one could only think that about someone who is provenly non-Christian and beyond doubt, self admittedly working to destroy the cause of Christ. The type of individual Paul is describing would be like a soldier once committed to the Western cause, but who has been radicalized by fundamentalists; he decides to stay put, in order to work for the fundamentalists from within, and

to bring about the mass destruction of the side he once believed in. That is hardly the case with someone who sincerely holds a different view of Scripture.

2 John 7-12 “Receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed”

These verses are taken by some as meaning that we should not break bread with any who profess the name of Christ but have a different theological view of His nature than we do. How to exactly express the nature of the Son of God and Son of Man within the limits of human language has always been a divisive issue amongst believers. For we are seeking to articulate within the limitations of human words what was ultimately a mystery- that the Son of God, who had no human father, with all the spiritual advantages that brought with it, was still all the same tempted as we are and experienced our humanity to the point that He is our genuine and total representative.

John was writing against a background of incipient Gnosticism- at that stage of this idea's development, the key concept was of docetism. This comes from the Greek verb

dokein, to seem. The idea going around in the first century was that Jesus only *seemed* human, He Himself didn't actually die on the cross, but His place was taken by someone else like Simon of Cyrene. John's concern was that Christians must believe that Jesus really did "come in the flesh" (1 Jn. 4:1-3). Jesus was real. It all really happened. And it happened to Him. John didn't have in view trinitarianism or any other misguided, erroneous attempt by mostly sincere believers to explain what cannot be explained. He was simply making the point that it is essential to believe that Jesus was for real, and He really died for us.

The passage in 2 John is clearly advice on how to deal with itinerant teachers who might present themselves at an ecclesia. "Receive him not into your house" (2 Jn. 10) would surely be a reference to not having such a person into the house-church to whom John was writing. For he surely didn't mean that we are to stand at the threshold of our homes and check out everyone's doctrinal position before letting them pass beneath our doorway. The false teaching was about the person of Jesus, and John's comment is: "This is a deceiver and an antichrist". The false teacher is being put for the false teaching; hence the NET Bible: "This person is the deceiver and the antichrist!". Clearly the person in view is identified personally with his teaching- and *that* is the reason for excluding the person from teaching. Whether the individual would have been refused the emblems of God's love in

Christ seems doubtful; he was simply barred from teaching the doctrine with which he was personally identified.

The letter appears to be written to a sister who had “children”, spiritual converts, probably members of a church which met in her home (2 Jn. 1-4). House churches are the scenario we have in the similar letter of 3 Jn. It could be that John was warning against allowing false teachers to teach in the church. To do so would be to “distribute [AV “partaker in”, but the Greek *koinonio* also has the definite idea of distribution] his evil deeds” (2 Jn. 11). ‘Bidding God speed’ may be a technical term referring to accepting someone into a teaching position within the church. In this case, the point would not be ‘Don’t pass the bread and wine to such a person’, but rather ‘Don’t facilitate these people in spreading their wrong ideas by letting them have the platform’. To do so would be “lose the things we have worked for” (2 Jn. 8)- a phrase hard to understand if it means we can lose our standing with God and our life’s work just for sharing a piece of bread and sip of wine with a heretic, but making more sense if we understand it as meaning that we can lose the converts we have worked for by allowing a false teacher to lead them. The idea of receiving a “full reward” for our “work” connects with Paul’s idea that his converts whom he pastorally cared for were his “work” (1 Cor. 9:1), and that we receive a full “reward” for that “work” if they are accepted into the Kingdom at the last day (1 Cor. 3:13-16).

The command “Look to yourselves” (2 Jn. 8) is in the plural; the individual addressed in the letter is asked to look for the spiritual welfare of those under her charge and to protect them from false teaching. That’s rather different to telling individuals not to pass bread and wine to someone who has a different theology to their own. It is this which is an expression of “love” (2 Jn. 5,6).

Rev. 18:4 “Come out of her My people, lest you take part in her sins, and partake of her plagues”

This is a quotation from the Old Testament commands for the people of Judah to leave Babylon, where they had been in exile for 70 years, and return to the land of Judah and rebuild the temple (Is. 48:20; Jer. 50:8,9; 52:11; Zech. 2:7). They were also warned not to partake in her sins or else they would partake in her plagues- Jer. 25:12; 50:8-12 had predicted that at the end of the 70 years exile, Babylon would be punished and desolated, although at the same time God would cause the Jews to return to Judah (Jer. 29:10). Hence the urgent need for the Jews to make use of what God had potentially enabled, and obey the call to return to their land in order to avoid sharing in Babylon's judgment. But sadly, as the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah show, the majority of Jews preferred to remain in Babylon, and they became influenced by Babylonian theology and practices. The return from exile in Babylon to God's land is a theme alluded to throughout the New Testament in appealing for us to leave the world in the sense of not following the ways of those around us, and make our wilderness journey towards God's Kingdom. We in this life are passing through “the time of our exile” (1 Pet. 1:17 RSV). The restoration command to the

exiles in Babylon to arise and shine, as their light had come (Is. 60:1) is reapplied to us in Eph. 5:14 (1). The calling is to be a holy, separate people, and not to adopt the idols of Babylon / the world as our gods. For we like Judah should have only one God in our lives. The principle of having only one God and no idols does not preclude having an open table. Those who desire to be present at a table where these principles are taught are self-evidently interested in also coming out of Babylon. Our refusal to fence the Lord's table is not the same as going to the table of another idol. We are choosing rightly- in going to the Lord's table and not to the tables of Babylon's gods. But if others wish to attend the Lord's table too, who are we to deny them? Let the world come to us and to the Lord's table, but we will not go to the table of idols. What would be wrong, of course, would be to invite those teaching and practicing idolatry, those who worship other gods, to come and preside over the Lord's table and to teach us to forsake Him. But that is not at all in view in the thesis outlined in this book; in fact the very opposite.

The command to "come out" was in the first instance a call to follow God's leading and return to the land of Judah; they were to do this before Babylon fell (Jer. 25:12; 29:10). But not all the Jews in Babylon who didn't obey this call in physical terms, for whatever reason, were therefore unacceptable to God. Daniel is the great example. The night

Babylon fell, he was present with the King of Babylon; but under the new regime of Darius the Mede, Daniel was also present. But he was a man “greatly beloved” by God, even though for whatever reason he didn’t physically separate from “Babylon” and return to Judah. It’s rather like the way that Naaman was granted the concession of still visiting the temple of Rimmon for worship- because in his heart he was separate from all that and firmly committed to the one true God of Israel (2 Kings 5:18,19).

The essence of the call to “come out” from Babylon is therefore an appeal for a mental and physical separation [as and where possible and appropriate] from the idols of the world around us. But this does not mean that our services, our acting out of the Lord’s table, cannot be open to those who would also wish to leave the things of this world for the things of God.

Notes

(1) I have given other examples of these allusions in *Bible Lives* (Sydney: Carelinks Publishing, 2009) Chapter 11-1, online at http://www.aletheiacollege.net/bl/11-11The_Returned_Exiles.htm.

APPENDIX 2: Separating Church from God

True Christianity is not a purely intellectual, internal faith. It can only be lived in a community. Out of church Christians need to remember this. The lives that we live must be governed by our deep belief, not merely our knowledge, of the first principles of our faith. Those 'first principles' were taught to many of us by members of a church. And yet it can be that our disappointment with the church can lead some to reject the Gospel which the church teaches. I do not believe there is any believer of any experience who has not struggled with this at some time. This arises from a failure to separate the Gospel from the preacher of it; to see that God and the church are not identical, even though the ecclesias ideally ought to be manifesting God.

The qualities that can so upset us in our community- self-righteousness, hypocrisy, provincialism, parochial attitudes...were the very things which the Gospel records are at such pains to show us the Lord Jesus struggled against in the ecclesia of His day. So we are not alone in our desire to be out of church Christians. In one sense it is possible to say that His struggle with those issues was what led to His death. If we are pained by our struggle- it is in fact a sharing in the

sufferings of the Lord. So long as we struggle with them as He struggled, loving the community but hating the human features which are inevitably still in it. And He bore with the ecclesia of His day to the end- right to the cross. And even there, He loved them to the end.

We need to realize that God deals with us as individuals. No matter how functional and holy, or dysfunctional and evil, is our church, we are still treated by the Father as His individual children. So many have struggled with this, tending to see themselves rather as inevitably part of a community, faceless cogs in a machine. And this is actually quite attractive to humanity- hence the popularity of Roman Catholicism. Reflect a while on how God told Gideon: “I will be with thee” [you singular], and yet Gideon responds: “Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with *us*...” (Jud. 6:12,13). Gideon had to be taught that God saw him as a separate, unique individual, and didn’t deal with him automatically merely as part of a community as a whole. But it was a slow process. When Gideon saw in a dream a man saying that God had delivered Midian into *his* [singular] hand, Gideon then tells Israel that God had delivered Midian into *their* hands (Jud. 7:14,15). He still found it so hard to believe that God treated *him* as so important to Him.

There is a tremendous tension in our deeply private lives between our Christian ideals and the reality of our daily

failures. We'd all surely have to admit this. And yet that tension is inevitably reflected in how our community is. To be shocked or surprised at that lack of congruity within our community merely reflects a lack of penetrating introspection into our own inconsistent, contradictory lives. We shouldn't be surprised at 'hypocrisy'. It's in each of us. It shouldn't be, in the light of the fullness of victory which is promised in Christ, that being "more than conquerors" through Him that loved us in the death of the cross. Men like Gandhi refused to accept Christianity because they could not reconcile the disparity they saw between Christ and Christians. Yet my answer to that would be that there is a disparity within each human being between theory and practice; and no religion or group could ever realistically claim to have no such disparity. Western politicians say that the most vicious and vitriolic letters they receive are from Christians. And I can believe it. And of the 40 or so letters and e-mails I receive daily, the most bitter and vitriolic are not from Catholics, Moslems or atheists- but from my own brethren.

The Lord Jesus didn't set up an institutionalized religion. But He also didn't preach a nebulous network of out of church Christianity. He refused to define a set of external rules. He Himself was in His life the moral law which is binding on His followers. "What would Jesus do?" is the simple and golden law. Religious systems inevitably tend to promote formality and external rules, and this has to some degree

happened with our beloved community. Yet the fact this has happened should not obscure for us the wondrous vision of the real, personal Lord Jesus who bids us follow Him, and Him alone.

A personal focus upon the man Christ Jesus ought to lessen the degree to which our faith is focused upon the church, without making us out of church Christians. We need to toughen up, to realize more keenly the self-discipline and self-sacrifice which following the man Jesus requires of us. Paul "exercised" himself in his spiritual life (Acts 24:16), the Greek word *asko* being the source of the English word ascetic. It should not be that our Christianity gives us merely a headful of vital truths but a life unable to fend off sin. We must translate our doctrines into the practice of a transformed life. On-our-knees prayer, fasting, real sacrifice of time, money and human possibilities...this is what the life of Christ is about. This, too, is what forges real personality. Peter speaks of a "hidden man" which is developed within us in Christ. We live in a world and perhaps in a brotherhood where there seems little of this hidden life. Conversation degenerates into mere gossip; those we meet can only talk of what they heard from someone else. The only difference between people seems to be that one has heard some news and the other has not. The inward emptiness of lives is surely reflected in the need to always turn on the radio or TV or CD-player in order to make sure something is happening

around us. If we allow ourselves to be sucked into this way of being, then we will so easily focus upon what is negative in others, and our Christian lives become caught up in the community rather than in the Man for whom and in whom the community should have its being.

The Problem Of Truth

The pursuit of 'truth' has led us into many problems, and is partly responsible for the development of the phenomena of out of church Christians. Yes, correct understanding of God's word and will is essential insofar as it affects our practical lives. Yet we seem to have so often forgotten that this is why truth is important- because it issues in the living of a true life before God. We have come to argue over the interpretation of almost every other verse in Scripture, as if eternal life depends upon getting the right interpretation written down in our Bible margins. Dostoevsky wrote a novel, *The Possessed*, in which he describes how a group of committed revolutionaries set out on their search for truth. They believed unity of understanding was essential for success, but they could never draw the limits on what matters they all had to believe uniformly about. The one thing they were all agreed on was that they must all agree. The problem got to such a point that all agreed that so important and high were their aims, that they simply had to kill the one member who would not agree with their view of a certain matter. And so it

can be with us. Those who have differing views on non-essentials have been too easily ejected in practice from our community, perhaps in sincerity, but the end result has been the spiritual murder of some of our most vital members.

We have confused unity and uniformity. The wonderful diversity of human persons and thought which there is in God's creation of humankind has so often not been accepted by us. It's like trying to describe a sunset or rainbow through using the technically correct word for every colour we see. We have to instead see the whole to perceive the beauty God intends. Yes, we can define and analyze too much. And yet none of this takes away from the most simple reality of the Gospel: that there *is* a God, there *is* Jesus, and they have given their all that we might come to an eternity of love and grace. And we are to begin living the essence of that eternal existence right now, in reflecting the patient, endless love of God to the unlovely. And in doing this, church and God in that sense come back together again in our own minds, whatever the disappointments.

If we can perceive and correctly explain the separation between church and God, we have something very real and relevant to offer the world around us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote often of his desire for what he called a religionless Christianity. And this is what we too should be realizing and preaching- Christ without the creeds, without the trappings of

mere religion... leading out of church Christians into fellowship with the body of Christ through fully empathizing with where they are coming from.

APPENDIX 3: Straw Men and Fellowship

The argument is often made that we cannot fellowship a person who holds a wrong belief because that wrong belief *implies* awful things. A provocative, angry sister in a minority fellowship once screamed at me “You’re a lesbian! Yes, that’s what you are!”. Seeing I’m a heterosexual male I tried to diffuse her anger by reminding her that I really am not and cannot be, and maybe I misheard her... But her point was that because I had begun breaking bread with a fellowship she disliked, in this case the Central fellowship of Christadelphians, I was a lesbian- because she apparently knew a sister in that group who was a lesbian. And therefore her belief in the ‘guilt by association’ dogma meant I was a lesbian. Clearly that was a straw man argument, but none the less real in her mind. The implications of her belief in guilt by association lead her to infer things about my nature and position which were simply wrong.

In doctrinal, theological terms the argument often goes: ‘If Jesus was God, then He couldn’t die. Therefore, if you

believe Jesus is God, you don't believe Jesus died, nor resurrected. Therefore, you are not a Christian, and therefore I will not break bread with you, and therefore I will not break bread with those who whilst sharing my understanding of Jesus, will break bread with you'. The string of 'therefores' reflects a logical path which is human rather than spiritual. For the example of Jesus was to break His bread with whoever wished to accept His invitation to sit at His table, regardless of their morality or doctrine. And the final, crucial step of logic is without any Biblical foundation: 'Therefore I will not break bread with you, and therefore I will not break bread with those who whilst sharing my understanding of Jesus, will break bread with you'. This is guilt by association thinking, sweet as.

But I would observe further that *we* may work out logical implications of a wrong belief, but the person holding the belief may not have analyzed their belief in the same way as us. The proof of that is quite simple: Ask a Trinitarian if they believe Jesus died and resurrected. They will say 'Yes I do'. Sure, their theology is wrong and they are misinterpreting Scripture (and I of all people spend a lot of time trying to persuade them of this). But this doesn't mean that they actually believe what we perceive the implications of their belief to be. Each person can state their belief for themselves- it's not for us to put words or beliefs in their mouths. The argument that 'It logically follows from your

belief that...’ is helpful and valid in helping people to rethink and reframe their beliefs. But it doesn’t logically follow that they actually believe what we think they are implying.

We should bear in mind a few other points before charging sincere Christian folk with total unbelief, and terming them ‘liars’ because there are contradictions in their belief system:

- “How little a portion is heard of [God]!”. We may have a fraction more ‘truth’ than they do, but we do not have the total truth about God ourselves. As we judge others, so we will be judged...
- Bible teaching about judgment clearly indicates that when all is said and done in this world, at the last day the Lord will finally judge His people based upon their Christ-like behaviour rather than their theology.
- You can misunderstand someone but still legitimately love them and give your life to them. This is true especially of our relationship with the Father and Son who are so highly above our total comprehension. Christians who held less than perfect understandings of God and His Son have been persecuted and tortured unto death. Who are we to say that the Father and Son were looking the other way or indifferent to this, counting their death as no more than the death of an unfortunate animal caught in a snare... let alone to

say that from the safety of our computer screens and located in societies which live largely in post modern indifference to religious faith.

- Clearly God's people in both Old and New Testaments held some misconceptions about God and His Son. This is especially clear in the area of beliefs about Satan and demons. On one level, such a belief reflects a lack of total faith in God and His omnipotence, and it impacts our understanding of what was achieved on the cross. But there is no indication that therefore they were not counted as God's people and were disallowed covenant relationship with Him because of it.

We must beware of making the errors in reasoning made by Job's friends- Zophar especially. Zophar is convinced that Job is "The wicked... the hypocrite" (Job 20:4,5,29). He is so convinced that suffering comes from sin that he is sure that Job is wicked and all his righteousness was mere hypocrisy. In this Zophar was not only wrong in his theology, but also in his logic. For Zophar, if A implies B [e.g. suffering implies major sin], therefore Job simply must be B [a major sinner]. Job's response is to prove that actually he is not B- and this false path of logic is followed in so many conversations, fallouts, arguments and relationship breakups. A only implies B *to us*. There may be other explanations for A. Our logical

perceptions are not absolute global truths- they are no more than our perceptions. It is often argued by non-trinitarians: "If you say Jesus is God, then you believe in two Gods". And the predictable response is: "No, I don't believe that. What I meant by saying 'Jesus is God' is that...". A person will state what they believe. It is not for us to insist that they believe B because we think that A implies B. It may imply so *to us*, but it often does not to them. I of all people am not saying that 'What you believe about the Godhead doesn't matter'. I'm drawing attention to a false path of reasoning. And even behind an apparently false or wrong statement in a creed or Statement of Faith, genuine people may still in essence believe the Truth. Lev Tolstoy rejected the Trinity, but he comments so wisely in opening chapter 15 of his *Confession*: "How often I envied the peasants their illiteracy and lack of learning! Those statements of faith and creeds which to me were evident absurdities, for them contained nothing false; they could accept them and could believe in the truth - the truth I believed in. Only to me, unhappy man, was it clear that truth was interwoven with falsehood by the finest threads, and that I could not accept it in that form". I have often come back to this profound observation about the Trinity, because so often I have had the same sense- that a genuine, perhaps simple minded Christian seems in essence to believe the same truths as I do about the Father and Son, despite accepting a creed which I simply cannot.

In Job 20:19 Zophar states of Job: "He has oppressed and forsaken the poor". But Job in chapter 31 explicitly denies this and demonstrates his sensitivity and generosity to the poor. Zophar was so sure that suffering implies major sin that he disposed of Job's good works to the poor by assuming they were mere acts of hypocrisy. Zophar's dogmatism is no more than slander, but he was led to that slander not so much by vindictiveness as by the false path of logic discussed whereby A implied B to Zophar, and therefore Job was B [a sinner] because of A [Job was suffering]. Zophar goes further, to assume that *his* path of logic [suffering implies major sin] is that of God, and therefore, for sure, *God* is condemning Job (Job 20:29). We must be careful that we do not refuse fellowship to people because of such setting up of straw men.